

## HARUN FAROCKI

November 30, 2016

### Images of the World and the Inscription of War (Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges)

1989, 75 mins

### Inextinguishable Fire (Nicht Löschbares Feuer)

1969, 22 mins

### Videograms of a Revolution (Videogramme einer Revolution)

Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, 1992, 106 mins

December 7, 2016

### In Comparison (Zum Vergleich)

2009, 61 mins

### Workers Leaving the Factory (Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik)

1995, 36 mins

### Interface (Schnittstelle)

1995, 25 mins

### The Expression of Hands (Der Ausdruck der Hände)

1997, 30 mins

### Still Life (Stilleben)

1997, 56 mins

This is a simple introduction, brief, and with the expected gaps that any retrospective view affords. For an artist whom the cinema was only one output, we settle in our seats knowing that what is on screen is a limited view at the scope of Harun Farocki's work with moving images.

Throughout his career Farocki's use of media adapted to its mode of production. He was an artist conscious of his means, and if we risk what is too often thought as vulgar and speak of money: he often went where the bread was. He earned a living, first in film, then television, later museums and art spaces, and meanwhile as an educator and critic. For example, he has said that by 1979:

... I had learned how to earn money. Meaning that I learnt how to make use of the big television apparatus. [...] I probably only had the courage to make productions which didn't fit into any programme because I was surrounded by such wealth and energy. From 1979 until 2000 I was able to make one production every year with television finance, sometimes two or three.<sup>1</sup>

This activity was not cynically motivated, nor was it to miser production budgets, direct vanity projects, or settle into comfortably paid bureaucracy. Farocki was an artist who—inspired by his daughters' adoration of children's television—directed segments of the German adaptation of Sesame Street with his collaborator Hartmut Bitomsky.<sup>2</sup> Such jobs provided the means for Farocki—providing not only money, but technology and an audience—that he always managed to make his own. These are Farocki's lessons. Whatever the medium, scene, or circumstance, he dealt eloquently with its language and gave it back to us on display. His commentary ranged from direct to tacit, but regardless of the immediate volume, his films contain the important lessons of a term that is often overused and certainly overripe: “critique”.

Farocki shows us that the true character of criticism is not in an arrogant posture, but in the produce of skill. He certainly had an aptitude for craft, and it is from his formal proficiency that he gifted to us the images that we exhaust ourselves trying to explain. Such attention to form is often taken for granted in the excesses of interpretation, but skill—even if we struggle to uncover or define its limits—was an indispensable motor for Farocki's vocation as an artist, and indeed in the foundations of human labour itself.

It then comes as no surprise that scenes of work, labour, and the pro-duction process occupy much of Farocki's films. He shows us the banality of work; the gradient from its hyper-visibility to its disappearance; its pressures and conflicts and upsets; its histories and representations; its rhetoric, skills, and artistry; the humour in it; its agents, places, and objects; its changing and primal scene; its affect and consequences; its place amongst the many ways of living; and at bottom, its import. It is not the total character of his work, but it is its ground. It is from this view that Farocki's films can be an aid in meditating on what it means when we use the word “work?”. It is suggested, with care, that observations such as these should be reserved as a simple consideration, or as a small entryway into his body of work. The broader lessons of Harun Farocki are in the films themselves; they educate in a way that escapes the simple diction used in summaries such as this, and they are why we must take our job as audience seriously and watch for what they impart.

#### Notes:

1. Harun Farocki, “Written Trailers” in Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?, Koenig Books & Raven Row, London, 2010
2. [www.harunfarocki.de/films/1970s/1973/sesame-street.html](http://www.harunfarocki.de/films/1970s/1973/sesame-street.html)

1856

1856 is a program of exhibitions and events presented across sites within and around the Victorian Trades Hall. It proceeds from thinking under this roof, with a duty to experiment in thinking about the labour of artists and the many ways in which artists, through their work, address social issues with absolute diversity.

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November 30, 2016

## IMAGES OF THE WORLD AND THE INSCRIPTION OF WAR (BILDER DER WELT UND INSCRIFT DES KRIEGES)

“According to a basic idea of this film, visual thinking expresses itself in a particular age through the specific use of its vision machines. Starting from the invention of aerial photography, originally used in the realm of architecture, Images of the World and the Inscription of War explores the complexity of certain rule systems within which such techniques of measurement are used. Harun Farocki develops an archaeology of technical images in which attention is not so much given to things seen in civilian or military contexts at certain points in the film, but to what becomes visible by using a medium. In so doing, the ambivalence of the term *Aufklärung* becomes clear: as both a form of enlightenment and a form of military reconnaissance.

Through the way in which the film makes images of control and surveillance from various historical and social contexts turn around a blind spot, it links them to the deadly virtuality of the photographic. Through repetitions, thematic series, and constant reframing, a gap gradually becomes apparent between two moments of viewing an aerial photograph from World War II. In the comparison, we recognize the historical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of the points of view in question: the visual regime of the American army, whose pilots shot photographs of Auschwitz in 1944, is different from that under which two CIA agents undertook private research in 1977 in the wake of the TV series ‘Holocaust’.

The film empathizes the materiality and the peculiarity of technical images by showing them within the spaces and arrangements they belong to: in the context of archives, albums, the media, or other structures. Farocki’s sensual thinking becomes apparent in a “lateral” montage of images and commentary, aimed at depicting displays of visual measurement and topographical procedures as dialectical constellations of reconnaissance and pursuit, and as specific framings of the human body.”

(Christa Blümlinger)

## INEXTINGUISHABLE FIRE (NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER)

“When we show you pictures of napalm victims, you’ll shut your eyes. You’ll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you’ll close them to the memory. And then you’ll close your eyes to the facts.”

These words are spoken at the beginning of an agitprop film that can be viewed as a unique and remarkable development. Farocki refrains from making any sort of emotional appeal. His point of departure is the following: “When napalm is burning, it is too late to extinguish it. You have to fight napalm where it is produced: in the factories.”

Resolutely, Farocki names names: the manufacturer is Dow Chemical, based in Midland, Michigan in the United States. Against backdrops suggesting the laboratories and offices of this corporation, the film then proceeds to educate us with an austerity reminiscent of Jean Marie Straub. Farocki’s development unfolds: “(1) A major corporation is like a construction set. It can be used to put together the whole world. (2) Because of the growing division of labor, many people no longer recognize the role they play in producing mass destruction. (3) That which is manufactured in the end is the product of the workers, students, and engineers.”

This last thesis is illustrated with an alarmingly clear image. The same actor, each time at a washroom sink, introduces himself as a worker, a student, an engineer. As an engineer, carrying a vacuum cleaner in one hand and a machine gun in the other, he says, “I am an engineer and I work for an electrical corporation. The workers think we produce vacuum cleaners. The students think we make machine guns. This vacuum cleaner can be a valuable weapon. This machine gun can be a useful household appliance. What we produce is the product of the workers, students, and engineers.”

(Hans Stempel)

## VIDEOGRAMS OF A REVOLUTION (VIDEOGRAMME EINER REVOLUTION)

“This reconstruction of the events of December 1989 in Romania, which led to the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu, is created using found footage: live television transmission, censored material, amateur recordings, and coverage by foreign TV crews. The chronological and topological montage is commented on off-screen through succinct statements about the actual course of events and the production of images.

The double character of the events is clearly rendered. On the one hand, it takes a classical course. On December 21, the live broadcast of a Ceausescu speech is interrupted when part of the audience listening on-site refuses to play the role assigned them in the spectacle. The abandonment of the standard choreography reveals the unwillingness of the people to continue accepting the regime. The next day, the crowd storms the building from which the dictator spoke.

On the other hand, the overthrow takes place in a new way, communicated by the media. In the television studio, which is also taken over, ideas of the nation, the return to religion, and the struggle of the demonstrators are discussed and summoned in varying constellations. As chaotically as these presentations take place, they follow the rules of direction of live TV. In the meantime, fights occur on the streets. For the cameras, the front lines are by no means apparent. In back rooms, in the presence of the cameras that are still tolerated, renegades of the old regime haggle over power.

A film like this could only be made in 1990/1991, when the archives of the censored recordings were accessible and amateur material remained limited. Ten years later, the mountain of images created during such events has grown to such an extent that their selection becomes random. After all these years, Videograms of a Revolution remains an aesthetically consistent testimony to a moment of historic upheaval.”

(Dietrich Leder)

December 7, 2016

## IN COMPARISON (ZUM VERGLEICH)

“I wanted to make a film [In Comparison] about concomitance and contemporary production on a range of different technical levels. So I looked for an object that had not changed too much in the past few thousand years. This could have been a shoe or a knife, but a brick becomes part of a building and therefore part of our environment. So the brick appears as something of a poetic object. I follow its mode of creation and use in Africa, India, and Europe [...]”.

(Harun Farocki)

## WORKERS LEAVING THE FACTORY (ARBEITER VERLASSEN DIE FABRIK)

“The first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory, but a century later it can be said that film is hardly drawn to the factory and even repelled by it. Films about work or workers have not become one of the main genres, and the space in front of the factory has remained on the sidelines. Most narrative films take place in that part of life where work has been left behind. Everything which makes the industrial form of production superior to others—the division of labor into minute stages, the constant repetition, a degree of organization which demands few decisions of the individual and which leaves him little room for maneuver—all this makes it hard to demonstrate changes in circumstances. Over the last century virtually none of the communication which took place in factories, whether through words, glances, or gestures, was recorded on film. [...]

The work structure synchronizes the workers, the factory gates group them, and this process of compression produces the image of a work force. As may be realized or brought to mind by the portrayal, the people passing through the gates evidently have something fundamental in common. Images are closely related to concepts, thus this film has become a rhetorical figure. One finds it used in documentaries, in industrial and propaganda films, often with music and/or words as backing, the image being given a textual meaning such as “the exploited,” “the industrial proletariat,” “the workers of the fist,” or “the society of the masses.” The appearance of community does not last long. Immediately after the workers hurry past the gate, they disperse to become individual persons, and it is this aspect of their existence which is taken up by most narrative films. If after leaving the factory the workers don’t remain together for a rally, their image as workers disintegrates.”

(Harun Farocki)

## INTERFACE (SCHNITTSTELLE)

“HF’s oeuvre can be written as a short biography of technical standards in terms of formats, digital media players and editing tools. The list of formats would include: 16mm reversal, 16mm negative, 35mm, video 2 inch, video 1 inch, Beta SP, Digital Beta, Mini-DV. The list of media players would include: Umatic Player, 1/4 inch player, Beta SP-Player, VHS/S-VHS player and DVD. The list of editing tools would include: a 16mm flatbed, a 35mm flatbed, a 16mm/35mm flatbed, a Umatic device, a VHS/S-VHS device, Avid software, and Premiere Pro software. HF recalled a relationship he had with a quarter-inch Ikegami player that looked like a huge ReVox recorder with two upright reels. The Ikegami played quarter-inch tapes on its giant reels, but there was a problem. ‘To keep

the image stable one had to lean something against the back reel, like a brake. Our magazine Filmkritik was too light. Engels’ Dialectic of Nature (1883) was too heavy. Bresson’s Notes on Cinematography (1975), that was perfect.’ The arms race of standards forces the filmmaker into a love-hate relationship with his machines that oscillates between feelings of tenderness, deference, despair and divorce.”

(Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun)

“Workers paving a road with cobbles will throw a stone into the air and catch it; each stone is different, and they determine where it properly belongs in mid-flight. Film script and shooting schedule are ideas and money; shooting a film is work and spending of money. The work at the editing table is something in-between. Editing studios tend to be found in back rooms, basements, or in attics. Much of the work is done outside normal working hours. Editing is a recurring chore and gives rise to solid jobs, yet each cut is a particular effort and one which draws the editor under its spell, making it hard for him to keep work and life apart. Time passes quickly. The film on the editing table winds backwards and forwards, and one frame comments on another; to reach a particular frame ten minutes back you have to wait two and a half minutes again. Through this winding back and forth you get to know a film very well. Children who have not yet learned to speak will still notice if a spoon is on the wrong hook in the kitchen. With this kind of familiarity, a film becomes a space you can inhabit and feel at home in. After three weeks, the cutter knows where the camera Jerks, where there is a blip on the soundtrack, or where an actor uses an idiotic intonation. A director who does editing himself once told me that he could not understand how anyone could translate a text which they did not know by heart. That is the work performed at the editing table; getting to know the material so well that the decisions taken as to where to make a cut, which version of a shot to use, or which music to play follow of their own accord.”

(Harun Farocki)

## THE EXPRESSION OF HANDS (DER AUSDRUCK DER HÄNDE)

“Historically, the cinema close-up was initially employed to convey emotions through facial expressions. But soon filmmakers also began focusing their attention on hands. Using film extracts, Farocki explores this visual language, its symbolism, Freudian slips, automatisms and its music. Often, hands betray an emotion which the face tries to dissimulate. They can also function as a conduit (exchanging money) or witness to a form of competence (work).”

(Harun Farocki)

## STILL LIFE (STILLEBEN)

“In the end, objects bear witness to their producers who bear something of themselves in the act of production. But the producers do not appear with their objects. When you look at objects, the people who produce them remain unimaginable. The spectator who understands this becomes unimaginable to himself. This is the departure for a new image of man.”

(Harun Farocki)