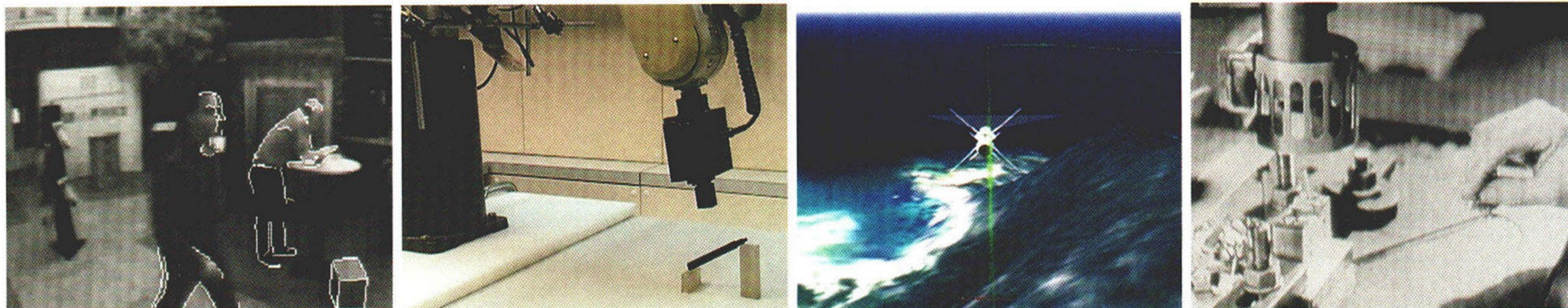


The Cinema of Harun Farocki

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This page: **Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine I-III*, 2001-2003.**
Installation view, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, 2004. Opposite page, left pair: **Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine I*, 2001,** stills from a color video, 25 minutes. Right pair: **Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine II*, 2002,** stills from a black-and-white and color video, 15 minutes.



VISION QUEST

Born in 1944 to an Indian father and a German mother, Harun Farocki studied at the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin from 1966 to 1968. This places him in the ambit of the most famous figures of New German Cinema (Fassbinder, Herzog, and Wenders), but his practice is closer to the more engaged filmmaking of Jean-Marie Straub, Alexander Kluge, and Helke Sander. Politicized by the struggles around the Vietnam War in the '60s and the Red Army Faction in the '70s,

Farocki has, like these peers, developed a critical cinema—one focused on the image as “a means of technical control”—and it isn’t as well known as it deserves to be.¹

The criticality of his work is one reason for its delayed reception; another is its sheer diversity: ninety-two films and videos, many made for TV; numerous radio pieces; a long list of articles, reviews, and interviews; and, lately, several image installations as well.² The films vary, both in style and topic, from a psychological thriller (*Betrayed* [1985]) to the “essay films” with which Farocki is typically associated.³ Among the latter are *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988), *How to Live in the German Federal Republic* (1990), *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* (2000), and *Eye/Machine I–III* (2001–2003), which is currently installed at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh.

In these works Farocki recovers, recuts, and reframes archival images, largely drawn from institutional records, industrial films, instruction videos, surveillance tapes, and home movies, of such subjects as labor practices, production models, training methods, weapons tests, control spaces, and “everyday life” (as it is still, somewhat optimistically, called).

Often he slows these images down, repeats them in various juxtapositions, and ruminates on them with a voiceover that ranges from the analytical to the deadpan; the overall effect is that we seem to see these representations, together with Farocki, for the first time. In this respect his essay films are pedagogical but never pedantic: The intelligence in play—extracted from the images, inflected by the commentary, and coproduced (so it seems) with the audience—is too quizzical, elliptical, and generous to be felt as reductive or rigid, and the filmic voice cannot be identified strictly with Farocki in any case.⁴ His reworking of montage as a recurrent clustering of adjacent leitmotifs also leaves much for the viewer to do: We are invited to further work over the image-texts that Farocki has assembled for us (“I try not to add ideas to the film,” he says; “I try to think in film so that the ideas come out of filmic articulation”), perhaps to dialecticize them as best we can, with the tacit understanding (if we attend to the ethics of the filmic voice at all) that the puzzle will remain open, never formulaic, in the end—a problem to reconsider, precisely an essay to revise, at a later moment, a different conjuncture.

The essay films have both a forensic dimension and a mnemonic

imperative. From *Images of the World* to *Eye/Machine*, Farocki has juxtaposed emblematic images from various moments in capitalist production—a simple punch-press, say, with a sophisticated robot or missile—in order to retrieve some evidence of the technical relation, some sense of the lived connection, between different modes of labor, war, and representation that each new mode tends to banish from memory. Again and again he returns to instruments of seeing and imaging, and in this dialectic of “new media” and outmoded forms he is all but obsessed with the



FAROCKI APPLIES WARHOLIAN MEANS TO BRECHTIAN ENDS: HE “ANNEXES” FOUND IMAGES—THAT IS, BOTH CANCELS AND SUBSUMES THEM—IN ORDER TO INSIST ON A NEW RELATION TO SEEING AND IMAGING ALIKE.

role, indeed the fate, of cinema. This obsession focuses his practice and grounds it in its own means in a way that allows Farocki to “show” as much as to “tell”—and what he wants to show above all are signal transformations in seeing and imaging. Often Farocki presents his various devices—perspective engravings, aerial photographs, computer models, and so on—not only as representative of the long Industrial Revolution, but as indicative of its significant shifts. Like Marx, he implies that each new phase in this history of production and reproduction sets up a new relay of power and knowledge; and, like Michel Foucault and Jonathan Crary, he suggests that each new relay involves a new regime of the subject as well.⁵

Although some of his allusions run to Renaissance representation, more point to the birth of film just over one hundred years ago. “Central to his work,” writes film historian Thomas Elsaesser, editor of a new collection of essays on Farocki, “is the insight that with the advent of the cinema, the world has become visible in a radically new way, with far-reaching consequences for all spheres of life, from the world of work and production, to politics and our conception of democracy and community, for warfare and strategic planning, for abstract thinking and philosophy, as well as for interpersonal relations and emotional bonds, for subjectivity and inter-subjectivity.”⁶ Of course, some of these consequences are explored in Pop art—one thinks immediately of Andy

Warhol and Gerhard Richter. Yet Farocki does not redouble the image world as passively as they often do; again, he works to indicate its historical trajectory through a partial archaeology of its telltale devices. Moreover, he is driven by a Brechtian imperative to refunction these “inscriptions,” and in this respect he has acknowledged Brecht along with Warhol as his “most important influence[s].” “In both cases,” Farocki has remarked, “the impulse is to avoid naturalizing the image. The difference is, of course, that Brecht wants to develop a mode of representation, while Pop art annexes one.”⁷ In effect, Farocki applies Warholian means to Brechtian ends: He, too, “annexes” found images—that is, both cancels and subsumes them—in order to insist on a new relation to seeing and imaging alike.

“My way,” Farocki has also commented, “is to look for submerged meaning, clearing away the detritus on the images.”⁸ This desire to lay bare is also quintessentially modernist; at the same time it draws on the ideology critique of the Western Marxist tradition, especially as developed by Brecht and, later, Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957). Farocki reviewed this seminal text soon after its German publication in 1964, and his essay films are indeed myth critiques—so many analytical rearticulations of ideological images.⁹ The association of Brecht and Warhol also conjures up Godard, another important influence on Farocki.¹⁰ Like Godard, Farocki has produced a political metacinema; yet whereas Godard has focused on the classic genres of film, Farocki concentrates on its military-industrial exploitation; and whereas Godard once assumed a realist match between camera and eye that he then moved to disrupt, Farocki demonstrates a perpetual retooling of eye by camera that he then works to deconstruct. It is this motive of his practice, proposed in *Images of the World* and elaborated in *Eye/Machine*, that I want to underscore here.

The title *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* suggests not only a mediation of the world by images, but also an embeddedness of war in this mediation, and “inscription” implies that both require decoding. Immediately, then, Farocki announces his primary theme—the imbrication of instruments of representation and destruction—which the seventy-five-minute film proceeds to examine through specific examples that, as they are repeated, take on the hermeneutic form of allegorical objects—objects that we must first decipher and then use in further deciphering.

We begin and end with a wave machine in a marine laboratory in Hannover, a figure of the control-through-reproduction of nature at its extreme. Yet, in its mindless repetition, this device appears even more inexorable than the sea, and so signifies not technological ingenuity so much as mechanistic indifference, a world not only “without qualities” but nearly without “the human” as well. Next, in a dialectical move, Farocki refers this contemporary diffusion of the human to its historical development in Renaissance humanism (he shows us Dürer engravings detailing perspective) and in the Age of Reason (here he reflects on *Aufklärung*, the German term for Enlightenment). The first connection between the individual subject and single-point perspective echoes the Heidegger of “The Age of the World Picture” (1938), while the second allusion to the ambiguous history of rationality echoes the Adorno and Horkheimer of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944); yet these suspicions are also in keeping with poststructuralist critiques of the 1970s and ’80s.

However, Farocki focuses these familiar critiques on the role of representation in rationalization. He does so first, obliquely, through an anecdote about one Albrecht Meydenbauer, who, in 1858, set out to measure the facade of the cathedral in Wetzlar, Germany, for purposes

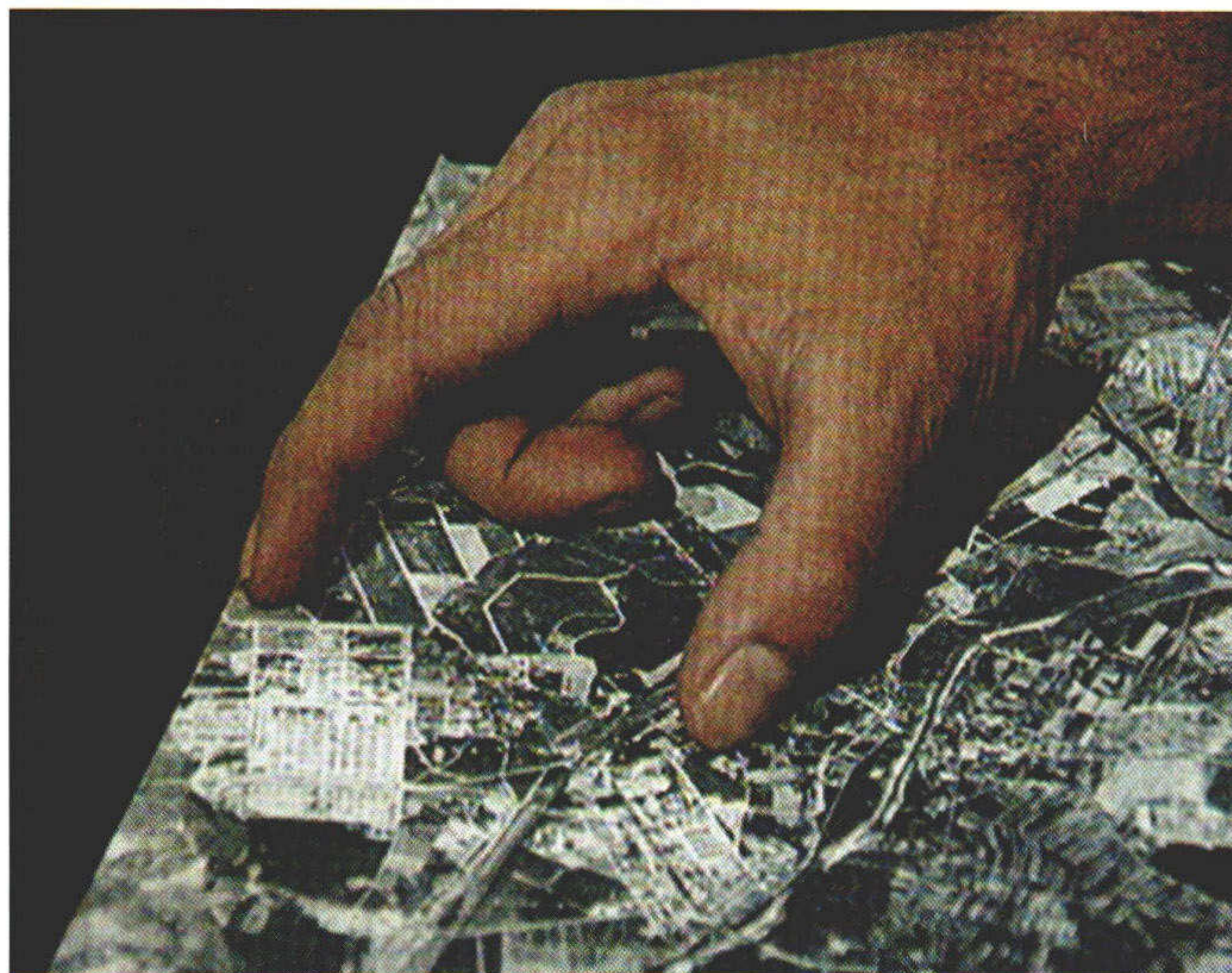
This page: Harun Farocki, *How to Live in the German Federal Republic*, 1990, stills from a color film in 16 mm, 83 minutes. Opposite page: Harun Farocki, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1988, stills from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, 75 minutes.

of preservation. On this job Meydenbauer nearly fell to his death, and his response was to devise a method of scale measurement of buildings from photographs. This cluster of image ideas is typical of Farocki: A mortal danger prompts a technical innovation, a desire for control through representation, but, in this mingling of desire and technique, scientific reason slips into instrumental rationalization. For Meydenbauer went on to propose an institute for scale measurement, essentially an archive of architectural images, which the Prussian war ministry then supported for its own strategic purposes. Too often, Farocki implies, representation and preservation are not far from war and destruction.

Further on in his genealogy of visual instrumentality, Farocki reflects on the slippage, in the word *Aufklärung*, between “enlightenment” and “reconnaissance” (as in intelligence gathering, as it is still, somewhat optimistically, called). He tells the story of an American plane that, on a bombing run to Silesia on April 4, 1944, inadvertently photographed Auschwitz, only to have this evidence of the death camp go undetected by military analysts focused on the nearby I.G. Farben complex. In 1977, inspired by the TV series *Holocaust*, two CIA employees searched the old military files with the new technical aid of a computer, found the relevant images, and performed the analysis of the camp that their analogues failed to produce thirty-three years earlier. In this sequence Farocki juxtaposes a great ability to “reconnoiter” with a fatal failure to “recognize” in order to demonstrate how catastrophic a split between image and understanding can be.¹¹ He then associates this failure to see with a further failure to listen (Farocki insists that visual evidence requires testimony as well as analysis) through the story of two prisoners, Slovakian Jews named Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, who against all odds escaped Auschwitz later in 1944, only to have their report of the horrors there ignored first in Switzerland and then in London and Washington. Finally, Farocki suggests that this split between reconnaissance (again in the technical sense of “intelligence”) and recognition (almost in the Hegelian sense of “understanding”) is also inscribed in more recent technologies of seeing and imaging, such as satellite photography.

Of course, our representational devices often concern not only how we see but how we look or pose, and *Images of the World* also pressures this tension between imaging and being imaged. In the Auschwitz sequence Farocki lingers over an extraordinary photograph of a new arrival, an attractive woman in a long coat, who darts a furtive glance at the camera, while behind her a Nazi soldier selects several inmates for labor or death. Even now the implication of gazes here is difficult to bear, but at least the woman retains enough self-possession to look back at her Nazi photographer with what appears to be outrage. Elsewhere in the film, Farocki presents another stark encounter between camera and subject: archival portraits of Algerian women photographed in 1960, for the first time without veils, by the French military for purposes of identification. These visages are exposed in every sense of the word, but the violation is also literally faced and mutely resisted.¹² After such representations, when, toward the end of *Images of the World*, Farocki shows us a life-drawing class in session, the cumulative effect of his montage is such that we can no longer hold humanist uses of seeing, measuring, and imaging apart from military-industrial-bureaucratic abuses of such techniques. While some of us might be positioned as objects of this general image-science, Farocki concludes, others might be set up as its operators as well. Our training is as apparently innocuous as playing a computer game or watching a war report on TV.

Farocki pursues this concern with training (an important topos in Walter



Benjamin, too) in *How To Live in the German Federal Republic*, which draws heavily on instruction tapes—a young boy quizzed with a block puzzle, expectant parents coached with baby dolls, schoolchildren drilled about street traffic, bank tellers and police cadets coached in dispute management, and so on—to suggest how lessons in proper behavior shade into forced socialization.¹³ (In this footage not only are people tested, but so, too, are things like drawers, chairs, and toilet seats subjected to robotic abuse: The ideal of all these test subjects, human and



FAROCKI INTIMATES THAT A NEW “ROBO EYE” IS IN PLACE, ONE THAT, UNLIKE THE “KINO EYE” CELEBRATED BY DZIGA VERTOV, DOES NOT EXTEND THE HUMAN PROSTHETICALLY SO MUCH AS IT REPLACES THE HUMAN ROBOTICALLY.

otherwise, is to be an object that can endure any beating.) In an administered society, Farocki suggests, “how to live” has all but subsumed living as such; and in this respect the film looks ahead to our own present of a permanent retooling, a relentless “test drive.”¹⁴ Moreover, as a documentary of dramatizations, *How to Live* also anticipates our own age of post-Warholian reality TV, in which real life often appears real only if performed and “living” sometimes seems synonymous with “acting out.” Farocki develops related lines of inquiry in his recent films on prisons and shopping malls, but in *Eye/Machine III* he links them fully with the concerns first broached in *Images of the World*.

Like *Images of the World*, the *Eye/Machine* trilogy (images recur in the three sections, twenty-five, fifteen, and twenty-five minutes long, respectively) reflects on instruments of work, war, and control, especially ones advanced since the first Gulf War—new techniques in robotic production, missile weaponry, and video surveillance. Once again, the title of *Eye/Machine* immediately poses the question of relation: Does the slash signify a split between eye and machine (as often in *Images of the World*) or a new elision of the two, or somehow both—a split that has produced an elision? The slash also evokes the old division between body and mind: Farocki seems to imply that “the eye/machine problem” is to our age what “the mind/body problem” was to thought after Descartes, with ramifications that here, too, far outstrip the philosophical.

Farocki divides his screen into two equal frames, set on a diagonal from upper left to lower right with an overlap at the center (the film can also be shown on separate monitors). The effects of this split screen (which he has used before) are multiple. It makes us aware of both imaging and framing as such, and so effects a distance that obstructs our customary identification with the camera view (as usual, his commentary interferes at this level, too). At the same time the device mimics a targeting that, as in the smart-bomb images that recur here, all but compels us to assume the look of the camera. Yet the frames never quite converge: Seeing-as-targeting is evoked, only to be suspended. (As the title of the *Elsässer* collection suggests, Farocki “works the sight-lines.”)¹⁵ Finally, the device calls up a history of imaging instruments and formats from the stereoscopes of the mid-nineteenth century to the split screens of the present. Emphatically neither a window nor a mirror (the traditional models of realist representation), this screen represents our new visual paradigm: a surface of information to be manipulated as such, a monitor that might monitor us as well. And yet, as re-presented by Farocki, this surveillant gaze seems almost beyond the human. As with *Images of the World*, a principal leitmotif of *Eye/Machine* is the gradual automation not only of labor and war but of seeing and imaging, too. Farocki is fascinated by the affectless, even subjectless, operations of information-processing and data-matching: Often, in the world of *Eye/Machine*, no one seems to be home or, indeed, in the workplace.

The first allegorical object in *Eye/Machine I* is the smart-bomb targeting made infamous by the first Gulf War. What kind of viewer is projected by this eye machine? Apparently one of enormous force, for it seems to see what it destroys and destroy what it sees. The targets on the ground appear tiny, and only the cameras explode with the bombs—we as viewers do not—so we are further empowered by the destruction that we seem to direct: In a technological updating of the sublime, objective devastation is converted into subjective rush.¹⁶ Farocki also presents less extreme instances of the eye machine, such as surveillance footage of workplaces and (sub)urban areas (e.g., traffic in a street, people in a mall); yet once again image and space have merged into one zone, here of continuous control, if not outright destruction. The viewer posited by the surveillant eye machine scans and prevents: If, as Benjamin once remarked, Atget sometimes photographed Paris as though it were a crime scene, such surveillance cameras always target putative citizens as protocriminals. More examples of eye machines follow: a missile in flight, a sophisticated robot, satellite images of the Dubai airport from Gulf War I, and so on. “These images are devoid of social intent,” Farocki comments at one point (often he mimics, critically, the abstraction of language—really its nullification—in administered society). They are not authored, and, as they mostly survey the predetermined, they appear to be more automatically monitored than humanly viewed. In this way Farocki intimates that a new “robo eye” is in place, one that, unlike the “kino eye” celebrated by modernists like Dziga Vertov, does not extend the human prosthetically so much as it replaces the human robotically. *Eye/Machine* points to a postsubjective seeing, “an optical nonconscious.”¹⁷

At one point Farocki plays on the term *erkennen*, “to perceive” but also “to recognize.” With his eye machines, “recognition” is further emptied of human(ist) content: It means little more than the faculty of a smart drone, the algorithmic capacity to compare live images with stored data, to process information and to select action accordingly. In fact the smart drone is the ironic protagonist of *Eye/Machine*: “Autonomy,”

This page: Harun Farocki, *Workers Leaving the Factory*, 1995, stills from a black-and-white and color video, 36 minutes. Opposite page, top: Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine II*, 2002, still from a black-and-white and color video, 15 minutes. Center, from left: Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine III*, 2003, still from a color video, 25 minutes. Harun Farocki, *Eye Machine II*, 2002, still from a black-and-white and color video, 15 minutes. Bottom: Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine I*, 2001, still from a color video, 25 minutes.

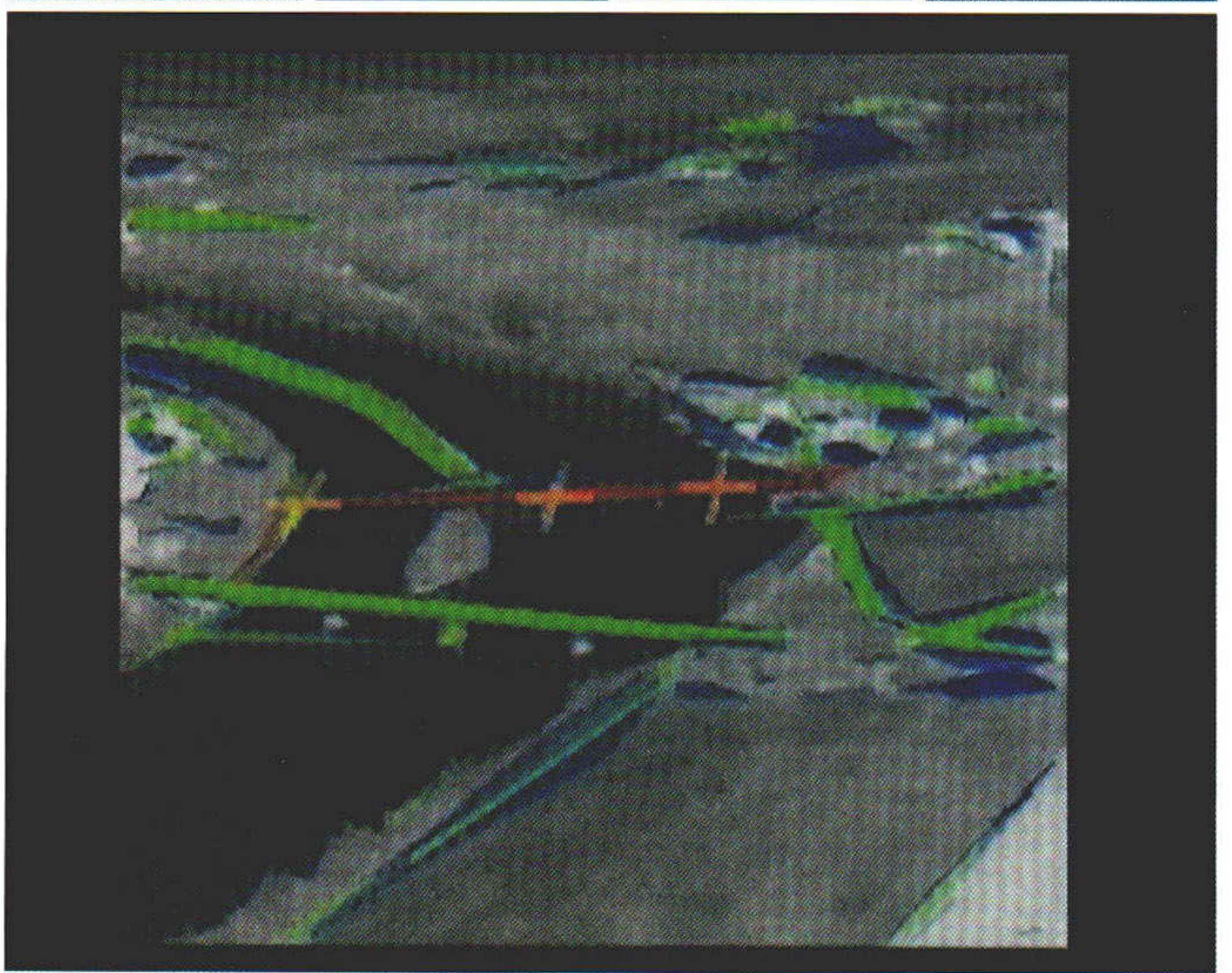
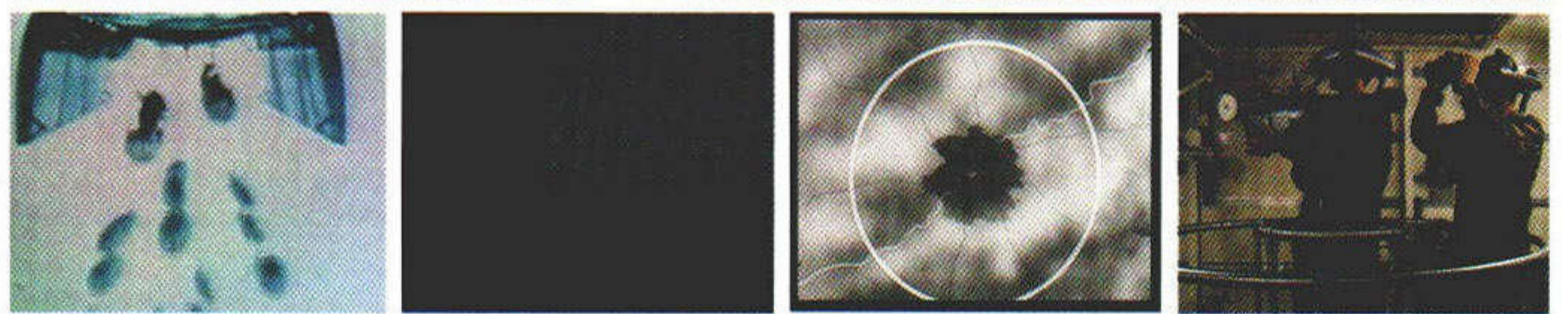
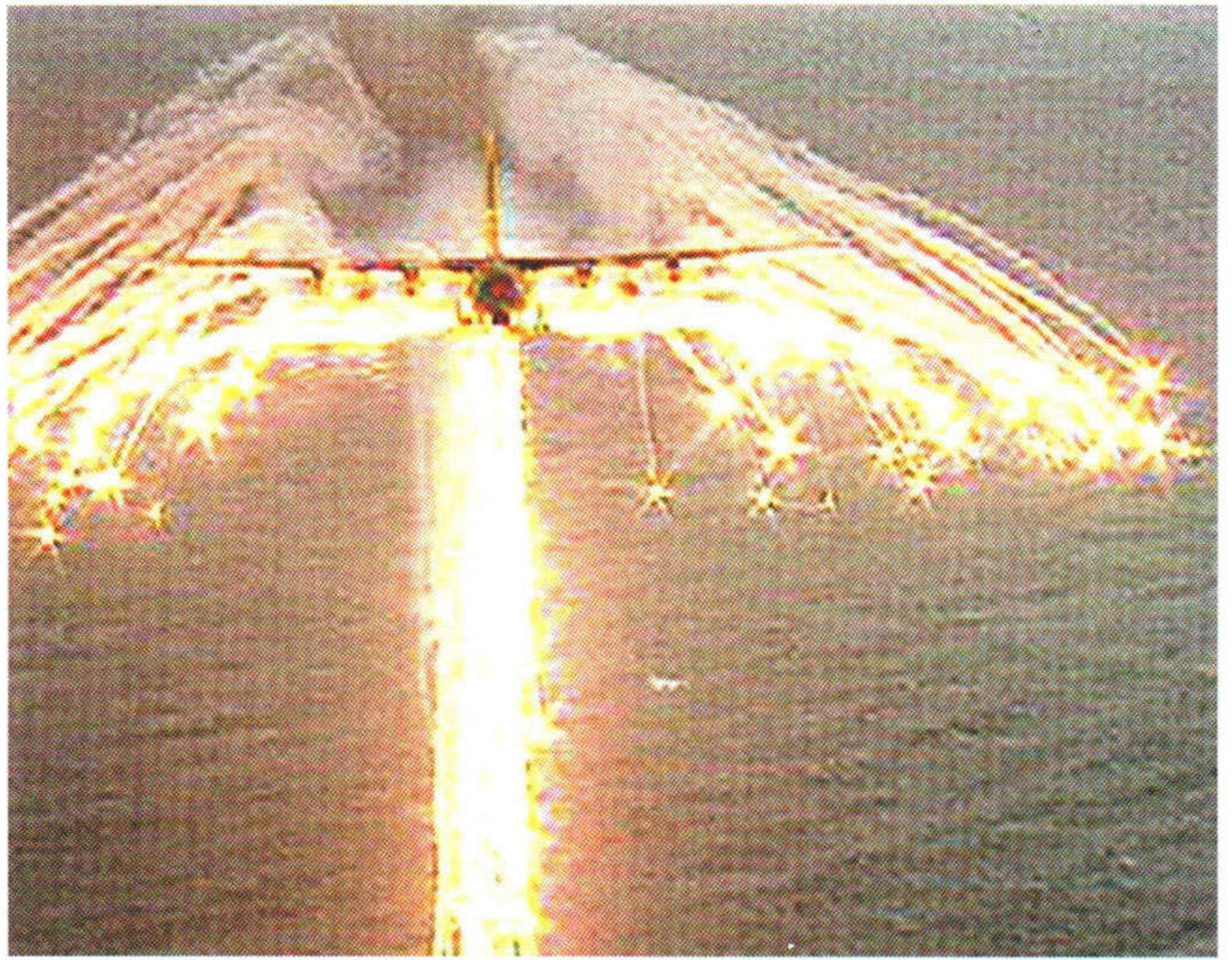
the great ideal of the Enlightenment, is here on the side of automated missiles, robots, surveillance cameras, and other eye machines. This has dire consequences for work, a focal concern for Farocki. As Elsässer suggests, ever since the Lumière brothers made the “first” film, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895)—that is, ever since cinema and industry “made contact, collided, and combined”—“more and more workers have been leaving the factory.”¹⁸ Farocki has repeatedly returned to this workplace (he made his own *Workers Leaving the Factory* in 1995, the centennial of the Lumière version); yet when he does so in *Eye/Machine*, he finds it so automated as to be almost absent of humans. However, like the body, work is never transcended; it is only relocated, redefined, and retooled, and in *Eye/Machine III* there is no end of such training: Farocki shows it underway at video arcades, before computer games, through army ads, and so on; all of us TV viewers of the Gulf War series, he suggests, are also “turned into war technicians.” This is another of his leitmotifs that elaborate on Benjamin: In a fascist manner, such images have produced a pervasive “empathy for the technology of war.”¹⁹

Yet perhaps the grimmest implication of *Eye/Machine* is left unspoken, if not unseen. *Images of the World* examines a world still based on the indexical inscriptions of photography and film: However mythical or mute the images may be, traces of facts can still be extracted from them, laid bare in a modernist hermeneutics of critical suspicion. *Eye/Machine* points to a digital reformatting of that old analog world in which images now stream as phosphorescent information and screens can be reset without residue, a universe of image flow that may shape reality one moment and dissolve it the next. This world in which everything appears mutable and nothing transformable is hardly new (it is called modernity), but the technology available to our current masters is breathtaking.

And here Farocki faces a difficulty. (I will pass over the charge that his concern with the loss of human agency produces a humanist nostalgia; for the most part he avoids this error, which is not so damnable in any case.) *Eye/Machine* surveys a world of hyperalienation, not merely of man from world, but of world from man—a world of our making that has moved beyond our reach. If this is so, how can a Brechtian alienation effect contend with it? That is, if hyperalienation is a general condition, its mimetic exacerbation—the great old dare posed by Marx to make reified conditions dance once again to their own tune—offers little in the way of real challenge: It might fall on deaf ears and dead feet. Again and again Farocki shows consciousness drained from our images of the world. If this is so, then their dialectical troping might be little more than a wishful manipulating. In short, he traces such a grim telos that it threatens to nail us all: After you view *Images of the World* and *Eye/Machine*, any grid—a perspectival painting, a computer screen, your front window—begins to look like another target, a crosshairs about to line up.

At one point in *Images of the World*, Farocki quotes Hannah Arendt to the effect that concentration camps were laboratories of totalitarianism that proved “absolutely everything is possible” when it comes to human domination. In *Eye/Machine*, Farocki updates this proof. This is essential work today, even though it tends to force him beyond his critical dialectics toward a stark oppositionality. Yet such oppositionality also runs deep in this old '68er, and it might be that his adamant will to resist overweening power is what the Left needs most of all today. At the end of a 1982 essay on the Vietnam War, Farocki quotes Carl Schmitt on the figure of “the partisan.” (Schmitt was a German juridical theorist whose writings on decisionist politics were of great assistance to the Nazis; not surprisingly, there is a Schmitt revival today.)

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other promotional photographs in which she toyed with gender and cross-dressing. Both were used as gallery announcements. According to Pincus-Witten's *Artforum* article, Benglis also created "pornographic polaroids" featuring herself and Robert Morris.

22. The Benglis spread was one of just three color ads in the November 1974 issue and the only one to extend across two pages. At the time, *Artforum* was gradually expanding its use of color printing as well as the number and ambition of its advertising pages. Needless to say, this expansion continues to this day.

FOSTER/FAROCKI *continued from page 161*

If the "immanent rationalization of the technically organized world is implemented completely," Schmitt wrote in 1963, "then the partisan will perhaps not even be a troublemaker. Then he will vanish of his own accord in the frictionless performance of technical-functional processes, no different than the disappearance of a dog from the freeway."²⁰ However frictionless the freeways of the present may be, Farocki is one dog that won't go away. □

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NOTES

1. Volker Pantenburg, "Visibilities: Harun Farocki between Image and Text," in Harun Farocki, *Imprint/Writings*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2001), 18. Farocki made no fewer than three films on the Vietnam War.

2. Farocki edited and contributed to *Filmkritik* until its demise in 1984; he has also written for *die tageszeitung* and *Jungle World*, and recently published a bilingual edition of his writings (see note 1). In effect, he not only examines industrial methods but practices them as well: "In my work, I try to make a composite according to the model of the steel industry, where every waste product flows back into the production process and hardly any energy is lost. I finance the basic research with a radio show; books studied during the research period are dealt with in shows on books, and some of what I observe while doing this work appears in television shows" (*ibid.*, 32). His move into image installations might also be in keeping with the industrial fate of cinema: As it passes in part into history, it moves in part into the art museum, with the art gallery as a way station.

3. "The category [essay film] is quite unsuitable," Farocki has remarked, "just like 'documentary film,' which is also not particularly appropriate. In television, when you hear a lot of music and see landscapes—nowadays that's called an essay film, too. Lots of atmosphere and fuzzy journalism is essay" (2000 interview with Rembert Hüser, quoted in *ibid.*, 38).

4. This is not to say that they are not "partisan," on which more below.

5. See especially Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). The films ramify with other critical projects, too, such as those of Paul Virilio, Manuel De Landa, and Samuel Weber; Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin are more explicit points of reference for Farocki. Among the best texts in English on his work, prompted by *Images of the World*, are Thomas Keenan, "Light Weapons," *Documents* 1/2 (Fall/Winter 1992); and Kaja Silverman, "What Is a Camera?, or: History in the Field of Vision," *Discourse* 15, no. 3 (Spring 1993). Silverman draws an extensive comparison between Farocki and Crary.

6. Thomas Elsässer, "Introduction: Harun Farocki" (2002), www.sensesofcinema.com. See also Elsässer, ed., *Harun Farocki: Working the Sight-Lines* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004). This conjuncture is also much studied in recent film theory; see especially Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

7. Farocki, in a 1998 interview with Rolf Aurich and Ulrich Kriest, quoted in Farocki, *Imprint/Writings*, 24. Also Brechtian is his interest in the particular expression or *gestus* that signals a specific social formation.

8. Farocki, on *Images of the World*, quoted in *ibid.*, 26. This approach also guides his criticism; a text from 1982 begins: "A photograph from Vietnam. An interesting photo. One has to read a lot into it to get a lot out of it" (*ibid.*, 112).

9. The young Warhol had a Brechtian side as well. Like the post-*Mythologies* Barthes, too, Farocki is concerned with the special discursivity of the photographic and filmic image; both men also share a caution about the presumptive authority of the myth critic.

10. Farocki has coauthored a book on Godard with Kaja Silverman: *Speaking about Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

11. In part Farocki refers this failure to the sheer profusion of images evident even then: "More pictures of the world than the eyes of the soldier are capable of evaluating."

12. Farocki follows these images with footage of a Western woman made up in a cosmetic salon: Again, such disconnection is the principle of his montage.

13. Benjamin discusses training in industrial culture in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), among other texts—an aspect of his work brilliantly elucidated by Miriam Bratu Hansen. See, *inter alia*, her "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004).

14. I borrow this formulation from Avital Ronell.

15. On seeing-as-targeting, see Samuel Weber, "Target of Opportunity: Networks, Netwar, and Narratives," *Grey Room*, 1, no. 15 (2004): 6–27.

16. I discuss this effect in chapter 7 of *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). Benjamin gave the ur-formulation of this fascist sublime at the end of "The Work of Art" essay: The "self-alienation" of mankind "has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (*Illuminations* [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], 242). Perhaps there is some progress, at least in fascism, for today the destruction is rarely our own.

17. An indispensable guide to this world is Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel, eds., *CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

18. Elsässer, "Introduction: Harun Farocki." "Films about work or workers have not become one of the main genres," Farocki has commented, "and the space in front of the factory has remained on the sidelines. Most narrative films take pace in that part of life where work has been left behind" (*Imprint/Writings*, 232). Another artist who has consistently worked against this lack of representation is Allan Sekula; see, among other projects, his *Fish Story* (1990–94). If work rarely appears in movies, its representation is also very limited on TV, where today it tends to be restricted to cops, lawyers, and doctors, or some nastily forensic combination of all three.

19. At the Republican Convention in August, the greatest cheers were for war—any war (against Iraq, terrorism, Democrats, the murderers of unborn children, gay couples who seek the right of marriage, etc.). But many non-Republicans also recently thrilled to embedded views of bombs over Baghdad.

20. Carl Schmitt, quoted in Farocki, *Imprint/Writings*, 160.

ROBBINS/CONCRETE COMEDY *continued from page 208*
perceptual change turned. Duchamp's was a theatricalizing gesture enacted with a playful attitude, a rendering of both the context of life and the context of art as *constructs*. Like his contemporary Valentin, Duchamp was essentially of the theater.

Duchamp's second major contribution to the history of comedy can't be described by a single, isolated gesture. It was carried out, instead, over the trajectory of his career. Plainly stated, *Marcel Duchamp was the first to thematize the question of the artist's sincerity*. He consistently cast doubt on whether or not he was to be taken seriously. (Imagine the strength of character!) In this he was truly a groundbreaking comedian.

By 1920 or so, then, the two foundations of concrete comedy have been established. From the comedian Karl Valentin we get the idea of an invented, theatricalized context. Objects and gestures of the Valentinian persuasion stand on their own merits as comedy and infer their own comedic context. Artifacts created and gestures enacted by figures such as Jack Benny, Robert Benchley, the Ramones, Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, David Letterman and Jeffrey Vallance are appropriately placed in this category.

Of equal weight, import, and value are comic actions that explicitly recognize, engage, or activate context, including the art context. Use of context as a material is a possibility derived from the example of Marcel Duchamp. The comedic output of Marcel Broodthaers, Andy Kaufman, Maurizio Cattelan, and others fall into this category.

Throughout the history of concrete comedy, one or another of these integers, the Valentinian or the Duchampian, will figure. Space does not permit examination of each fascinating wrinkle in every example of concretist comedy.

Software

Plenty of comedy, of course, doesn't result in any sort of physical object at all. When concretist instinct isn't communicated in a proplike, theatricalizing object, how is it manifested?

For an answer, hold the constancy of the concrete against the changing character of the backdrop. The concrete resists the illusionistic, by definition, but the intensity of that resistance varies in direct proportion to the pressure applied by the forces of illusionism. When concrete comedic instincts are manifested within, for instance, the art context (a context established specifically

in order to celebrate distillations of the real), they enjoy a sympathetic presentational syntax, and consequently need merely a firm, resolute non-illusionism to succeed. By contrast, concrete comedians in the performing arts—a context defined by proscenium-arch, "window" media such as stage, screen, and television—face far greater pressure to bend a knee to the reign of illusion. Thus the concrete comedian is pressured into a more aggressive stance and, instead of settling for *non-illusionistic* status, turns to anti-illusionistic measures. By means explicit or subtle, via material strategies or conceptual, the concretist jams a stick in the gears of narrative, pricks the dream-state of make-believe. The concretist works against deep illusionism, draws it into the shallows; there, it flops about on the surface—and consequently, the surface becomes activated. Stretched tight between illusionistic and *anti-illusionistic* forces, the surface goes taut and springy with tension. Ironically, the surface acquires substantiveness, meaning—"depth."

To operate within this surface tension demands a particular conception of comic persona. Again, aestheticization is restrained. Promoted instead: approaches to performing which carry a *conceptual* dimension that enables the performer to remain essentially, consistently himself or herself—i.e., to remain real. In his 1979 film *Real Life*, director Albert Brooks plays Albert Brooks, a director making a documentary about an average American family. In place of an illusionistic "doubling" of identity, concrete comedy sets forth persona as identity multiplied, say, one and a half times. This fractional multiplication causes the audience to wonder at and about the true personality of the performer—about what is and isn't performance, about the "I" that exists in quotes.

Instead of grounding their comedy entirely in craft and character and the transparent melding of these in illusionistic, narrative-driven media, performers like Andy Kaufman, Albert Brooks (in the earlier stages of his career), Alex Bag, Tom Green, and the rock band the Frogs mobilize selected facets of identity, organize them into a facade, and extend them, via concept, into an imaginative space rich with the tension between the actual and the pretend, between sincerity and insincerity. A skillful manipulation of comic persona can result in a behavioral model at once identified with that personality and separable from it as concept. When watching Andy Kaufman we don't only enjoy Kaufman the performer—his timing, voice, posture, and presence—but the idea about comic behavior that he's exploring. Kaufman's *continued on page 256*