

Godmilow's 'Exact Replica', *WHAT FAROCKI TAUGHT*: An Introduction

By Tom Gunning

(This talk was given as an introduction to a discussion of Jill Godmilow's film, *What Farocki Taught* on April 8, 1999, at the University of Notre Dame.)

Some years ago I was asked to be an "expert" on a series of films that were being produced on Hollywood and American cinema for PBS, a series I might add, that ended up being neither informative nor successful in terms of ratings. We talked about the various subjects that might be covered and the sorts of filmmakers that might be chosen to make them. I suggested that rather than getting filmmakers who regularly made television documentaries, it might be interesting to have films on Hollywood made by Independent filmmakers, people like Jill Godmilow. I saw that far-away look come into the producer's eyes, the sign of panic at having to defend their basically conventional and philistine values while still appearing intellectual and at least vaguely counter culture. Well, I was told, they tried that in a previous series they have done on American poets. Jill Godmilow was approached to do one of the series, I don't remember which one, but knowing the way their minds worked, I would guess it was a woman poet, Emily Dickinson maybe or Elizabeth Bishop. Godmilow however had caused them great concern and anxiety when she said she would want to make a film about the problem of making a film on Emily Dickinson or Elizabeth Bishop. Needless to say someone else was hired to make the program on Emily Dickinson or Elizabeth Bishop and I was not asked for further advice on the Hollywood project.

I think many of us who first came to film in the late sixties or early seventies did so under the shadow (or the guidance) of Jean Luc Godard, who once described his films as less films than attempts at films. There was a modernist sensibility involved here which was not so much an embrace of abstract formal issues as a Socratic questioning of what lay behind things. It is a tradition that I would maintain is deeply bound up with film as a medium, even in the ways we use it in daily life without thinking about it, because very often watching images in our society substitutes for thinking about them. The immediacy of the moving photographic image, its extraordinary ability to seem to re-present something to us directly, is both the greatest tool and the greatest illusion of our era. It is a problem that see-saws in Godard's pithy statement attacking most of cinema, "This is not a just image; it is just an image". For Godard, the search for an *image juste* for a filmmaker should be as difficult a task as Flaubert's search for the *le mot juste*, the exact word, which finds justice in its clarity and its careful placement.

All of this is bound up with Jill Godmilow's *What Farocki Taught* because it deals with reproduction, representation, repetition and re-making. I would like to offer a quote coming from the very beginning of cinema, a period that has constantly drawn my attention because at the beginning every one had to define what they were doing. It comes from an 1896 advertising prospectus for the Jenkins Phantoscope (one of the earliest American film projectors) describing the fascination of their *Street Scenes*, "Who has not watched the shifting, changing panorama of the streets? The hurrying to and from, the bustling crowd? And who has not said, I would like to see this scene again, I would like to study its many interesting phases?"

What I want to point out here is that at the origin of cinema the power of motion pictures for these filmmakers and their potential audience lay not simply in its

ability to “capture” real life – a sort of realism – but in its re-production, it repetition. Why? So one could study its many interesting phases. “Study” here does not necessarily indicate a scientific purpose, but an intellectual and sensual pleasure, a satisfying of curiosity, since film was one of a long line of “scientific toys”.

Now let me contrast that with another comment from Godard, about a film I hate even though some of my most respected colleagues defend it, Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. Godard once made the ironically modest claim that he had not had a strong effect on film history, because of all the things he had not been able to prevent, including Steven Spielberg rebuilding Auschwitz. I know it’s a low blow, but the issue here is complex, not simply sophomoric. [We live in a world which has not so much forgotten the past as re-made it, made it constantly available and accessible in new packaging.] Rather than watching a classic movie again, one can see it re-made with color and new stars, improved special effects, all its embarrassing patina of past-ness stripped away, as the past is made palatable, familiar, given a contemporary sheen.

But my point is not to take a superior attitude to this packaging of the past, this drive to remake it, because at its core breathes a very deep problem, one about the nature of history and the nature of cinema. How else can one have access to the past without in some sense re-making it? That must be the task of every historian, to pull the fragments of the past into the present and speak with them. The danger lies in making this look easy, because it is very difficult.

Jill Godmilow remade Harun Farocki’s *Inextinguishable Fire*. She calls it at the beginning of the film “an exact replica”. We know (and she knows) that she is both lying and telling the truth with this statement. It would be easy to list all the ways this film is not an exact replica, beginning with the change of title and rushing toward the nearly five minutes of epilogue at the end. But the ways that it is a replica are more important, I think. A Hollywood re-make, which boils a previous film down to a basic plot situation and may occasionally reproduce some dialogue, NEVER creates a substitute for every image and sound in the way that Godmilow undertook for Farocki’s film. Further, the Hollywood re-make attempts to eclipse the original, to make you forget about it except with a few elbow-in-the-ribs references (in fact, the original version is usually removed from the market during the release of the re-make). In *What Farocki Taught*, Godmilow seems rather to invoke and resuscitate Farocki’s film, allowing it to emerge specter-like at key moments from her film. It creates a curiosity about the original and an interest in seeing it, and thinking about the original context in which it was made. In other words, this is a remake with all the fingerprints still showing, its trail of observation and reproduction leading back to the original clearly revealed to the audience.

This is why Godmilow calls her film “an exact replica”, because it is supposed to point back at something, not replace it. The drama of the film does not lie in seeing if it got it right, that exercise in nostalgia that Hollywood period films delight in, so that no actual photograph from the Great Depression or World War II can ever hope to match the perfectly period flavor attained by a Hollywood Art Director. Although Godmilow evokes the period piece, her old clothes seem ill fitting on her actors. They seem to move unnaturally. There is no aesthetic here of representing the original, that is to say of overcoming its past-ness, its difference from us. Godmilow remakes Farocki’s film for the same reason Jenkins filmed a city street scene in 1896 – in order to study it, to take apart its various phases, to understand it, to think about it.

In other words, we have two models of repetition or remaking or representation here. One tries to make you re-experience the original with no distance, in fact to make you forget that there was an original. The re-make will be better, stronger, newer, more like real life than real life is. The other model pays careful attention to the original, even down to attempts at exact replication. But it does not eclipse the original, it is in dialogue with it. It makes you think about the original, and indeed emphasizes its distance from you, the viewer. But instead of that distance being a problem to overcome, it grabs it as an opportunity for reflection. The distance itself becomes the space in which the film takes place.

Godmilow chose to remake a film whose aesthetic was already involved with creating, acknowledging and encountering distance. Farocki's film refused the illusion of immediacy. Testimony from a Vietnamese victim of napalm was not read by a Vietnamese person. Americans were played by Germans. It was filmed far from Michigan. The actors never tried to convince you they were really scientists or secretaries or business men. Yet this film was rooted in reality, a series of documents and reconstructions in detail of a research process and its funding and implementation. Farocki never used this lack of "realism" as a way to create an alternative reality. Rather, the lack of realistic detail creates again a space for reflection, a demonstration rather than a re-enactment. There is no joke or escape in the original film's stylization, simply an engagement with facts and the way they fit together.

So Godmilow's stylization corresponds with the original film's aesthetic and discursive approach – another exact replica. But the basic dumb question re-emerges: why re-make this film, how is it different (not literally – that's easy) fundamentally from the original? What does it do that the original does not? What does its re-presentation allow us to study? The answer does not lie in its scrutiny of the original, although reproducing anything does heighten our awareness of it. Rather, I would claim it lies in the temporal distance between the two films, that almost three-decade gap, which, after all, is what we call history. History makes *What Farocki Taught* different from *Inextinguishable Fire*. History is a gap between the two films which the second film renders visible. Making history visible has been the great unfulfilled promise of cinema, a task that was recognized as soon as it was invented. But in fact, for the most part, film as a representation of history has been a great disappointment, because film's true historical possibilities have been misunderstood.

Film delights us, and also deludes us with its immediacy. We see a film of Humphrey Bogart whistling, of Lillian Gish smiling, of James Dean holding back tears and they are they are alive before us. But, there is a canker at the heart of this rose. Film does re-present the ephemeral and most touching moments of life to us, but if I can quote Godard one more time, it also shows us "death at work." That is, it not only reproduces a moment in its uniqueness, but also in its passing, its disappearance. Every moment eludes our grasp. The greatest films allow us to mourn time's passing in a profound way. Godmilow does not really bring Farocki's film back to life; it mourns its passing. Like the mourning work, as described by Freud, it does this by first remembering. This film forgotten, neglected, perhaps repressed, must be re-discovered in all its clarity, courage and specificity.

But it is not simply a specific film that Godmilow is mourning here. It is an act of remembering and honoring a moment, the moment of Farocki's clarity, insight and

courage in making the original film. Even intelligent critics have gotten Godmilow's film wrong in seeing it as somehow avoiding contemporary issues by reviving the debate about a war that is long over. This is wrong for two reasons. First of all, the issues that Farocki and Godmilow raise about the place of one's work as part of a system of inhumanity and the way that instrumental reason, the problem solving of the Dow scientist which drive the narrative thrust of the films, blinds us to its ultimate uses is every bit as important today as it ever was. The problem is that now, it is foggier; the war had the horrible virtue of making things, such as the connections between government sponsored research and dire inhuman consequences, clearer. Thus Godmilow returns to a point of clarity to speak about issues still very much alive. But secondly such criticism is wrong because it partakes of the ideology of immediacy that pervades our sense of ahistorical thinking. To return to the past, it claims, is to hide from the present. On the contrary, to deal only with "current issues" can be a way to hide from history.

The commercial impulse to "remake" film comes from this desire for the new, this discomfort with the challenge of the past. Godmilow's remake reverses this, demanding that we pay attention to the past, both the Vietnam War and the sort of focused opposition it engendered. One does not return to the past in order to relive it nostalgically, substituting a dream image of the past for the complexity of the fragments of memory and ambiguities of recall. One returns to the past in order to understand the present, to demand that the present keep faith with the past, both its tragedies and achievements. As Walter Benjamin says, "even the dead are not safe from the enemy if he wins." To articulate the past historically, Benjamin says, "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger." The gesture Godmilow makes in this film is double. It allows the past to be past, it does not eclipse its strangeness, its distance from us. At the same time, it does not rest content with its passing. It uses cinema to wrest it out of oblivion, to bring it to us as a challenge to contemporary thinking and to contemporary filmmaking. This is not a work that rests easy in its recreation. It hopes to inspire by demonstration – it shows us that such a film as Farocki's was made in the past, and it asks us: can we think as clearly, work as economically and as vividly in the future? If it does not inspire us to new work, this film will exist to embarrass us, to show what can be (once was) done.

Farocki's film ends with a parable rather than an acted-out document. A worker in a factory speaks of smuggling out the various parts of a vacuum cleaner in order to have an appliance he can assemble at home and give to his wife. But when he puts it together it turns out to be an automatic rifle. A student at a factory smuggles out parts that he thinks will prove the factory is making automatic rifles when re-assembled. However, when put together he finds he has a vacuum cleaner. An engineer concludes that a vacuum cleaner can become a useful weapon, and an automatic rifle can become a household appliance. What we make depends, he says, on the workers, students and engineers. The parable is compact and nicely oblique. But it focuses on the true issue of the film, not manufacture of napalm thirty years ago (although we should never forget it) nor the making of Farocki's film, (although now hopefully it will not be forgotten) but the way it is all too easy to lose sight of the parts assembled to make up a whole in advanced technological production. Every product is the assembly of many parts through the labor of often separated workers. Therefore, every product, too, has a history which it is easy to forget, or even never know. Reclaiming those fragments, putting them together and especially showing the way they can come apart and make something else, are tasks of the historian. Film which can break reality into pieces, which can capture moments and let us study them, need not only thrill us with the rush of immediacy but can also

demonstrate to us the processes of memory, of re-thinking the past and turning it – not into nostalgia – but into a lesson for the future.