Priscila Arantes and Sergio Nesteriuk
Programming the Visible:
Conversations between Vilém Flusser and Harun Farocki

The motto of the exhibition *Programming the Visible*, presented at the Paço das Artes in São Paulo, 2016, was the questioning of the nature of XXI century images. The exhibition brought together a number of works by the artist and filmmaker Harun Farocki (1944-2014): *Parallel I-IV* (2014)*, Interface* (1995), *and Phrases of Impact, Images of Impact. A conversation with Flusser* (1986).

Harun Farocki (1944-2014) is internationally known for his critical exploration of images that make up the world. Having made a number of films, many of them inspired by Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard, the artist, in the last years of his life migrates to the world of contemporary art creating film-installations that discuss the relationship of man with the universe of technical images.

In 2010, he participated in the *29th International São Paulo Biennial* with the video installation *Serious Games,* a reflection on computer animation, which employed images focusing on violence. The work takes as its starting point the therapeutic process developed with North American soldiers who had been through traumatic situations in the Middle East.

Programming the Visible presented not only part of the creative universe of Farocki, but also examined the differences between images captured by optical devices and those built by computer algorithms. In addition, the exhibition discussed the nature of contemporary images and also their "power" in the construction of the ways we see and perceive reality. The title of the show, in this sense, could not be more appropriate. What we see is not only created by programed codes, but the way we see is also programmed; we live wrapped up in a world that is programmable and manipulated by machine codes. The computer image, thus creates "parallel" worlds that affect trajectories: the image itself is the world/reality we live in.

Parallel I-IV (2014), one of the works presented in the show, is a film installation which consists of four parts, each addressing the language of games. It reflects upon snippets of

popular games, usually narrated by an essayistic voice-over. In these films, Farocki investigates the devices used for the construction of images throughout the history of art, such as the Renaissance perspective. The work is a film-installation about the "history" of images as well as the representation strategies throughout history.

In the first film of this series, created in 2012, Farocki analyzes the style of the computer graphics in games of the 1980s, which used images without depth of field composed of horizontals, verticals, and points. In the second and third films (2014), the artist analyzes the productions utilizing perspective and depth of field. In the fourth film, one of the latest works created by the artist in 2014, which has as its protagonist the hero-inspired games from Los Angeles in the 1940s, from pre-apocalyptic imagery, and from Western movies. Many of the sequences are frightening and violent; showing film sequences of street fights, persecution, and threats at gunpoint.

In these films, Farocki addresses a fundamental question: the fact that we live immersed in a world of images that have decisive influence over the way we see and approach reality. He discusses the nature of images in the twenty-first century, which unlike optical images, separate themselves from reality by creating their own "reality" with particular rules and characters. "The hero had no parents or teachers. He had to learn by himself what the rules were," says a voice-over in one of the films that are part of the exhibition.
The work of Farocki, in this sense, seems to assume a tangible political dimension in line with the works of Jean-Luc Godard, master at creating terrifying beautiful takes, even if based upon the discomfort of contemporary life and its inherent violence.

Didi-Huberman, in his essay "Como abrir los ojos" [How to open your eyes] states that Farocki spent his life obsessed with the same question: "why, how, and in which way do the production of images participate in the destruction of human beings?" (HUBERMAN 2013).

To deal with the violence in the world by giving back even more violence, is perhaps Farocki's strategy, in order to reflect on the malaise of the world: "Elevar el próprio pensamiento hasta el nível del em ojo (el enojo provocado por toda la violência que hay en el mundo, esa violência a la que negamos estar condenados). Elevar el próprio enojo hasta el nível de una tarea (la tarea de denunciar esa violencia con toda la calma y la inteligencia que sean posibles)." [To raise our own thoughts to eye level (anger caused by all the violence in

the world, this violence that we refuse to be condemned to). To raise our own anger to the level of a task (the task of denouncing this violence with all the calmness and intelligence that is possible.)] (Huberman 2013: 14).

Shocking Statements, Shocking Images. A conversation with Vilém Flusser

It is interesting to see how the issues of *Parallel I-IV* echo in *Shocking Statements, Shocking Images: A Conversation with Vilém Flusser* (1986), another work present at the exhibition, in which Farocki asks the philosopher Vilém Flusser to analyze the first page of the German sensasionalist tabloid *Bild Zeitun*. Taking place decades before the series *Parallel*, this interview provides disturbing answers to many questions about the contemporary uneasyness. Here, images, texts, and sources reinforce each other to create both shocking media and reality effects.

It is important to point out that many of the questions in this interview bring up discussions that were already developed by Flusser in the publication of *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* [Philosophy of the black box], released in 1985, a year before the interview.

In *Filosofia da Caixa Preta,* photography is taken as an example, which makes possible the development of a critique of the relationship between technology and society, an example from which Flusser arrives at the concept of technical images. Photography is a basic model, a device whose characteristics will acquire new meaning in film, video, television, and more recently, in computer generated images. In this sense, *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* is not only a book about photography, but rather about the production of technological images, which change the way we relate to the world. Photography in this context works more properly as a pretext with which to check the functioning of our society marked by the collapse of the text and the hegemony of media images.

The advent of the technical image marks the beginning of a new relationship with the visible, with structures that are different from the written language model: technical images are surfaces that aspire to be representations of the world, but in fact hide their real dimension, which is none other than that of being an image.

The exercise employed by Flusser is, precisely, upon perceiving a new stage of the culture contaminated by the explosion of technology and media, to cast a critical eye onto other devices seen as *black boxes*, devices whose interior programming are completely opaque and uncertain.

Due to the action of the techno-social programs, the subject tends to become programmed and a programmable worker, who is expected to respond to questions posed by the technical apparatus. In other words, what we really see, in a world dominated by technical images, is not the world, but certain predetermined concepts relative to a world impregnated with the media structure.

The interview thus emphasizes important points of Flusser's discussion: the hegemony of the world of images and their power in programming our visibility.

It is interesting to note that, unlike other texts by the philosopher, in this interview, Flusser develops an "applied philosophy." He carries out a thorough exercise of reading the subliminal relations between text and image on the first page of the German tabloid, unmasking the way the expressive codes interrelate in the creation of slogans and demagogic discourses.

The theme of violence, which is one of the topics placed on the front page of the newspaper, more specifically concerning a person who was shot, is reinforced by the way the text and image intertwine, creating a subliminal way to treat violence as something trivial. Flusser says in one of the excerpts from the interview: "The text states: She had to kneel. Shot in the neck. And here the image breaks the text. Therefore, if someone looks at the image, a powerful point can be obtained. Very important, which is to say, (…) even before we go crazy trying to understand what that page really wants to say (...). The situation constructed here is built in a deliberately chaotic manner with the intention to burst into our consciousness. Its intention is to eliminate our consciousness. Its intention is to prevent our conscience, so that we can supposedly absorb the message at a low level of consciousness and will not understand it correctly. What we are looking at here, is an apparently transcendent form, a 'kitschified', brutalized reduction of human dignity by a robust demagoguery."

At the end of the video, Flusser calls attention to the fact that the interview is also an image — since the interview is being filmed — and in this sense, the viewer must have a critical and reflective view in relation to what he/she sees: "I honestly believe that when someone watches us on TV, this must be said. We must make an appeal to the viewer now, and say: "use this critical skill, because we are using the 'word' against ourselves."

This is the point where Flusser's *philosophy* wants to intervene: to produce a reflection on the possibilities of creation and a critical view with freedom in an increasingly programmed society dominated by technological images. Thus, it is also necessary that we be suspicious of images, since they are codes, and as such, programmable.

Game Design: Between Vilém Flusser and Harun Farocki

In *O Mundo Codificado* [The Codified World], Flusser (2007) defines design as an area in close harmony with the world of communication. Far from seeing design as a separate language, both are encodings of the world: "Design, like all other cultural expressions, shows that the matter does not appear (is unapparent), unless it is informed, and thus, once informed, begins to manifest itself, becoming a phenomenon. Matter in design, like any other cultural aspect is the way shapes appear" (Flusser 2007: 28).

That is to say, for Flusser, unlike a modernist vision of design in which form should follow function, the form of something, the artifact, carries with it the sense of in+forming, that is to say, to create something with intent: "Every manufactured object, in turn, aims to transform the user's relationship with its surroundings in order to give him some advantage. By completing a possibility of use, the artifact becomes both model and information. For example, once you see a lever in operation and once you see the principle employed, it is no longer possible to look at any wooden stick or metal without recognizing its potential application for the same purpose. What was before a simple piece of wood acquires a specific function and meaning by the existence of a concept, that is, to inform is also to fabricate" (Flusser 2007: 13).

Faced with a massive entertainment device, one of the main intentions of a game designer is to project and implement strategies and various resources that support the ubiquity and immersion of the player. In this way, it is possible to keep the player in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) called "flow": a state of extreme concentration (or absorption) in the activity per se, as if the ego gets dissolved before an autotelic phenomenon.

However, what the literature in this area seems to ignore is precisely the limits that these (and other) game design issues reveal. The flow deprives the individual player and her "suspension of disbelief", of a critical detachment from the artwork (the "game played"), as well as from an expansion of potential experiences that games can offer, just by confining users within certain desired parameters.

And it is precisely in this gap that Farocki thinks of games: between the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic — to make use of the psychic realms proposed by Lacan. By appropriating, mediatizing, and subverting the logic of games, the artist places them in a kind of digital non-space, a palimpsest under which other texts are revealed; the invisible behind that which he called "operative images": images that start from a technical operation in order to restore or create a given reality.

Unlike what was done with *Serious Games*, in which he addressed a game created by the US Army, in the installation *Parallel,* consisting of four videos, Farocki employed four different commercially launched games to explore relevant issues which escape not only the game players, but game critics as well.

In the first video of the *Parallel* installation, elements of nature such as fire, water, and trees serve as a reference to show a kind of "leap" in just thirty years of digital image representation, from a few points on the screen, to lines, until reaching the representation of the three-dimensional (3D) space. As stated in the video, the 3D image creators did not have to wait for a Renaissance, because digital technologies allowed images out of their symbolic dimension into a "new constructivism." The example of a designer alternating his/her gaze between two monitors to create clouds in a 3D scene is emblematic: on one of the screens he/she operates the interface of a software program while on the second, the result of handling forms a virtual sky composed of different layers of clouds. Unlike the Greek painter

Zeuxis, who had painted grapes so perfect that birds were attracted to his canvas, computer images intend to attract human beings created by their own designs. Farocki believes that, in the same way that photography liberated painting for the avant-garde movements, the three-dimensional images will assume the function of cinema, freeing other possibilities.

The second video touches upon spatiality: space, its surfaces, its limits and the emptiness. Beginning with the ontological assumption that "the world does not exist if I'm not observing it," Farocki focuses the reflection on the attempt to understand the (in)finitude of space created by these operative images. "How far can you get?", asks the voice in the video, while the images show attempts to overcome unscalable or even invisible borders programed by the games.

The third video in the installation explores issues of displacement, showing the control of a camera in a type of big zoom in/out that allows one to exit from an almost microscopic view inside a battlefield scene, zooming out to a distance that reveals a silent scenario with no sounds, suspended in a kind of big emptiness — "the world ends as a board," a voice tells us in the video. Through manipulation of the game programming code, one can cause the camera to penetrate objects and solid surfaces showing them, as if they were hollow inside. The absence of collision provides other ways to experience space in this "new constructivism." By breaking the immediate relationship between matter and form, the artist reinforces the hyper-real (Baudrillard 1981) in the manifestations of time and space created by the direct manipulation of the player, thus stimulating new forms of cognition and imagination. "Like a child who rips a doll apart in order to know the mysteries of representation," the video narration concludes.

In the fourth video, Farocki investigates extreme situations involving characters controlled by the player and their interactions with NPCs (Non Player Characters) guided by the programming of an AI (Artificial Intelligence) algorithm. In addition to the "gratuitous violence," one of the tactics used is to keep the character still when controlled by the player before an NPC, that is to say, not to act or look for ways of interaction that a gamer usually seeks. This adopted distancing reinforces the estrangement of the public towards something

that is presented both as familiar and strange (unheimlich).[1] Thus emerges an intrinsic diegesis that asks us not only about the simulation or mimicry of human behavior, but about the limitations of human freedom. In sum: to what extent life in society could also not be considered programmed or programmable? How far does the player control his/her own life? To what extent can his/her own life be considered a big game?

Final Thoughts: (Re)programming the (in)visible

We argue that by proposing new ways of encoding and decoding the world, Farocki assigns new possibilities for the use of an artifact, thus valuing not only its model, but especially the potential of its program.

Nevertheless, we can expand this consideration if we have for a base other aspects present in the term "design," both in its use as a noun and as a verb. For Flusser (2007), even the most ordinary meanings of the term evoke "perfidious and cunning" dimensions: "The design word occurs in a context of trickery and fraud. The designer is therefore a malicious schemer dedicated to engendering traps" (Flusser, 2007: 182).

Thus, the artifacts of which Farocki appropriates can be understood as machinic processes, deception devices — the lever itself, example used by Flusser, has as its main mechanical feat the cheating of gravity. Similarly, the philosopher believes that the designer causes the appearance of the form and, therefore, should be regarded as an impostor who seduces men to consider ideas "deformed."

The dichotomous separation promoted by the Enlightenment between the realms of art and the technology of machines was already unsustainable in the nineteenth century, beginning with the emergence of technical images. For Flusser (2007), it is precisely modern design that will fill this gap, as a link between these two worlds that explains their internal connections and make viable a new form of culture.

---

[1] One of the paradoxes observed in games is a phenomenon known as the "uncanny valley", in which the closer to a perfect representation of the human figure a character is, the greater our fear of it, and therefore, the player's empathy diminishes as representation becomes frightening real.

"This is the design that is the foundation of every culture: to cheat nature through technical means, replace the natural with the artificial, and build machines from which we ourselves arise as god. In a nutshell, the design behind all culture consists of, with cunning, the transformation of simple mammals conditioned by nature into free artists" (Flusser 2007: 184).

Thus, it is also possible to consider the work of Farocki, as that of a facilitator in the understanding that a photograph, a film, or a game reaches their audiences in increasingly mediated and mediatized forms, unmasking, manipulating or often hiding their secrets, their invisible codes. And the more this process is repeated, the more obvious it becomes. Therefore, like the player of a game, the contemporary subject, might be understood as a deceiver who is at the same time deceived—even if this visibility is being hidden under other codes.

Bibliographic References

Arantes, Priscila (2015). Re/escrituras da arte contemporânea: história, arquivo e mídia. Porto Alegre, Ed.Sulina.

Baudrillard, Jean (1981). Simulacres et simulations. Paris: Galilée, 1981.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (2008). Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

Flusser, Vilém (1985). Filosofia da Caixa Preta. São Paulo, Ed. Hucitec.

Flusser, Vilém (2007). O mundo codificado: por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação, org. Rafael Cardoso, trans. Raquel Abi-Sâmara. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007.

Huberman, G. (2013). "Como abrir los ojos." In: Harun Farocki, Desconfiar de las imagenes. Buenos Aires, Caja Negra.