

Men and women,  
who are paid  
to look at images



*Harun Farocki. Counter-Music. 2004.*

# *Counter-Music*: Harun Farocki's Theory of a New Image Type

MARTIN BLUMENTHAL-BARBY

Harun Farocki's 2004 installation *Counter-Music* explores the issue of surveillance. It probes different kinds of surveillance and, in so doing, delineates historical trajectories, juxtaposing, for instance, state surveillance under Louis XIV in late-seventeenth-century France (through public streetlights) with more recent modes of observation via surveillance cameras (through closed-circuit-television systems). The tacit epicenter of Farocki's installation is the novel form of surveillance in which cameras are linked with automatic-recognition systems that no longer rely on human beings as observers: Human beings have been replaced by software designed to surveil. This new kind of surveillance, in which images are recorded and then "viewed" by automatic "eyes"—that is, analyzed by algorithmic software—generates what Farocki calls "operational images" to be used within systemic surveillance operations.

*Counter-Music* seeks to understand the questions that such an automated form of surveillance raises with regard to the notion of "the human" and of human affect (to the extent that it relies on the paradoxical efficacy of blind sight). Rather than providing a philosophical argument, a conceptually sound narrative that is presented in images, Farocki (and here the aesthetic rendering of his installation comes into play) seeks to think *through* images. His process of thinking transpires through the surveillance images he employs, images that are, by their very nature, not meant to be watched; for the most part, nothing is happening that would be worth watching. Hence the ever-increasing application of automatic-recognition systems, which analyze the monotonous images algorithmically and thereby assist or replace the easily distracted human eye. While Farocki explicitly thematizes this displacement of the human in his installation, a different and decidedly human dimension emerges in the course of his particular arrangement of surveillance footage and our concomitant task of reading these images. Farocki creates a complex network of cross-references, of adumbrated analogies that are not rendered explicit, as well as unambiguous correspondences that are figuratively undercut. Just as the human ceases to matter in the practice of surveillance, Farocki's enactment of surveillance compels it to reemerge. *Counter-Music* relates antipodally to its subject matter: It demands a reading of surveillance images that these images seem to have left behind long ago.

Surveillance was at the center of Farocki's work for some two decades. This interest permeated such different projects as *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1995), *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), *Prison Images* (2000), *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* (2000), *Eye/Machine I, II, III* (2001–03), *War at a Distance* (2003), and *Counter-Music* (2004). In these works Farocki explores surveillance in the city, the prison, the workplace, and the supermarket, in military warfare and medical research—often in light of their intertwining in one and the same project. The various manifestations of surveillance in early-twenty-first-century urban spaces lie at the center of *Counter-Music*. This installation, perhaps more emphatically than any of his other works, elucidates the degree to which surveillance is not merely a technical phenomenon, a (mechanical) means toward an (economic, political, social) end. Rather, surveillance presents itself as a cultural paradigm of our time, as a social “symptom”<sup>1</sup> that—and this is the kernel of Farocki's interest—manifests a new type of image, one that has thus far remained “under-theorized” and hence emerges as a subject in need of theoretical scrutiny.<sup>2</sup>

Notably, video surveillance, as depicted in *Counter-Music*, is less an isolated practice than a thoroughly integrated network, a network suffusing the French city of Lille's infrastructure in every possible way. Given the ever more prevalent application of surveillance technology in urban spaces, video surveillance—in addition to the established networks of electricity, telecommunications, gas, and water—appears as a sort of “fifth utility.”<sup>3</sup> In the text accompanying the installation Farocki lays out his initial plan for *Counter-Music*:

The activation of the city only through diagrams, representations, measurements.

Gas use

Traffic light configurations

Electricity grids

Mobile phone networks

Railway line representations

Plus surveillance cameras in train stations, power stations, at crossings, on motorways, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Conspicuously, the network of surveillance technology emerges in *Counter-Music*

1. David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 161; Dietmar Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 268.

2. Harun Farocki, *Bilderschatz* (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 1999), p. 8; Harun Farocki and Wolfgang Ernst, “Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts,” in *Working on the Sight-Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 275.

3. Stephen Graham, “Towards the Fifth Utility? On the Extension and Normalization of Public CCTV,” in *Surveillance, Closed Circuit Television and Social Control*, ed. Clive Norris, Jade Moran, and Gary Armstrong (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1989), p. 108.

4. Harun Farocki, “Contre-chant,” in *La ville qui fait signes*, ed. Alain Guiheux (Paris: Éditions du Moniteur, 2004), p. 108.

not merely as *contiguous* but as *interlaced* with other infrastructures, for example the sewage system, as becomes apparent in a sequence in which subterranean video cameras move through drainage pipes in search of defects. The intertitle reads: "We follow the cameras moving through the city's sewers. The camera checks the welding of the pipes. The veins of the city."<sup>5</sup> The traffic system, too, is seen to be tightly monitored: Traffic density, congestion, and accidents are detected and displayed via computer simulation. "In rich countries the streets fill up in the morning . . . circulating instead of sitting about. Metabolism of the city-body . . ." Soon after, Farocki contrasts the rhizomatic structures of urban surveillance with those of human blood vessels, which, like the city's sewers, can be monitored from within and checked for abnormalities or blockages. Curiously, this medical register is eventually retranslated into the urban sphere: The logic of modern urban planning frequently presents itself as one that equates *security* (guaranteed through video surveillance) and *cleanliness* (guaranteed through the expulsion of criminals)<sup>6</sup>—a nexus pointed to in Lille and especially in "Euralille," the business district in the center of the city where most of *Counter-Music* is shot. "Many cities whose industry has faded are building a new centre," an intertitle states, describing how the decline of the textile industry in Lille triggered a decidedly unhygienic process of urban decay, which only came to a halt when a new, closely monitored city center was built, one that promised new prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

Euralille appears, in Farocki's installation, as a controlled society: "The city is as rationalized and regulated as a production process," Farocki writes. Correspondingly, "the images which today determine the day of the city are . . . control images":

Representations of traffic regulation by car, train or metro, representations determining the height at which mobile phone network transmitters are fixed, and where the holes in the networks are. Images from thermo-cameras to discover heat loss from buildings. And digital models

5. *Counter-Music*, directed by Harun Farocki (2004; Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2004), DVD. Unless otherwise noted, all italics of intertitles are mine.

6. Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung*, p. 63.

7. Farocki's sophisticated practice of appropriating existing images, his *détournement*, if you will, of course draws much of its force from montage. The imagistic juxtaposition of referential systems as different as urban canals, traffic, and the human body is driven by Farocki's penchant for developing his arguments in visual terms, in line with the "grammar of filmic motifs," as he put it in his Flusser lecture of 1999 (Farocki, *Bilderschatz*, p. 20; Farocki and Ernst, "Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts," p. 280). Farocki does not treat images on the basis of preconceived thematic categorizations but in terms of their visual idiosyncrasies. Interestingly, this understanding led Farocki, together with media theorists Friedrich Kittler and Wolfgang Ernst, to design a visual encyclopedia analogous to the renowned *Archive für Begriffsgeschichte* (literally, the archive for the history of concepts) published by the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz. "This collection," Farocki holds, "has the advantage of not being bound to any lexical or systematic principle," and, as such, epitomizes the blueprint for the thus far unmaterialized project of an "archive of filmic expressions." Farocki, *Bilderschatz*, p. 5; Farocki and Ernst, "Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts," p. 273; see also Farocki and Ernst, "Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts," p. 265.

of the city, portrayed with fewer shapes of buildings or roofs than were used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when planned industrial cities arose, amongst them the Lille agglomeration. Despite their boulevards, promenades, market places, arcades and churches, these cities are already machines for living and working.<sup>8</sup>

The “machine” Lille—with its subterranean monitoring of the sewage system, its tracking equipment for satellite television, its control systems of automobile, metro, and train transportation as well as automated CCTV systems recording pedestrian traffic—in many ways appears to embody what (in Deleuzian parlance) has often been described as a “control society.”<sup>9</sup> Yet exactly what characterizes a control society as exemplified by Farocki’s Lille, and, more important, wherein lies Lille’s relevance to Farocki’s theoretical project?

2

Farocki’s Lille is, as displayed on a computer-simulated map, above all, a major transportation hub: thirty-eight minutes to Brussels, one hour to Paris, two hours to London, three hours to Cologne, Amsterdam, and Luxembourg. What links Lille with these cities is the French high-speed-rail service, and so it appears consequential that Farocki moves his camera into “the high-speed train control centre in Lille (TGV),” where countless cameras send images to be displayed on numerous monitors. Cut to the “control centre for the Metro in Lille (Transpole)” and the commenting intertitle: “Images from 1,200 cameras arrive at this control centre.” With a perpendicular panning shot along the control monitors, Farocki directs our attention unequivocally to the side of the “surveillance system” rather than to the “surveilled subject.”<sup>10</sup>

The many surveillance monitors function here as an extension of the cameras’ vigilant eyes and, as such, epitomize an ominous futuristic scenario (recalling Michael Klier’s film *The Giant*)<sup>11</sup> of total surveillance. In spite of the futuristic appearance of this technology, a topos emerges that can be traced back to Greek mythology, famously embodied by the giant Argus Panoptes, who had eyes all over

8. Harun Farocki, “Contre-chant,” p. 107.

9. Farocki himself emphasizes this correspondence to Deleuze in his essay “Controlling Observation,” in *Harun Farocki: Imprint: Writings*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2001), pp. 306–21.

10. For a discussion of the “interaction between . . . the ‘surveillance system’ and the ‘surveilled subject,’” see Lyon, *Surveillance Studies*, p. 75.

11. “I begrudged Michael Klier his idea of making a film entirely out of surveillance imagery (*Der Riese/The Giant*, 1983),” Farocki writes in his autobiographical collage *Red Berta Goes Wandering Without Love (Rote Berta geht ohne Liebe wandern* [Cologne: Strzelecki Books, 2009], p. 16; “Written Trailers,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun [London: Koenig Books, 2009], p. 227). Klier’s *The Giant* is an experimental documentary film unprecedented insofar as it consists almost exclusively of surveillance footage—from an airport, railway station, department store, supermarket, streets, and so forth, thereby evoking the sense of a gigantic force overseeing the city.

his body and could look in every direction, all day and all night.<sup>12</sup> Like a metamorphosis of Argus Panoptes, the metro control center in *Counter-Music* stands guard with a hundred eyes, some of which never sleep. Argus is ordered by Hera to watch the nymph Io, whom Zeus had seduced; the personnel in Lille's metro control center are ordered to watch the life of the city, which is technologically mediated by the many simultaneously recording cameras and monitors displaying the transmitted images. These control *monitors*, of course, can never broadcast more than a fragmented image of the world, a fragmented "world picture," as one might say with Heidegger.<sup>13</sup> Etymologically they invoke a highly charged frame of reference. The classical Latin *monitor* is derived from the verb *monere* ("to advise, warn, remind") and carries, according to the *OED*, not only the contemporary meaning "to observe . . . esp. for the purpose of regulation or control" but also the more portentous connotation of giving a



*Hermes slaying Argus Panoptes, Athenian red figure vase. Fifth Century B.C., Kunsthistorische Museum, Vienna.*

12. In the fragment of a lost poem by Hesiod, Argus Panoptes is characterized as "great and strong Argus, who . . . looks every way . . . : sleep never fell upon his eyes; but he kept sure watch always." Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 273.

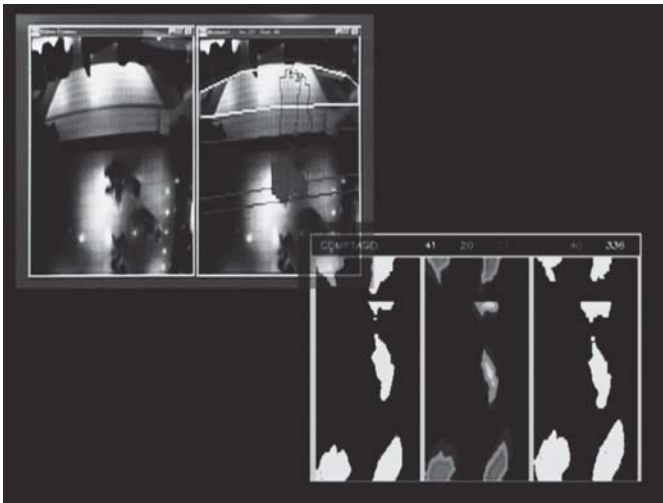
13. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 129–30. See also Thomas Keenan, "Light Weapons," *Documents* 1–2 (1992), p. 147.



*Farocki. Counter-Music. 2004.*

“warning as to conduct.” The array of control monitors Farocki shows us invokes, then, not only the all-seeing Argus Panoptes but also a Christian concept of an omnipotent God, whose gaze is always a gaze from *above*, just as the surveillance cameras’ gaze in *Counter-Music* is typically a gaze from above (as exemplified by footage of a group of adolescents sitting about in Euraville, or of passengers trying to board a subway). The understanding of the surveillance cameras’ gaze as the secular equivalent of God’s gaze is one that Farocki, in his film *Prison Images*, renders explicit: “The [surveillance] camera which the inmates go past has taken the place of God.”<sup>14</sup>

Conspicuously, *Counter-Music* does not merely consider conventional electronic interface surveillance through video cameras, but also surveillance systems that are linked with pattern-recognition software. Such automated surveillance systems, exemplified by the repeatedly shown “intelligent” scene-monitoring that can identify “people who don’t budge,” evoke, in their tendency to reduce human beings to numbers and analyze them algorithmically, Deleuze’s conception of the “control society.” We see a monitor that displays surveillance footage of human beings passing through a train station; with it is the intertitle “This software counts the people passing by / Whereby it is not easy to make out the individual in the mass.”



Farocki. *Counter-Music*. 2004.

Farocki notes that both Ruttmann and Vertov, in their city films *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), respectively, “envisaged something different. For them, the crowd was not a lump to be dissected and rendered as numbers.” What sort of conceptual shift are we dealing with, then, when human beings are conceived of as blocks to be encoded numerically? In his enigmatic

14. *Prison Images*, directed by Harun Farocki (2000; Berlin: Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 2008), DVD.



"Postscript on the Societies of Control," Deleuze argues that the traditional panoptic model that Foucault found to characterize eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *disciplinary societies* has been more and more replaced by modern *control societies*, which are less centralized and less enclosed yet, surprisingly, no less tightly regulated and controlled.<sup>15</sup> Farocki, in a piece about *Prison Images*, writes about just that: "Deregulation does not by any means imply a reduction of control. . . . Deleuze outlined the vision of a society of controls which he said would replace disciplinary society."<sup>16</sup> No doubt it is this late Deleuzian text that inspired Farocki's characterization of surveillance technology as he finds it in Lille, including its tendency to view the urban crowd as a "lump to be dissected and rendered as numbers." "The disciplinary societies," Deleuze notes,

have two poles: the signature that designates the *individual*, and the . . . administrative numeration that indicates his or her position within a *mass*. . . . In the societies of control, on the other hand, what is important is no longer a signature . . . but a code. . . . We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become "*dividuals*," and masses, samples, data.<sup>17</sup>

When "individuals" are reduced to "dividuals"—or, to list some of the formulations one encounters in the surveillance-studies literature, to "data doubles,"<sup>18</sup> "data shadows,"<sup>19</sup> "data images,"<sup>20</sup> or "databased selves"<sup>21</sup>—or, in Farocki's plain words, to "numbers," then it becomes clear not only how the *systems* of surveillance have developed but also how the *subjects* of surveillance have been exposed to a radical reconceptualization. Farocki's *Counter-Music* accomplishes nothing short of an investigation into the anthropological and media-theoretical consequences precipitated by new surveillance technologies. If earlier we asked what characterizes a control society such as Lille, and, more important, wherein Lille's relevance to Farocki's theoretical project can be found, then two provisional answers present themselves. First, on the anthropological level, we are dealing with a new

15. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992), pp. 3–7. In a different context, Slavoj Žižek observes a "reversal of the Bentham-Orwellian notion of the Panopticon-society in which we are (potentially) 'observed always' and have no place to hide from the omnipresent gaze of the Power: today, anxiety seems to arise from the prospect of NOT being exposed to the Other's gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the camera's gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his/her being." Žižek, "Big Brother, or, the Triumph of the Gaze over the Eye," in *Ctrl Space: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 225.

16. Farocki, "Controlling Observation," p. 318.

17. Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," p. 5.

18. Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson, "The Surveillant Assemblage," *British Journal of Sociology* 41, no. 4 (2000), pp. 605–22; see also Lyon, *Surveillance Studies*, pp. 87–88.

19. Alan F. Westin, *Privacy and Freedom* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

20. David Lyon, *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), pp. 84, 206, 207.

21. Bart Simon, "The Return of Panopticism: Supervision, Subjection, and the New Surveillance," *Surveillance and Society* 3 (2005), pp. 1–20.



conception of “the human” as data-conglomerate. Second, on a media-theoretical level, Farocki describes new kinds of images: automated surveillance images, which he dubs “operational images.”

3

“The images which today determine the day of the city are operational images,” Farocki claims.<sup>22</sup> As he explains: “Rather than these images being supposed to represent the production process, they are the production process.”<sup>23</sup> Operational images certainly abound in *Counter-Music*, including numerous digital representations of traffic regulation. And of course operational images can be found in other contexts as well. In *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, for instance, we learn about the application of operational images to control robots in the automobile industry;<sup>24</sup> in Farocki’s installation *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, operational images track the movement of customers in a supermarket, and in *Eye/Machine* they promise the targeted impact of military projectiles, abetting the utopian conception of a “humane war.” If one asks what exactly “operational images” are, Farocki explains that by the term he means “pictures, made neither to entertain nor to inform. . . . These are images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation.”<sup>25</sup> He goes on to explain that the term was inspired by Barthes’s *Mythologies* (1957/64), specifically the afterword and the distinction Barthes draws there:

I must return here to the distinction between the language of objects and meta-language. If I am a lumberjack and I name the tree that I am chopping down, I say—whatever the form of the sentence may be—*the tree*, and I do not speak *about* the tree. . . . If I am not a lumberjack, though, I cannot say *the tree*, I can only talk *of* and *about it*.<sup>26</sup>

Operational images do not talk *of* or *about* something; instead, they speak by way of what they do or generate or precipitate. It is not their constative assertions that are relevant but their performative thrust, their functional valence concerning a defined operation.

Against the backdrop of Vertov’s and Ruttman’s city films Farocki notes, “I too want to ‘remake’ the city films, *but with different images*.” What renders the images incorporated in *Counter-Music* different (the surveillance images in general and those

22. Harun Farocki, “Contre-chant,” p. 107, translation modified; Harun Farocki, “Tagebuch: La ville qui fait signes,” in *Weiche Montagen/Soft Montages*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2011), p. 105.

23. *War at a Distance*, directed by Harun Farocki (2003; Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2004), DVD.

24. On this film in particular, see the perceptive analysis by Nora Alter, “The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki’s *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*,” *New German Critique* 68 (1996), pp. 165–92.

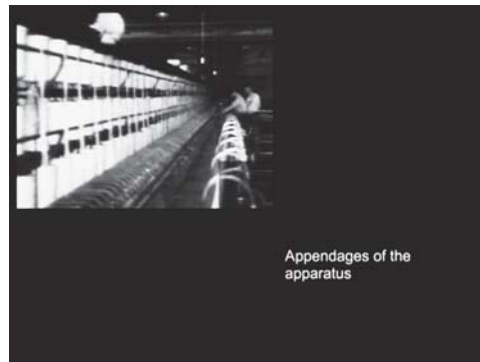
25. Harun Farocki, “Phantom Images,” *Public* 29 (2004), p. 17.

26. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 254; cited in Farocki, “Phantom Images,” p. 17.

inflected by automatic-recognition systems, i.e., operational images, in particular) is, generally speaking, the absence of human beings, and that on at least three levels. First, in contrast to the seeming ubiquity of the cameraman in Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, Farocki's *Counter-Music* assembles "Images without a cameraman/camerawoman," as one intertitle pronounces, thus gesturing at the absence of the human on the production side of surveillance images. Second, modern surveillance systems' tendency to reduce human beings to "digital personas" or "numbers" invokes the nonexistence of human beings as the *subject matter* of surveillance. Finally, as one of the installation's last intertitles suggests, surveillance images such as the ones arriving in the control centers in the city of Lille are often "processed by a programme. Programmes reducing the amount of work for the viewer or abolishing it." In line with the disappearance of human beings as producers and subject matter of these newly configured images, humans also fall on the *recipient's* side of the equation.

Indeed, the increasing "abolition" of humans in modern-day surveillance is one that Farocki explicitly problematizes by way of analogy with the textile industry in Lille. Just as human beings, in the course of industrialization and the automation of weaving, have turned into "appendages of the apparatus," so the human eye, according to Farocki's suggestive montage, has been relegated, in line with the automation of surveillance via automatic-recognition systems, to "appendages of the apparatus." The labor of weaving, as well as the labor of seeing, is ever less dependent on the involvement of human beings, an observation that led Paul Virilio to speak of the ever-increasing importance of "vision machines."<sup>27</sup>

*Counter-Music* links the thematized history of weaving with the history of seeing; what constitutes the gist of Farocki's argument by analogy is the increasing displacement of human beings from technical operations,<sup>28</sup> the displacement of human beings as "operational" constituents in the weaving industry and, correspondingly, the surveillance industry.



Farocki. *Counter-Music*. 2004.

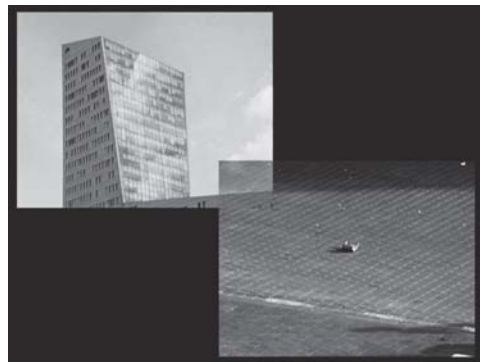
27. Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 59–77.

28. The expulsion of human beings from sensorially charged work processes is also negotiated in Farocki's film *As You See*, where arithmetic (*Rechnen*) serves as a metaphor for the jettisoning of human beings from the craft of observing and, similarly, from manual crafts such as weaving. On the "gradual replacement of sensuous images by what Farocki calls 'Rechnen,'" see Michael Cowan, "Rethinking the City Symphony after the Age of Industry: Harun Farocki and the 'City Film,'" *Intermedialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques* 11 (2008), p. 71. The displacement of sensorially inflected human

Yet how does the gradual abolition of human beings relate to the poetic fabric of Farocki's installation, in particular his intricate split-screen aesthetic that emphatically engages the viewer? How can we understand the paradoxical combination of the underwhelming and undramatic nature of "found footage" surveillance images and Farocki's stratified ways of arranging that very footage? What is the promise of this aesthetic that neither edifies nor entertains but instead imposes considerable strain on our ability and our willingness to contemplate?<sup>29</sup> Just as Farocki, with respect to "operational images," speaks of the abolition of work to be accomplished by human beings, so do we as viewers of Farocki's installation perceive the tenacious demand—triggered by his complex split-screen aesthetic—to engage and make sense of it. Let us consider an example: We see the unique L-shaped office building, the Tour de Lille (designed by Christian de Portzamparc), atop the Lille Europe railway station in the left track of Farocki's installation; simultaneously, in the right track, a piece of trash blows across the pavement, a bit of discarded paper wrapping from a fast-food restaurant, it seems—we cannot quite make it out, and it does, after all, not really seem to matter. But what does it mean that something does or does not matter, and how do we deem one image meaningful and another not? Farocki, to be sure, does not provide unequivocal answers to these questions. For a solid fifty-five seconds the camera follows this piece of trash as it dances across the pavement, jolted by the wind. As if the questions of meaning and intention and the possibility of meaning without author and without intention had not been raised emphatically enough, the camera makes us watch yet another piece of trash, again on the right track and parallel to the L-shaped office building in

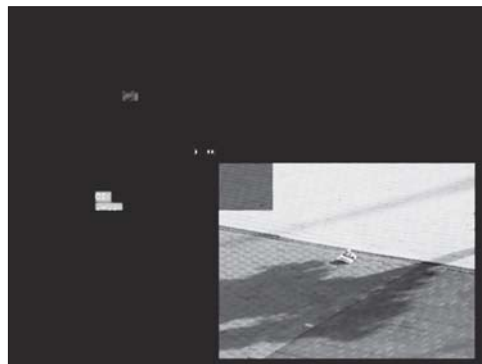
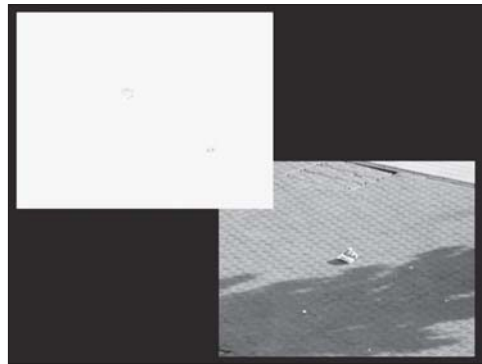
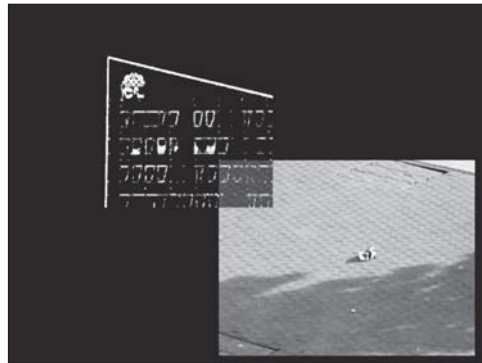
labor through technology is, differently configured, also addressed in the installation *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, where the narrator states: "Whoever controls the technical means is considered powerful. The body alone does not count for much. Searches of cells carried out by hand and with the aid of an electronic sensing device. This apparatus can detect even the smallest trace of a drug." *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, directed by Harun Farocki (2000; Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2000), DVD.

29. In his installation *Eye/Machine* Farocki characterizes operational images in terms of the lack of a "contemplative" viewer response and "edifying" effects; in "Phantom Images," the essay accompanying the installation, Farocki describes operational images with regard to the absence of "entertaining" qualities and "educational" intentions. Farocki, "Phantom Images," p. 17; *Eye/Machine*, directed by Harun Farocki (2001–2003; Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2001–2003), DVD.



Farocki. Counter-Music. 2004.

Euralille in the left track. This time a discarded plastic bag is carried across the cobblestones. As we ponder the possible meanings of this enigmatic sequence, the L-shaped office building, depicted in the left image track, transitions from conventional surveillance-camera imagery to a series of surveillance-camera images analyzed by algorithmic-recognition software, “operational images” that invoke the gradual displacement of human beings as viewers, in that they do not require a contemplative reading but assume a calculated interface position within a defined operation. The paradox here results from the peculiar juxtaposition of the two image tracks, the “soft montage,” as Farocki would say. The surveillance footage showing the wrapping paper and the plastic bag on the right image track raises questions regarding the humanly conceivable meaning of such images. Functioning exactly as antipode, the operational images in the left image track insist on the dispensability of human viewers by allocating the task of “viewing” to machines. The succession of images as well as the tension between the two tracks could undoubtedly be read in different ways as well, and it is precisely the ambiguity emanating from the two-screen installation that prompts its performative thrust. Our semantic involvement in the installation, our “reading,” manifests the very opposite of what *Counter-Music* seems to be all about, namely, the abolition of the human worker in



Farocki. *Counter-Music*. 2004.

modern control society. Whereas the conceptual center of what Farocki describes in his installation is the operational image, which excludes human beings, the installation derives its performative traction from his two-screen “soft montage,” which does require human beings. Farocki, as it were, (performatively) undoes the very dynamic he describes (constatively), and it is this peculiar interplay between content and form or matter and manner that emerges again and again. Again and again, the center of Farocki’s theoretical argumentation, the *operational image*, is figuratively thwarted by the rhetorical efficacy of the *soft montage*.

In an article delineating his aesthetics of “soft montage,” Farocki portrays this split-screen approach as follows: “There is succession as well as simultaneity in a double projection, the relationship of an image to the one that follows as well as the one beside it; a relationship to the preceding as well as to the concurrent one.” Farocki draws on a metaphor to elucidate: “Imagine three double bonds jumping back and forth between the six carbon atoms of a benzene ring; I envisage the same ambiguity in the relationship of an element in an image track to the one succeeding or accompanying it.”<sup>30</sup> Farocki draws on this method of double projection for the first time in *Interface* (1995), a work commissioned by a museum in Villeneuve D’Ascq near Lille in the mid-’90s. “For the first time, I had the chance to work with two images, something familiar to me from the 1970s avant-garde,” he explains.<sup>31</sup> His second double projection was the 2000 *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, where we encounter a technique that will return in *Counter-Music*, namely, the tendency

to use one track as the main text and the other track as its commentary or its footnotes. The second track lent itself to working with anticipation and reprise, with trailer and cliff-hanger. It is a seductive way of easily achieving an effect, comparable to the shot/reverse shot in a single-strip film. . . . It was possible to cut in a title on one track whilst the image continued on the other, so that the viewer had the choice—amongst other things, of relating the title to one track or to both. It also lent itself to interrupting the image flow on both tracks with a title, as well as showing the same image on both tracks. It seemed to me that although it is possible to do with one image everything one can do with two, it would be still easier to create a soft

30. Harun Farocki, “Cross Influence/Soft Montage,” in Ehmann and Eshun, *Against What? Against Whom?*, p. 70. Farocki first develops these thoughts together with film theorist Kaja Silverman in their jointly published work *Speaking about Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 142. See further the differently inflected metaphorization of the benzol molecule in Farocki’s early film *Between Two Wars*. For a succinct commentary, see Volker Pantenburg, *Film als Theorie: Bildforschung bei Harun Farocki und Jean-Luc Godard* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006), p. 174.

31. Harun Farocki and Yilmaz Dziewior, “Gespräch, 23. Oktober 2010, Kunsthaus Bregenz,” in Dziewior, *Weiche Montagen*, p. 208.

montage with two tracks. More trial, less assertion. Equivocality can be attained with the simplest means.<sup>32</sup>

The transposition of the shot–reverse shot technique into a single film strip,<sup>33</sup> this two-track technique of soft montage, allowing for “more trial” and “less assertion,” subsequently appears in *Eye/Machine* (2001–2003), then in *Counter-Music* (2004) and a number of other installations, including *Comparison via a Third* (2007); *Deep Play* (2007), where no fewer than twelve image tracks are put into dialogue; and finally in *Serious Games* (2009/2010) and *The Silver and the Cross* (2010). In all these works the typical temporal sequence of images is spatially expanded to create an effect of a “simultaneity,” an “And rather than Or.”<sup>34</sup> Regarding his style in general and his technique of “soft montage” in particular, Farocki elaborates: “One image doesn’t take the place of the previous one, but supplements it, re-evaluates it, balances it.”<sup>35</sup> This mode of supplementation, reevaluation, and balancing describes individual sequences as well as the overall economy of the installation, including its tendency to repeat sequences and suspend and, more often than not, continue individual narrative strands, allowing for a multifarious space that provokes a host of associative links and emphatically corroborates our role as human (rather than machinic),<sup>36</sup> creative spectators.<sup>37</sup>

Given this background, it might serve our understanding of Farocki’s style to scrutinize yet another example from *Counter-Music*. Recall the aforementioned footage of workers in a weaving factory and the intertitle “Appendages of

32. Farocki, “Cross Influence/Soft Montage,” pp. 72–73.

33. “*Counter-Music* . . . with its original title *Contre-Chant*, which sounds like ‘Contrechamp’ (Engl. countershot), certainly . . . makes reference to film-immanent aspects, which are also emphasized by the split-screen format of the installation,” Yilmaz Dziewior writes. “Harun Farocki’s characteristic form of double projection is what enables him to produce both a regular succession of individual images and a simultaneity in their interrelationship. Despite the sometimes hard and unpredictable cuts, the jumping back and forth of images creates . . . soft montages” (Yilmaz Dziewior, “Harun Farocki: Weiche Montagen,” in Dziewior, *Weiche Montagen*, p. 12). Other critics who have commented on the “homophony” between the installation’s original French title and the French “contrechamp” (“countershot” or “reverse shot”) include Volker Pantenburg, “*Gegen-Musik*,” in Dziewior, *Weiche Montagen*, p. 98; and Christa Blüminger, “Memory and Montage: On the Installation *Counter-Music*,” in Ehmann and Eshun, *Against What? Against Whom?*, p. 102.

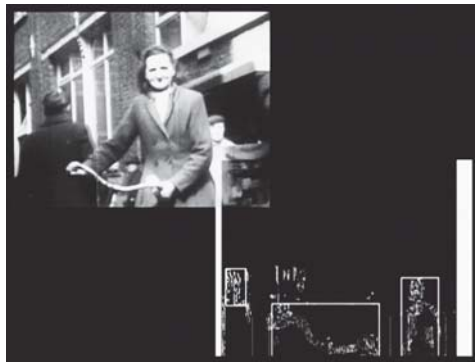
34. Farocki and Dziewior, “Gespräch,” p. 206.

35. Harun Farocki and Rembert Hüser, “Nine Minutes in the Yard: A Conversation with Harun Farocki,” in *Working on the Sight-Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 302.

36. See also David Tomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki: Machine Vision and the Posthuman* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); and Oliver Müller, *Zwischen Mensch und Maschine: Vom Glück und Unglück des Homo faber* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).

37. Stressing the corporeal implications of Farocki’s aesthetic strategy, Cowan astutely notes that Farocki’s work is “addressed . . . to the human body. Where technological development has tended to exclude the body from the informational process, the installation format, by insisting on the physical act of viewing, makes spectators aware of their bodily presence.” Cowan, “Rethinking the City Symphony,” p. 85.





Farocki. *Counter-Music*. 2004.

the apparatus.” Cut (in the left track) to footage of textile workers leaving the factory and (in the right track) to the obliquely commenting intertitle “Today, almost every city has memories of an industrial past.” The right track now picks up the footage of workers leaving the factory and shows these images as they are processed by an automatic-recognition system.

The paradoxes alluded to above are here solidified: First, Farocki reminds us of the gradual displacement of humans from the production process in the course of industrialization; then he incorporates documentary footage showing workers leaving the factory (on the left image track); finally, he shows images of the exact same workers, yet in the format of operational images (on the right image track)—evoking our own exclusion as workers or, more precisely, as viewers of images that are not intended to be seen by humans.<sup>38</sup> Just as the factory workers could not keep up with the demands of modern times, so we, it seems,

have largely become superfluous in the face of operational images. Farocki confronts us with our ineptness vis-à-vis this new image species, yet he does so in a most meandering way, always immersed in the image at issue, suspending any theoretical generalization, often at the expense of narrative strands that don’t fit in and poetic insinuations that don’t add up. Ironically, it is precisely this authority in matters of meaning and interpretation transferred to us that performs—as far as our involvement as introspective thinkers is concerned—the opposite of what Farocki appears to observe throughout, namely, the abolition of human beings as factory workers and, correspondingly, as image workers.

38. See the third part of Farocki’s *Eye/Machine*.



The displacement of the human as *viewer*, in addition to his role as *producer* and *subject matter* (in the case of operational images engendered by automatic-image-recognition software), is ultimately what distinguishes the epistemology of modern-day surveillance from that of the cinema, as exemplified by Vertov's and Ruttmann's films. Farocki's installation offers, among other things, a theoretical comparison of surveillance images and cinematic images, and perhaps this is the moment to address the peculiar status of those two other filmmakers in *Counter-Music*. Needless to say, Vertov's and Ruttmann's films serve, on a basic level, as a model as far as the tradition of city films is concerned. Farocki writes:

When I was asked to make a contribution to the exhibition [*La ville qui fait signes*], I instantly recalled the city films by Ruttmann and Vertov. Both succeeded in reading the city and in making it readable. They picked up on everyday happenings, hardly showing anything but that which everyone has seen before. They did not narrate a special day but one like any other. And yet their films were exciting. By discovering and revealing the lines of force in the undefined events, they dramatised the present.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Farocki is keenly aware of the dangers of transposing Vertov's and Ruttmann's early-twentieth-century approach onto an early-twenty-first-century project:

When a few years ago in Berlin, Thomas Schadt set about making a remake of *Berlin—die Symphonie der Großstadt*, he attempted a reconstruction by seeking sequences in today's city similar to each of those used by Ruttmann. Whilst one can show images today of people streaming to work from their means of transport, it becomes all too obvious that there are hardly any large industries left in today's cities. And that the machine rhythm no longer makes a melody. Mass society is no longer spectacular. Spread-out hours of work, the non-representability of most working processes [*die Unanschaulichkeit der meisten Arbeitsabläufe*], reduced density of residence, all go to rob Ruttmann's imitators of strength.<sup>40</sup>

The evanescence of the industrial sector and the rise of the service industry correspond, according to Farocki, to a certain shift in vision: While Vertov's and Ruttmann's images were appropriate to reveal "the lines of force" of early-twentieth-century metropolitan life and "dramatize" their present, the early-twenty-first-century urban life Farocki finds himself confronted with in Lille is no longer "spectacular" and indeed has become "unrepresentable" or "undepictable" (*unanschaulich*).

It is precisely this "unspectacular" and "undepictable" quality of early-twenty-first-century urban life that presents the key challenge for Farocki's project. Of course, Farocki seeks to develop and update the tradition of the city film. Yet given

39. Farocki, "Contre-chant," p. 108.

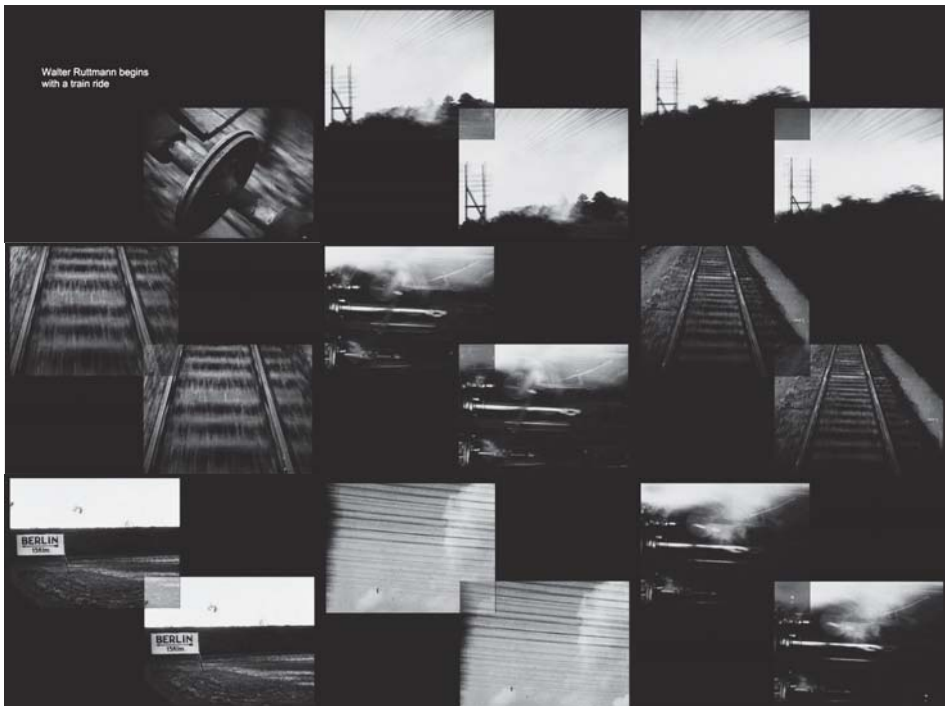
40. *Ibid.*, p. 107, translation modified; Farocki, "Tagebuch," p. 104.

the technological developments, especially in the surveillance sector, this requires some sort of break with his predecessors. The installation's title, *Counter-Music*, testifies to this break, or rather to Farocki's repudiation of the means as they still came to bear in Ruttmann's and Vertov's films. In contrast to (or by *countering*) these "symphonic"<sup>41</sup> city films of the early twentieth century, Farocki's city film assembles—beyond all dramatization, and beyond all spectacle—images that "are produced today as an administrative measure,"<sup>42</sup> operational images of the regulation of car, train, metro, and other traffic. In contradistinction to Vertov's and Ruttmann's cinematic images, these operational images are generated not to be viewed by human beings, with the possible objective of contemplation or aesthetic gratification, but for the purpose of a specifically defined technical operation.

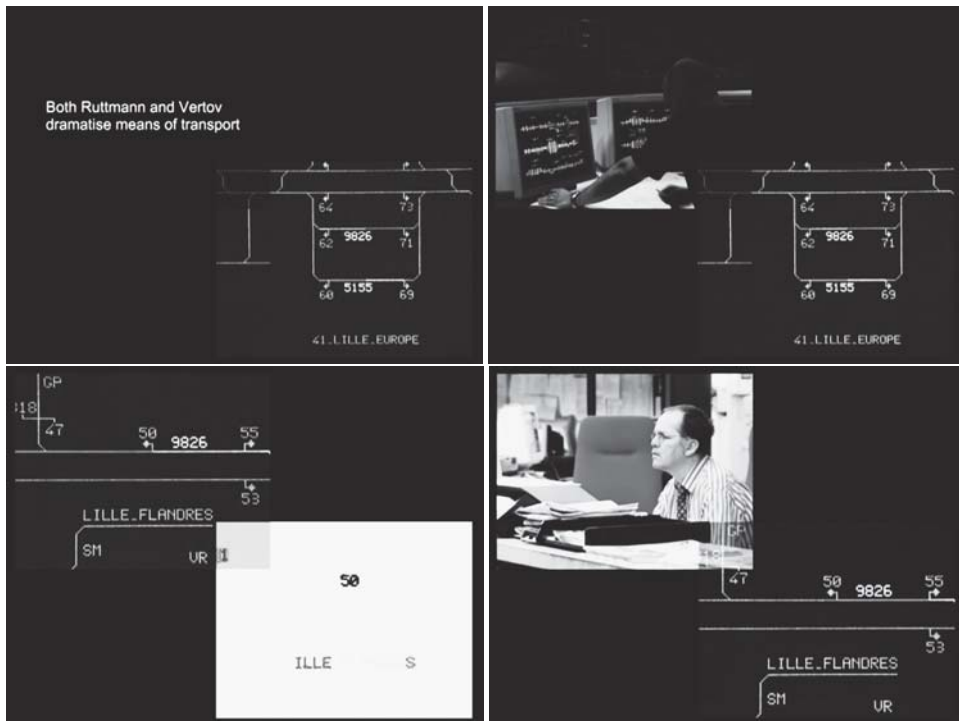
*Counter-Music* provides a number of examples where cinematic images and surveillance images are directly juxtaposed, and it may be rewarding to probe one of those instances in some detail. Roughly five minutes into the installation, Farocki invokes Ruttmann's famous city film with the following intertitle: "Walter Ruttmann begins with a train ride. 'Berlin—Symphony of a Great City' Germany 1927." We are presented with excerpts from Ruttmann's film, rapidly cut images of spinning train wheels, of rails and switch plates, and, time and again—through the windows of the racing train—images of treetops and telephone poles, moving images that enact or

41. Blüminger, "Memory and Montage: On the Installation *Counter-Music*," p. 103; Pantenburg, "*Gegen-Musik*," p. 98.

42. Farocki and Dziewior, "Gespräch," p. 222.



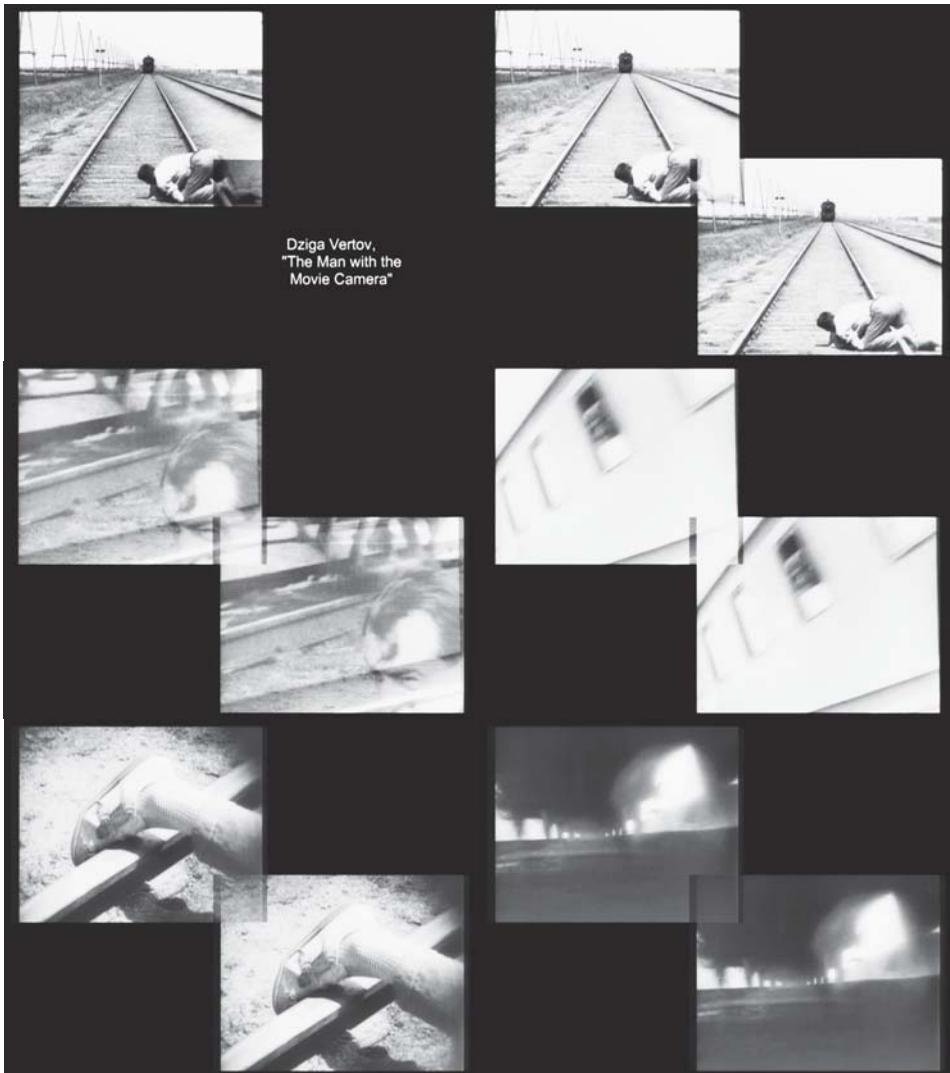
invoke, as in a *mise en abyme*, the experience of the cinematic gaze. These cinematic images, which can hardly be surpassed in their dramatic velocity (owing partly to the propulsive soundtrack Farocki adds to Ruttmann's film), are now contrasted with the contemporary images of the high-speed train passing through Lille. Significantly, twenty-first-century images present themselves as diagrammatic surveillance images, whose monotony and lack of plasticity in no way compare to the high-speed ride of the TGV but instead visualize the corresponding administrative processes. Cut then



Farocki. *Counter-Music*. 2004.

to Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, specifically the breathtaking scene depicting "the man with a movie camera" in the act of capturing a rapidly approaching train via a low-angle point-of-view shot. If we compare the medium-specificity of cinematic images with that of surveillance images, the emphasis on the composition—the creative authorship so critical to cinematic images—is clearly absent from surveillance footage. This difference, unsurprisingly, translates into the affective temperature of the respective media. "Both Ruttmann and Vertov dramatise means of transport," an intertitle states, hinting at the "extremely undramatic" quality of the surveillance images, with their comparative lack of "the most common means of condensation" such as "camera movements or edits."<sup>43</sup> At this point yet another differentiating mark

43. Farocki, *Bilderschatz*, p. 25; Farocki and Ernst, "Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts," p. 282.



*Farocki. Counter-Music. 2004.*

between the aesthetics of cinema and the aesthetics of surveillance imagery is evoked, namely, the expectation that cinematic images will be *seen* by some spectator (whose implied spectatorship may or may not have informed the production of the cinematic artwork from the outset). Most surveillance images, by contrast, are not intended to be viewed by anybody and—unless an exceptional occurrence like a robbery or riot requires their review—are indeed never seen by anyone but simply deleted or discarded.<sup>44</sup>

44. Farocki, “Contre-chant,” p. 108. Farocki writes: “[T]he most mundane activities are monitored by video. The images are not really intended to be watched. Only in exceptional cases are the tapes kept for

The ever more pressing questions that need asking then are these: Wherein lies the unique quality of this relatively new species of surveillance image? What attributes does Farocki's installation evoke with regard to this new medium, a medium that he rightly characterizes as "under-theorized"?<sup>45</sup> A comparatively unequivocal response to these questions emerges with a sequence in *Counter-Music* that Farocki shoots "on 14 July 04 (national holiday)." In the right half of the installation's split screen we follow security personnel handling the joystick of a surveillance control panel; in the left image track we see a street lamp. With this the commentary: "We directed the surveillance cameras towards streetlights to catch the moment when they light up. We are not hunting in the wild—we are shooting animals which have already been captured." What do we make of this hunting metaphor? On the one hand, the metaphor appears to suggest that since we know that the street lamps will light up at some point, since we are waiting for the actualization of an "event" that we can already anticipate, this "moment when they light up" is comparable to an animal that has already been captured. In line with the temporality of surveillance imagery—the future perfect<sup>46</sup>—one could say: "The streetlights will have lit up." However, the situation described here does *not* describe the typical event structure of surveillance—hence the not quite authentic ("We are not hunting in the wild")



Farocki. *Counter-Music*. 2004.

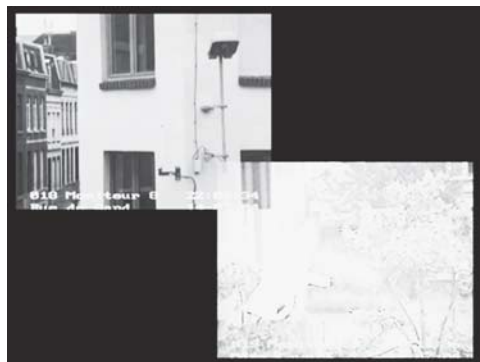
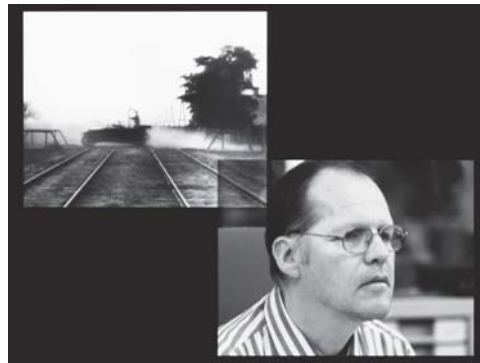
further use and not erased." Farocki, "Contre-chant," p. 108; see also Farocki, *Bilderschatz*, p. 25; Farocki and Ernst, "Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts," p. 282.

45. Farocki, *Bilderschatz*, p. 8; Farocki and Ernst, "Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts," p. 275.

46. See Winfried Pauleit, "Photographesomenon: Videoüberwachung und bildende Kunst," in *Bilder—Raum—Kontrolle: Videoüberwachung als Zeichen gesellschaftlichen Wandels*, ed. Leon Hempel and Jörg Metelmann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 76–78. Pauleit writes: "The use of video surveillance produces a specific sort of image. In the present . . . these usually stay invisible. . . . Cameras are . . . set up to double a specific spatio-temporal structure as an image trace that can be assessed retrospectively. A *second* reality is created as a security against unforeseen deviations. . . . This production of images is directed towards a 'future perfect.' . . . Deriving the name as an etymological transformation of 'photography' (light writing), I propose calling this type of image *photographesomenon* (light will have been written). The *photographesomenon* is already 'written,' even if it only constitutes itself as an image in futurity." Pauleit, "Photographesomenon," pp. 76–78, trans. as Pauleit, "Video Surveillance and Postmodern Subjects: The Effects of the Photographesomenon: An Image-Form in the 'Futur antérieur,'" in *Ctrl Space: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 469. On the prognostic force of surveillance, see also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), pp. 53–54.

quality of this “hunt” whose outcome is already predetermined (“We are shooting animals which have already been captured”). For what characterizes surveillance is precisely not the waiting for a particular event, is precisely not the tension, the anticipation of, say, a happy end, so familiar from the movies. Surveillance images are devoid of dramatic suspense, as is illustrated by Farocki’s juxtaposition with Vertov’s film. His juxtaposition of the bored gaze of a human monitor with a rapid car ride from Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* underscores this quality of surveillance imagery. Instead of dramatic development, surveillance is empty time, ongoingness, and monotony, until the next surely occurring yet not quite definable event.<sup>47</sup> This empty time structure, in turn, determines the expectation of the viewer of surveillance images, articulated in *Counter-Music* by the words “We whiled away the time spent waiting.” The whiling away, the sameness, that sense of boredom, describes the typical reception of surveillance images, a reception that may well be aligned with a certain hope for the arrival of an event but must acknowledge uneventfulness as a distinguishing quality of surveillance.<sup>48</sup> The surveillance cameras in Lille through which Farocki allows us to look implicate us—even if under artificial conditions (“We are not hunting in the wild”)—in the experience of this ambivalent gaze. This is a gaze that might anticipate the eventual actualization of an event, the lighting up of the streetlights, yet it is bound to endure the monotony, the lack of any action, for most of the time, and which is, in the course of waiting, presented no “dramatic spectacle” other than the close-up of a discarded plastic bag, caught in a tree and caressed by the wind.

At this point in the installation another intertitle raises the question “Are these images deliberate or chance?” In contrast to the cinematic images by Vertov



Farocki. *Counter-Music*. 2004.

47. See also Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung*, pp. 157–58, 351.

48. *Ibid.*



and Ruttmann, it seems to be precisely the lack of authoriality, deliberation, and human intention that presents itself as distinctively characteristic of surveillance images.<sup>49</sup> The camera's eye merely records; it is a cold eye, as Farocki says,<sup>50</sup> an eye that does not want to see and seems unfettered by all affect. Yet what does it mean that an image does (or does not) have meaning, that it is inflected by some sort of intention? What does it mean if a viewer can (or cannot) find edification in an aesthetic composition, the skillful dramatization of events, punctuated by *kairos*, the right moment,<sup>51</sup> and by *telos*, an ultimate aim? These are questions that surveillance images confront us with and that constitute their theoretically underexplored, novel quality. Farocki compares, in a 1983 review of Michael Klier's film *The Giant*, the novelty of these images with the feeling of novelty shared by the beholders of the very first photographs. "The electronic cameras you can now find everywhere (usually angled downwards from above) for observation and surveillance," he remarks,

produce images day and night, year in, year out. ... Seeing these shots in sequence creates a kind of pensive reflection similar to the doubts following the appearance of photography. Early photography showed, which can always be the case again, that you can have other kinds of pictures than just those of important people, objects and events. Random images, since they are as much pictures as those taken deliberately, raise the question of what status, significance, meaning—and intention—are supposed to be.<sup>52</sup>

These lines, written roughly two decades before *Counter-Music*, anticipate, in condensed form, the crucial questions regarding surveillance images that would be more rigorously explored in the 2004 installation. They prefigure the eventless temporality and profoundly undramatic feel of most surveillance images as well as the nonexistence of an author, that is, the lack of any *intention* behind the images. Farocki elaborates on his interest in the idiosyncratic nature of surveillance images, which, in contrast to cinematic images, are

not cropped and framed in order to compress space and time. ... Images that appear so inconsequential that they are not stored—the tapes are erased and are used again. Generally the images are stored and archived only in exceptional cases, but exceptional cases one is sure to encounter. Such images challenge the artist who is interested in a meaning that is *not authorial and intentional*, an artist interested in a sort of beauty that is not calculated.<sup>53</sup>

49. Ibid., p. 320.

50. In Farocki's film *Prison Images* the narrator states: "The video images duplicate the control gaze. Their cold eye is intended to shed light on the prison, and so demystify it."

51. Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung*, p. 320.

52. Harun Farocki, "Kamera in Aufsicht," *Filmkritik* 27, no. 9 (1983), p. 416.

53. Farocki, "Phantom Images," p. 18, emphasis mine.



Surveillance images are images that are neither cropped nor framed, devoid of *kairos* and *telos*, made to be deleted, by no author, with no intention. These, then, are, in Farocki's vein, the parameters of a theory of surveillance imagery.

*Coda*

Farocki's invocation of surveillance images' "uncalculated beauty" is, of course, in some respects paradoxical, given that the category of beauty, implicitly or explicitly, presupposes a beholder who can apprehend beauty as such. Yet surveillance images are for the most part not viewed by anyone, since most of what they record indeed is inconsequential, devoid of anything that might be of potential interest. For the type of surveillance images that Farocki dubs "operational images," i.e., surveillance images analyzed by automatic-recognition systems, this holds true all the more given that such systems are designed to spare the human viewer the drudgery of viewing the infinite quantity of surveillance images. This is precisely the point where an abyss opens that pervades Farocki's installation from the first minute to the last. On the one hand, Farocki shows us images whose "meaning . . . is *not* . . . *intentional*." At the same time, we, Farocki's audience, are unmistakably implicated as far as our reflective capacity is concerned, our ability to disentangle the associative links that his "soft montage" precipitates. While Farocki's operational images allude to the abolition of human observers, his aesthetic emphatically demands our involvement and, as such, challenges and disturbs what *Counter-Music* seems to be about. Farocki has said with regard to surveillance images that "their continuous message is that what they show is not important."<sup>54</sup> One is tempted to turn this claim against his "found footage" installation and argue that *Counter-Music's* "continuous message is that what [it shows] is not important." That we nonetheless invest ourselves in a reading of *Counter-Music* and find it, in perhaps not quite discernible ways, important might, after all, be owed to its intended beauty.

54. Farocki, "Contre-chant," p. 108.