



*Leben—BRD* [How to Live in the German Federal Republic]  
(dir. Harun Farocki, Germany, 1989).

# **History Is Not a Matter of Generations: Interview with Harun Farocki**

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European cinema is in transformation. The geopolitical changes of the European map as well as the new transnational economy have altered the politics of film. To provide reflections on these transformations the German director Harun Farocki proves an excellent source. A filmmaker, critic, theorist, academic, and writer very familiar with the United States as well as Europe, Farocki's work has appeared here in the pages of *Camera Obscura*, among other places. He is thus especially well situated to articulate an analysis that can bring some clarity to US perspectives on the European film scene.

Farocki has been a truly independent filmmaker. His films, from agitprop to essayist, have developed along a unique path. Yet the theme that connects his films and his written work is the constant exploration of the possibilities and influences of the cinematic apparatus. His extensive exploration of the potential

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of film has required Farocki to remain critically aware of transnational developments in film. In the interview below, Farocki reflects on how the medium of film is defined by distribution, funding, and technology, among other topics. Here his comments are marked by a certain dialectical realism that recognizes both limitations and possibilities in the current conditions. For example, the transformation and, to a great extent, privatization of European television has brought a great need for programming, filling airtime mainly with reruns of *Baywatch*, *Knightrider*, and anything else starring David Hasselhoff. Nevertheless, these transformations have also resulted in increased opportunity for Farocki's work.

Such analysis coming from one of Germany's most important independent filmmakers is perhaps especially significant as a document for a US audience waxing nostalgic for the "Golden Age of Foreign Film," the title a recent film retrospective in New York gave to the roughly forty years of film production that followed the end of World War II. There is no dismissing the fact that popular commercial film production is up in Europe and that such production has changed the parameters of high culture. For various reasons, many of them having to do with the film policy of the European Union (EU), the European share of the film market is up as Europeans choose to view European productions with greater frequency.<sup>1</sup> However, the noise that surrounds the production of predictable and generically conventional films does not mean that avant-garde, experimental, critical, and/or political film production has been drowned out. Prompted to compare the relationship of his production to contemporary popular films, Farocki humorously expresses the hope that the number of people who go to see his films would be higher than that of the number who leave during a contemporary German comedy. However, it would be a mistake to assume that those who see a Detlev Buck film do not also see a film by Lars von Trier, Jean-Luc Godard, or Farocki, for that matter.

The terms of political engagement and the system of cultural production are dynamic. They have not remained stagnant over the last fifty years, neither in the US nor in Europe. Farocki

certainly gives insight into that dynamic process. Yet in the US, where it is possible to generate the designation “Golden Age of Foreign Film,” it seems that there is a desire among cinéphiles to freeze European production in time and dismiss current production as not living up to past glories. Such nostalgia is itself a longing for forms that appeal according to static aesthetic criteria—the visual pleasure of viewing what one knows. I would suggest that when we hear such nostalgia, it is not really for a film “as good as” *Wild Strawberries* (dir. Ingmar Bergman, Sweden, 1957), but actually, perhaps paradoxically, nostalgia for a moment in which people were viewing things they did not know, when people were open to engagement with new aesthetic forms. The desire to view according to static aesthetic criteria, however, reveals that an element of entertainment value has always adhered to high cultural production, that element that allows for a distance from the political and sociohistorical conditions with which each film struggles.

Such an analysis as that provided by Farocki is perhaps also significant for viewers seeking to engage precisely with a film’s political and sociohistorical content. Particularly in the US such viewers must exercise a certain amount of care. Here political life and debates are often significantly framed by terms like *multiculturalism*, *inclusion*, *special interest groups*, *entitlement*, and so on. Such terms may have no resonance or a very different weight outside of the US. Without an understanding of the terms of cultural productions from abroad, we tend to subject those productions to the same form of analysis as US productions. If we apply the same criteria, critics, academics, and all spectators run the risk of misappropriation, misidentification, or perhaps worse for foreign filmmakers, nonrecognition. Transnational film distribution and the abundance of images from abroad invite us to engage with a broader world. The following interview explores and exhibits many of the difficulties of urgently necessary transcultural dialogues.

Indeed, as Farocki remarks below, his work has remained relatively unknown to US audiences.<sup>2</sup> The interview itself actually begins with Farocki providing reflections on his own background. Beyond those reflections I hope a brief overview of some

of the developments in his film production might give greater depth to the reader unfamiliar with his work.

Born in 1944, he emerged as a filmmaker in the late 1960s in Germany, highly influenced by the revolutionary activity of the period. German critical theory and French *Nouvelle Vague* provided early defining inspirations that have remained constant throughout his career; the names Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, and Godard could offer embodiment of these directions. His own works, however, quickly came to exceed these influences, becoming distinct and timely interventions of their own. Farocki entered the newly established German Film and Television Academy Berlin in 1966, an institution whose very existence resulted from the agitation of the young German filmmakers. He stayed only two years, at which point he and a number of colleagues were barred from the institution for their political activity. (He would eventually return to the academy as an instructor.) In 1971 he took up a position as editor, writer, and critic for the influential German film journal *Filmkritik*, where he was active until 1983.

Farocki's films have remained outside the trends of German film; he does not count as a part of New German Cinema (NGC) and certainly not as part of the latest move to popular film. His earliest films belong to an agitprop, even commando style, typified by *Break the Power of the Manipulators* (1969), co-directed with Helke Sander and Ulrich Knaudt. A scene central to this film occurs when Sander and Farocki are chased out of a German Press Club function that they had stealthily entered in order to verbally confront Axel Springer, the leader of the German boulevard press. However, already in *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), the assertion of cool distanced rationality—Brechtian distanciation over emotional engagement—became central to the structure of all his subsequent films. This film, Farocki's first significant achievement, was both an indictment of Dow Chemical's production of Napalm B for the Vietnam War as well as of German involvement in this multinational corporation's activities. It was also an attempt to document the horrors of Napalm B while avoiding the lurid shock of images so characteristic of the documentarists of the era.

Subsequent work has explored the interconnection between war, industry, and media, accomplishing in film the type of analysis that recently Armand Mattelart has produced in writing.<sup>3</sup> These explorations of the technology of film take on a different form—essay films in which Farocki examines various images often found or produced by other filmmakers for quite different purposes. In these films a narrator's voice provides reflections, guiding the viewer through the diverse and highly disparate scenes. *Images of the World and Inscription of War* (1988) is perhaps his most well-known film. It begins with aerial images of Auschwitz taken in an allied reconnaissance flight during the war, yet at the time military intelligence did not recognize what they were. It was only recognized decades later after the machinery of the Holocaust was understood; ignorance of Nazi activities prevented recognition of the image. This lack of recognition in a surveillance flight serves as the initial point for a series of wide-ranging reflections on various aspects of imaging technology, surveillance, and discipline.

Overall, the political energy and analysis that fill Farocki's films do not inflate the possibilities of the film itself. Farocki has always been careful to recognize the limitations of his work, often with a surprising sense of humility coming from such an accomplished filmmaker. For Farocki, film does serve to awaken political consciousness, but he tempers this with an awareness that only mass political movements have the ability to transform the conditions that he examines, criticizes, and indicts. In *Videogramme of a Revolution* (1992) Farocki found precisely such a moment. This essay film examines the transformation of the Romanian television system at the point of the revolution. The mass struggle against Nicolae Ceausescu is reflected in the more specific struggle against the state-controlled media, which is a fundamental part of the larger movement.

In the interview at hand, Farocki proved to be a willing yet often complex discussant. Given our geographic distance at the time, we conducted the interview in written form. I posed questions, he wrote replies, I returned new and follow-up questions, and so on. This format allowed us both time to think and reflect at each stage in ways that face-to-face interviews cannot. Further-

more, where other directors and critics might be ready to hold forth on any topic put to them, Farocki refused to speak about certain topics. Just as his films explore the questions of viewing and knowing, Farocki's silence to many of my questions seems to transform the Wittgensteinian paradox, "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" into a political dictum. In terms of transcultural dialogue some of these silences were interesting on their own. They, however, have been lost in the editing process. What does remain clear below is that often he purposefully misunderstood questions, proving guarded in his responses, reformulating the questions to his own purposes. This becomes particularly clear when he is asked to speak about questions of multiculturalism, the marginalizing and particularizing aspects of which seem to work against precisely the formation of broad-based movements. Indeed, when he says below that "there are also majorities that are not free," such a statement can only be understood as part of his interest in precisely this type of movement and the systemic critique that informs his work.

### **Background**

Randall Halle: *You have been involved in the cultural life of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) as a filmmaker and critic for about thirty years now. Working mainly with a documentary essay form of film you have examined difficult moments in German politics, history, and society, producing works that have been provocative and controversial. A glance at your filmography reveals an incredible production of over fifty films. How do you assess your work? What significant continuities and breaks would you identify?*

Harun Farocki: Let's begin with my involvement in the magazine *Filmkritik*,<sup>4</sup> where I was a writer and editor from 1973 until 1983. The reason why we could take over the magazine was due to the fact that nobody else wanted to do it.<sup>5</sup> I was reminded of Lenin's words: "The power was lying on the streets, we only had to bend and reach for it." *Filmkritik* did not provide us with much power, but nonetheless it gave us the opportunity to work out and give form to our thoughts on film through writing. That no one

claimed this cultural forum (*Produktionsmittel*) in 1973—or later became contentious about our claim—is a clear indicator of how weak film culture in Germany was at the time. After all the changes, this is still the case.

*Filmkritik* was founded in 1957, when a rather stupid national film industry was rather well off. Back in the 1950s such wonderful films as Peter Lorre's *Der Verlorene* (West Germany, 1951), as well as *Lola Montez* by Max Ophüls (West Germany, 1955), were misunderstood. *Filmkritik*, inaugurated with a text by Adorno, was successful in the following years. The cultural constellation was suitable for it. The *Nouvelle Vague* created a new audience but also the music revolution was important. Rock music brought about many changes: people started going to underground films as they would go to concerts, as a form of demonstration (*Manifestation*). In the mid-1960s it came to a break at *Filmkritik*.<sup>6</sup> Many left or were pushed out and were able to become functionaries in the transformed film business; Heinz Thiel built up a cinemalike film division for television. Ulrich Gregor opened a wonderful cinema in Berlin—the Arsenal—and for twenty-five years he has been in charge of the *Forum*, the better part of the Berlin Film Festival. Günter Rohrbach became a producer for television, where he worked a lot with Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and later when he was head of *Bavaria*, he did *Das Boot* (West Germany, 1981) with Petersen.

Next the magazine was directed by people who were writers rather than organizers.<sup>7</sup> I would like to mention in particular the names of Helmut Färber<sup>8</sup> and Frieda Gräfe,<sup>9</sup> as they are the best writers on film in the German language. This was the group that introduced Russian formalism, experiences with pop art, and much more. But they were not interested in hanging on to the journal, because *Filmkritik* could not provide any salaries.

At that time we were the third generation; we did this “gratis-writing” until we were forty—just as today when the time one spends as a student is getting longer and the length of adolescence is being protracted. In those ten years with *Filmkritik* no one ever came who wanted to evince (*sich dort manifestieren*) themselves there. At this time about a hundred people made their first



film.<sup>10</sup> I was so deeply influenced by the French *Nouvelle Vague* that I have always envisioned a unity, or at least a connection, between production and critical reflection.

Many of the films produced in the FRG in the years 1973 to 1983 are now canonical teaching material in US film studies. In *Filmkritik* we published on Straub and on the early Wenders, sometimes on Alexander Kluge. Nevertheless, the “worker’s film” was not received well; neither were Werner Herzog, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, and Fassbinder. Fassbinder’s production probably demanded too much of us. In addition, there was already a great deal of fuss about him. Well, it is no big deal that we were not enthusiastic about him—but we simply ignored him, which bordered on sectarianism.<sup>11</sup> Anyway, the film culture was too weak to support a journal that stood in opposition to Fassbinder and all the other major events at that time.

Others, Hartmut Bitomsky, for instance, wrote texts that were significant on their own, while I managed only a critical articulation. It was important to me to create or preserve a mental attitude. This represented a utopia in opposition to the self-satisfied attitude that was so predominant in NGC.<sup>12</sup>

*You use the word utopic to describe the work of Filmkritik. Does this mean that you believe such a unity of critique and production is impossible, unrealistic, politically impracticable?*

I might have used the word *utopic* somewhat unreflectedly. I had wanted to express that my writing for *Filmkritik* was mainly intended to make possible the image of a different kind of film or to keep this possibility open. My writing was project making. The connection of production and critique is generally possible. It is conceivable. The prerequisites are actually given and if it fails—it is a result of personal inability. I myself was too involved with my own film work when I was writing about someone else’s work. Or perhaps I saw the work through the lens of my own.

*Your departure in 1983 and the journal’s demise in the following year closed down a possible venue for such a communal project. Are there other*

*contemporary forums? Is it possible to think of such a project on an international level?*

I have met very many young people in the FRG over the past few years who are under thirty-five and would have all the qualifications to carry out such a project. *Meteor* out of Vienna is a magazine in the German-speaking realm that might succeed. *Trafic*, in Paris, consists of texts from Europe and the US. The remarkable thing about this magazine is that it consists of writers with various backgrounds other than film, and moreover, the articles are neither scientific nor journalistic.

*Since your departure from Filmkritik, do you feel that you have come to concentrate solely on production?*

Fortunately not. I teach, which forces me to contemplate films more thoroughly, read about them, see them several times and develop my opinion about them. In addition, Kaja Silverman and I worked on a book on Godard over the past few years.<sup>13</sup> However, it is true that producing takes a position of prime importance. That happened against my will.

### **Film Aesthetics and Practice**

*The practice in many of your films has been to rely on the reconstruction of found (often familiar) images, reestablishing the order, space, and time of those images. This reestablishing of context invites the viewer to reexamine the familiar, to understand the image in a larger context of production. The reality of the image is both asserted and disrupted. And you as filmmaker are positioned ultimately not so much as a documentarist representing the real but as a metacritic of both the image and the society that produces those images. In this disruption you forego the conventional forms of enlightenment or of information dissemination upon which much of contemporary political activism is based. How would you position yourself and your work in the political culture of the FRG?*

I would like first to mention that I did many films in the past years that do not consist of found footage. They do not have English subtitles, though, because I could never attract an English broad-

caster for coproduction. I have made many films that could be counted as belonging to the genre “direct cinema.” But even for them I am primarily looking for preexisting scenarios. Just recently, I filmed in an advertising agency where a potential client was being shown a campaign that they wanted to sell him. I did not construct this story, rather I found it given. Images and sounds that we find without already having been aware that they exist are like an *objet trouvé*. Imagine a child who is walking on the beach and suddenly reaches for a pebble that evokes the lines of a human face. The *objet-trouvé* artist tries to preserve this notion of amazement. This also expresses that you cannot create meaning systematically, as the big production companies, cinema, and TV stations try to do. One needs chances and the luck of a finder.

In Vienna there is a building by Hans Hollein with a small balcony attached that is designed for taking pictures of the *Stephansdom* across the way.<sup>14</sup> Documentary films often refuse to take the ideal and allocated point of view in order to seek out their own—which could be the back of the building. I like looking at something as it is being presented to me. And then I make the picture appear a little bit different from how it wants to be seen, to perform a small alteration as we know it from pop art.

*I like this description of the balcony. It illustrates well the incessant search for the new, unique, or individual, a search that is motivated not so much by the content as marketability. The “newness” of the image becomes its meaning. But I would like to take up your invocation of pop art just now. Doesn’t pop art remain closely tied to, even dependent upon, the popular in a way that your work does not? I can think back to your earliest films like Inextinguishable Fire and recognize in them a much more direct political critique than pop art ever contained. It seems that various shots in your films may rely on this technique, but the sequence of shots results in a more intense Brechtian distanciation (Verfremdung) than the simpler displacement (Verschiebung) of pop art.*

Of course, there is a big difference between Brecht and Andy Warhol, and I especially like this pseudomorpheme. However, I have experienced times in which I did not dare acknowledge the issue with pop, not even to myself. I have taken politics seriously,

but even with serious intentions the preset pictures or codes appeared—how should one treat those?

*Well, this brings me back to your earlier statements about the autonomy of film. Aspects of the aesthetics of both Brecht and Adorno are present here. Yet they had very divergent views. Adorno was very critical of what he called Brecht's "committed works." Can you describe your current relationship to these two figures and your own attempts to resolve this conflict?*

The influence from both is so profound that I would want to compare them with parents. We can take what we heard from our parents and work it into something different, but the original remains distinct, one cannot get rid of the voice. It is worth asking: "Who is the mother, here?" But fortunately there are more parents. Adorno always reminds me that cinema deals with topics to which its means are inadequate. The whole world is supposed to be represented through the relationship within the family, and mostly in the form of a couple. The English translation of Adorno hardly conveys that he tried in his prose to be something like a *New Toner*.<sup>15</sup>

### **How to Live in the FRG**

*Your film *Leben BRD* [How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany] (1990) sought to show the practice of life in the FRG. The images are drawn from various groups engaged in role-playing. We see people preparing themselves for future interactions, an automation of the interpersonal. The editing disrupts straightforward narration and places images in series that drive them both to clarity and absurdity. Your title for the film positions you as a critic of life in Germany or of a German way of life. Would you accept the designation of a German critic?*

The English title plays with the language of user manuals—it is interesting that user manuals are the only text that a commodity economy writes about itself—perhaps the only capitalist literature of capitalism. Commodity economy claims to have for every need, for every lack, a *thing* in store that can take care of the lack; just like there once was a patron saint for every day of the year.

The film presents some of those formulas for life: how to deal with an upset client, how to sell life insurance without burdening the clients' "vision" of their futures with thoughts about death, how to cope with one's fears and angst. I don't want to play myself up as a vitalist but I believe that these examples demonstrate that the life religion that becomes apparent here is impoverished. It reminds me of the preachers on American television who do not even know the Bible and who present God's promise like a free weekend in a theme park. The whole issue is of course related to the expansion of the middle class. People working in a factory were supposed to bend and be as much of a nobody as possible; now everyone is expected to take the initiative and to have a self out of which the *actio* proceeds.

*Do you think the film's examination is limited only to the FRG? Did you have an international, national, or more focused audience in mind as you created this film?*

This kind of therapy and the poor concept of self exist of course everywhere in the Western world. In Latin countries, where family bonds are stronger and religion is a more natural part of life, we encounter more traditional rules for life. Typical for the FRG at this time (I shot the footage during 1989, which was the last year of the old FRG) was the strength of the social state. When Kohl became chancellor in the early eighties he decorated himself with some Thatcherisms but acted like his predecessors: if a social conflict arises, one tries to get rid of it with money. Since reunification, one talks neoliberal in Germany. However, today (just as before) this discourse sounds like that of a model student: "We Germans made a big mistake, but from now on we will do everything right." Practice and practice and never make mistakes—if I practice enough I will be fine. These are the same thoughts children have when they try to ease the darkness of the night with the neatness of their school notebooks in the light of a lamp.

I read Brecht when I was a child; that was a very strong influence. When I began to make films, I was looking for means that would express his aesthetics. Ten years ago, during a management seminar I saw a role-playing game where managers acted

both as managers and as workers. There, I thought, that would be a way to deal with the business life. There was a scenic depiction of high abstraction—these realistic films in which the boss dictates and the office workers on the phone are unbearable. Brecht himself said about his teaching plays (*Lehrstücke*) that actually only his actors could learn from them. The same is true for role-playing games on which the curtain never lifts. And from this learning we can recognize something. That is the documentary. Processes, not results.

*I am interested in asking how you perceive how a society creates its others. In your film it seems that you get at an aspect of what dehumanizes social interaction. You show a system that prepares every bank teller to ignore the anger of the customer and every insurance salesman to create alarm and fear. The Other is depersonalized, turned into a client whose emotions/personality are negated or manipulated. While the film focuses on the training of the employee, it also speaks to the viewer who, as social being, experiences this position as other in daily interaction. Could you elaborate further on this aspect of your film(s)?*

I do not think the bank client is the Other. If you think of the scene [in *How to Live in the Federal Republic*] with the soldiers—they are talking about the enemy. As an enemy action is reported the commander says: “NATO has been waiting thirty years for this.” This Other or enemy is hard to imagine. The real Other is the one who does not play the game well enough. I asked a woman who gives seminars on quitting smoking whether she also includes role games. No, the people in the course are too undeveloped (*primitiv*) for that. That was when I realized that the ability for therapy is nowadays a certain class attribute, almost like a high school degree once was. The Other is the one that cannot compete in these games.

*Fredric Jameson speaks of the need to establish a cognitive mapping to work against alienation, to restore some understanding of the totality of capitalism. Clearly you are seeking to restore speech by mapping out some of the broader (and obscured) connections formed in the totalizing process of capitalism. Yet I recall a recent critic who experienced your film *Leben**

BRD as a form of chatter, or at least as a form of language that carried no meaning. “The film is completely incomprehensible. Whatever Farocki wanted to attain with his film remains unfathomable; his teasing hokums sink into meaninglessness.”<sup>16</sup> *How do you recognize your films as working against this process?*

I would certainly like to contribute, at least somewhat, to a conceptualization and to concepts that can comprehend our present. The *Berliner Morgenpost* seems to accuse me of not being explicit enough. On the other hand, I have some reviews in which I am accused of being too explicit. I hope that I have risked bigger misunderstandings than this one.

*The material you brought together to create the images of the film came largely from before the Wende. The social structure of the FRG has gone through significant transformations since the Wende. To what extent does the examination of the “practices of life” in the film still obtain?*

With the end of the Eastern bloc and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the explicit class struggle has started again in the Federal Republic, mostly that from above. Earlier the tactic was to avoid any kind of conflicts. Marx’s pessimistic prediction that in the long run the proletariat would not be able to secure its wage level seems to be coming true. Almost over night a million jobs were abolished in the former GDR. That of course did not happen without friction but it happened very differently from how one would have expected or imagined it in a scenario. If in 1990 Steven Spielberg had come up with a film about this, the streets would have been filled with neo-Communists and neo-Nazis. If today, however, you come to a village with a 30 percent unemployment rate and I-don’t-know-how-many percent of workfare jobs, you cannot find traces of this on the streetscape. Not only have the political borders in Europe become blurred but also the differences between productive and nonproductive work, and working and joblessness, are unclear.

*The situation at the end of the 1990s certainly isn’t what was expected with unification at the beginning of the decade. But in the developed coun-*

*tries is there class struggle now? If there ever was some pure class antagonism, it seems that the process of reification that you seek to portray has resulted ultimately in an economy of desire for oppression, for the Value-Money-System.*

At the moment we find the organized discourse of “globalization.” It is very popular: women with baby carriages talk about it in the park, men while feeding the swans. People were talking like this in 1914 about the battleships and their weaponry. Then and today—this naive discourse of hope—since it would strike the other. If only one talks competently enough one will not become the victim but rather the coauthor. Your formulation “desire for oppression” reminds me of the phrase “it is bad to be exploited, but it is worse not to be exploited.”

### **Political Minorities and Identities**

*What, then, is your relationship to movements based on identity politics or minority liberation?*

Especially when it comes to politics I am interested in the question of identity: what kind of “I” is speaking to me through a film and how does a film in addressing me perceive me? I am particularly sensitive when the other “I” tries to identify and equate itself to the “I” that is presumed of me. During the Vietnam War, Godard decided to mention Vietnam in each of his films. Of course, I cannot do that for every oppressed minority—and besides there are also majorities that are not free.

*But what you are describing here has little to do with so-called identity politics, and more to do with identity in politics: how one becomes a political subject, doesn't it?*

I intentionally misunderstood the question—this is part of my agenda. When we were shooting *Leben BRD* in a school class, the Turkish youngsters were fighting the “Christian-Europeans” (those from Poland and Yugoslavia, together with some youngsters from Berlin). Their means were tape players and the music they were blasting at each other, as well as the way they reacted to



each other's music. I was reminded of the nineteenth century and how the nation-states all thought they needed their own national literature. I do not like reading a book under those circumstances. I cannot add anything to that. However, I do not want to say that, with that [statement], every identity politics is sufficiently described.

*The changes of the Wende have resulted in important debates about national identity, ethnicity, belonging, insider and outsider groups. Various groups in Germany erupted in violence against other groups and individuals identified as foreign. At the same time communities—for example, of Turkish-Germans and Afro-Germans—are asserting a hyphenated belonging to a greater community. From a different set of circumstances a portion of the population of the former GDR questions the basis of this community. And on the state level Germany acts as the main driving force in the European Community with a goal of reducing national sovereignty through a system of transnational cooperation. How do you perceive these transformations?*

In Berlin-Kreuzberg a growing number of young Turks dress in the fashion of African Americans. They listen to rap—and next to them stands a veiled girl. With the decline of industrial jobs there are fewer life possibilities outside of the ghetto for the one and the other group. Thus the ghetto becomes stylized. Politically and economically speaking the blacks in the US are not very successful at the present, but symbolically speaking they are. With their means of expression they are the most successful minority of the world. However, I would like to talk about another minority, which is much less talked about. When in the summer of 1996 I was shooting a film in and around Berlin about people who were practicing how to apply for a job, the story of women who once had a secure position in the GDR repeatedly came up. They had had technical qualifications. With the end of the industry in the territory of the GDR, their knowledge was suddenly worthless. The same happened in the West, but much more slowly and over a stretch of decades. In the former GDR social abilities were in demand—even the femininity of women.

Incidentally, a significant disadvantage also took place during the Communist regime. Traditional agricultural knowledge fell away, as did artisanship, and in most of the factories the machines consumed the human skills.

*In 1990 at the awards ceremony for the Teddy (awarded to gay and lesbian filmmakers in conjunction with the Berlinale) Rosa von Praunheim confronted the gay and lesbian community: "There are hardly any films worth watching from Germany, and this in times where video makes it possible to produce on a low budget. I especially miss something in the area of documentaries. Why are there no good films about young gays and their culture (if they have any left) or portraits of old gays? Is it laziness or are we too comfortable? We are dying quietly and closeted. What is there left besides lip-synching shows and techno? I would like it if the Teddy were to motivate some queen from Jena or Bielefeld to make something very personal and radical." Von Praunheim recognizes in video an underestimated means for socially marginalized and oppressed groups to engage in self-expression, to formulate radical demands. Historically the workers' movement and the women's movement used film in this way. Would you agree with this assessment of video's potential? How is this potential being realized in the FRG?*

Praunheim's text sounds a bit like the critique of the youth or of the next generation: "Why don't you say anything, please say something!" On top of that a little bit of provocation: "Maybe you don't have anything to say." I would like to see more films coming from different life circumstances than the usual. However, does it always have to be something subcultural? Do there always have to be new tribes—and is that better than the changes in painting or music trends?

### **The State of Media in Germany and Beyond**

*Many of your statements recall Adorno's pessimistic position in his essay on the culture industry. Of course one of the general critiques of his work in that area is that he did not take into account the reception and reading strategies of his audience; the audience, for Adorno, was a passive object of*

*the culture industry. He also did not really deal with the existence of multiple audiences. Quite clearly you rely on a different relationship to the audience. Can you speak to your relationship with your audience?*

After I have worked on a film for a long time and I invite someone to the editing room, then I realize it is less important to me what this person says or how they silently react, but when I am conscious of the presence of a viewer I am able to look at the film differently. The spectator from which I learn the most is the imagined spectator.

Later, however, when the distance to my own work has increased, I learn a lot more from the audience. How people laugh is very revealing and how, or if, certain suspenseful bridges work. When one of my films is set to air on Arte (Association Relative à la Télévision Européenne), I like to read in the contract in which countries people will be able to view it—via satellite in Albania or Montenegro, in countries where I’ve never been.<sup>17</sup> From the papers I know that Montenegro is still not striving for status as an independent state.

*Now of course you recently finished a film precisely on the conditions in Eastern Europe. The first section of your film Videogramme of a Revolution utilized images of the Romanian revolution captured on video by nonprofessionals. The commentator of the film draws our attention to the style and position of the camera. These cameras seem to mark the beginning of the breakdown of a system of censorship. In your estimation do they signify openings or do they actually create a free flow of information?*

A film linguist—in case that exists or should ever exist—should make a comparison of the TV during the Ceausescu era with the revolutionary TV of Studio 4.<sup>18</sup> During the Ceausescu period, just like in the courtly theater, there were minutely determined positions for the ruler and all camera operations were used to reinforce the established order. Also the next in rank had a position and the main purpose of TV was to present this image of hierarchy again and again. Along those lines—I recall that the major network news programs in the US also have an established idiom and also a fixed camera rhetoric, whenever the anchor person turns it over to the reporter on the scene, and when they take it

back again. Is this also about reinforcing authority in the presentation of the news?

In those days when the TV stations were in a state of emergency, Studio 4 presented a multifold and multifaceted lack of order. There were way too many people in the small studio and very often a man would speak—very few of them were women—who was barely visible or not visible at all. In contrast to the emptiness of images in Ceausescu's TV, which was rather an aesthetics of the poverty of mind, certainly not minimalism, there was suddenly a superabundance and the hierarchies were uncertain.

In only a few days the Romanian television underwent a great leap forward from a monarchial television in the spirit of pre-1914 to a postindustrial style. We know that in almost the entire world the consumer today does not wear work clothes but casual clothes; as if everyone was just coming from hobby work in their garage or from a big shopping trip. Television also tries to acquire this habitus and one witnesses that effort in its process of appropriating the new.

There is even more to be read out of this. In the beginning the revolutionaries were acting like citizens, and after a short time the same people keep appearing and offering themselves as politicians. We find something similar in the camera movement: During the first hours the images are of an operative nature and then shortly thereafter the cameras begin to offer possibilities for a new television, for all the coming jobs in media. Our film shows a scene with about twenty people who have simply pointed the camera and microphone at a television that was reporting about the trial of the Ceausescus and their execution. One and a half years later, when we were back in Bucharest, one of the cameramen who was in this room at that time had already received a license for a private TV station. He already owned his own horses.

*Do the technological developments that put video cameras into the hands of more and more people expand a democratic communicative public sphere? Are the use and effect of such technology limited to very specific historical conditions such as Timisoara in 1989, south central Los Angeles in 1991, or the West Bank in 1997?*

When Ceausescu was ruling of course there weren't any copy shops and also the typewriters were under control—the police kept a writing sample of every existing typewriter! Why then did the regime allow video cameras as private property? The whole Eastern bloc idolized writing; after all, the whole labor movement and social democracy was founded on written correspondence. A movement whose organizing medium is videotapes does not yet exist. For that we would need a deeper media literacy. I am also talking about cameras now, as one always does in that context. Of course, VCRs are more important, only with them it is possible to develop an ability to read the sequence of images, to enable a critical reading, without which an intelligent use would hardly be possible. As it is, frequently in the US one talks about representation, or how a film depicts a group of people. A VCR is also helpful for that. One could also say that without a VCR, there is no Turk who is popular outside of the Turkish community—no athlete, singer, actor.

So far, video has been used for very basic formulations of yes/no questions. The authorities say, "There are no corpses in X," while a video proves there are. Just like by an act of choice, such a statement of unambiguous logic can be very decisive, but it does not represent a highly advanced act of communication.

*How does the new medium of video differ from the promises presented when super-eight cameras emerged?*

The biggest difference is this: In 1970, when people were experimenting with super-eight and were hoping to have a synchronized sound version soon, we had a "different cinema" and an audience for it as well, and one was able to imagine that this would develop further in unknown directions with new films. Think about the music industry, where there are still groups, sometimes whole genres, that are not played (*intoniert*) by big labels. For the video business this was different. I do not know when MTV became popular in the US, but one can assume that something like MTV cast its shadow on the years before it existed. MTV did not leave much room to the avant-garde videographer. All the effects that an entire army of underground filmmakers

could have worked on for years—within months it executed and wore them out. Although video cameras offer a lot for their low price, they have a stigma: They always remain a few years behind the professional equipment. A poor country cannot be happy anymore when today a rich country builds a steel or plastic factory for them. It is too obvious that the rich pass along their old material as they would pass on their worn-out clothes. We see this with the developments in digital video: Consumers know that they always get what the professionals merely toss away. On the other hand, it is not clear whether new equipment is necessary at all. When I teach my students and they complain about the equipment, I like to say, Whoever can make better images than Sternberg, can ask for a better camera.

*But this “execution” by MTV of underground effects certainly didn’t leave filmmakers bankrupt. The work of Suzie Silver immediately comes to mind. Her video Freebird, for example, relies precisely on a displacement of the images and style of MTV for its effect. John Greyson, or recently Rosa von Praunheim, and so many filmmakers seem to now be taking MTV as a tool for countercinematic practice. And while I agree with you about the sort of obsolescence through outdating that you are describing, that does not mean that the old technology cannot still be employed. It might mean incompatibility of the end product with the professional “industry standards.” It might mean the end product also does not meet certain professional standards. But that in and of itself does not mean the technology cannot be employed or deployed, does it? Here we can think paradigmatically of the work of Sadie Benning and her pixelvision toy camera, or for that matter some of the outstanding work that comes out of the clunky cameras our students use in video production courses.*

*But what about the conditions in Germany specifically? How has the significance of video been affected as funding mechanisms in Germany change to an increasingly for-profit form of support, and more and more films are funded as international coproductions?*

I cannot really judge the state of affairs. The big films become more and more expensive and tie up increasingly more and more funding, so that it is quite lucrative for a TV producer to hire someone like me. One only has to give me 100,000 DM [approxi-

mately \$50,000] and one gets a product that brings with it a certain cultural profit. This profit is probably higher than it could be with a big production company. It is difficult not to talk about these things like a small businessperson talks about the big malls on the outskirts of the city. Of course they also are subsidized via tax manipulations. The small merchants are talking about culture, they say that with their businesses they contribute to the value of the city.

In the Channel Three program of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) [West German Broadcasting] 50 percent of the funds for the film department have been canceled.<sup>19</sup> This is the direct consequence of an idiotic political decision that Channel Three should compete with the private TV stations. From this division one got some good films; a video rental store would call it a “connoisseur section.” This is where *Shoah* was coproduced and I was able to do a lot there as well.

*Attendance at German films in Germany is up. It has doubled in the last four years, increasing dramatically from its lowest historic point. A new generation of filmmakers seems to be emerging. Directors like Sönke Wortmann, Katja von Garnier, or Sherry Hormann describe themselves as consciously rejecting the style and themes of New German Cinema. On a basis of comedy and entertainment they seek to make financially successful films. Is this indeed a generational conflict, as portrayed in the press? Do these films represent a viable renewal of German cinema?*

I saw *Abgeschminkt* [Making up!] (dir. Katja von Garnier, Germany, 1993) and it made me think. I will leave aside the fact that the film propagates stupid indulgences in self-pity—it is wonderful how rushed the film is. Every second it tries to please the audience and to offer something. There is something loud and ostentatious about it and the film is actually a snuff film, only you do not see the fear of death of a film character in the picture but that of the author behind the pictures. One could go further: I believe that today’s fixation on “audience, money, success” is a religious theme. In this century there were many intellectuals who willingly submitted themselves to a party. In my generation these were already artificial parties. (I don’t like to use words like “genera-

tion” because it turns history to a story of trends.) I believe that the money for which filmmakers today are struggling is actually counterfeit. However, I haven’t thought about this question enough. I can only hope that more people go to see my films than the people who leave during Buck’s.

*One of the characteristics of New German Cinema was its focus on cultural criticism and political engagement. While various directors may denounce auteurism, or New German Cinema as boring antientertainment, must this mean a rejection of film as critical medium? What space is available in terms of current funding and distribution for such work?*

I might be in the lucky position that I was a peripheral figure during the New German Cinema. So I can only hope that I have not faded along with the movement as others did whose work means a lot to me, people like Hartmut Bitomsky, Heinz Emigholz, Peter Nestler, Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Wyborny.

*Since the earliest days of film, the German film market has been struggling against domination by Hollywood production and distribution. Alternating strategies have been attempted to meet this competition with various forms of success. Do you believe that German film production continues to exist? How would you characterize it?*

Hollywood not only produces movies, it also organizes how we talk about them. It is like a church that also prescribes blasphemous arguments [*vorschreibt*]. Just as in the time when Christian Rome ruled the whole Occident, there is always the danger that critique will become essentialist and attempt to outdo the clergy in piety like the Albigenses. One has to free oneself from this tendency.

## Notes

1. In this regard it is perhaps important to note that one of the enterprises of the EU has been to fund the renovation and modernization of European movie theaters, under the stipulation that the theaters then devote a certain percentage of their screening time to European productions. The end result



has been that films are now indeed appearing in theaters, and while these might be predominantly commercial productions, independent, avant-garde, and experimental films are being screened as well.

2. Independent US filmmaker Jill Godmilow tried both to address this obscurity in the US and to attend to American historical amnesia by recreating one of Farocki's earliest films. In her film *What Farocki Taught* (1997) Godmilow recreated frame by frame Farocki's early film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969). The original was never distributed in the US. Godmilow's acclaimed film almost thirty years later served to recast not only US but international critical attention on Farocki.
3. See Armand Mattelart, *Mapping World Communication: War, Progress, Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
4. The history of film criticism in Germany is connected mainly to newspaper writing. From 1957 to 1984 *Filmkritik* was the most significant postwar journal for film criticism, attempting to provide for Germany what the *Cahiers du Cinéma* did for French film culture. Indeed while there are some trade and popular journals, as well as the influential feminist journal *Frauen und Film*, there has not really been a journal that has taken its place in terms of film criticism. Its founders were Enno Patalas, Frieda Grafe, Wilfried Berghahn, Ulrich Gregor, and Theodor Kotulla, editors, writers, and critics who undertook extensive analyses of their contemporary German film production and more broadly European production. As such, the journal provided great impetus to the Young German Filmmakers who emerged in the 1960s.
5. The journal, as Farocki goes on to explain, went through three generations. In 1974 a dramatic shift resulted in the following much pared-down editorial staff: Hartmut Bitomsky, Wolf-Eckart Bühler, Farocki, Rainer Gansera, Paul B. Kleiser, Eberhard Ludwig, Peter Nau, Gerhard Theurig. Compare this to note 4 above. Moreover, while he might downplay the significance of his role, Farocki, who had been contributing to the journal already, became one of its most significant writers.
6. In the course of the 1960s a tension between what was identified as the political and the aesthetic critics developed among the editors. The political group was forced out in 1969 at the point

where the new film schools, especially Berlin, were beginning to produce politically engaged auteurist directors and in general the film climate was highly politicized. As Farocki notes, those who were shut out for the most part became significant figures in the film institutions of the Federal Republic. While it always remained critical and political at this time, the journal took a turn toward reporting on and discussing aesthetic developments. Its focus shifted in that sense from analyses of the culture industry to the introduction to a German-speaking audience of new theoretical work and directions. It further changed its format to a special issue format, supporting translations of André Bazin, Erwin Panofsky, Sergei Eisenstein, or devoting issues to the work of John Ford or Jerry Lewis, for instance.

7. While a certain amount of flux was always present in the editorial staff, after the first break it took on a configuration that lasted until 1974. In 1973 the following were directly involved in the journal: Klaus Bäderkerl, Alf Brustellin, Bühler, Jürgen Ebert, Helmut Färber, Jörg Peter Feurich, Gansera, Grafe, Harald Greve, Urs Jenny, Dietrich Kuhlbrodt, Herbert Linder, Ludwig, Joachim von Mengershausen, Nau, Uwe Nettelbeck, Patalas, Helmut Regel, Wilhelm Roth, Siegfried Schober, Theurig, Wim Wenders. While some of these remained involved, many went on at that point to other significant positions within industry, academia, archives, and so on.
8. Beyond his early writings for *Filmkritik* Färber edited translations of works including Bazin, Panofsky, and Yoshikata, among others. He has undertaken studies of individual directors and films by Polanski, Mizoguchi, von Stroheim, Griffith, and others. See Färber, *A Corner in Wheat von D. W. Griffith, 1909: Eine Kritik* (Munich: Färber Studien zu Griffith, 1992); *Das Leben der Frau Oharu* (Munich: Filmland-Presse, 1975); “Erich von Stroheim et Maurepas,” in *Erich von Stroheim*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Helga Belach, and Norbert Grob (Berlin: Argon Verlag, 1994). His own work has paid special attention to mise-en-scène and staging. *Baukunst und Film: Aus der Geschichte des Sehens* (Munich: Färber, 1977); Klaus Kreimeier and Färber, *Die Metaphysik des Dekors: Raum, Architektur und Licht im klassischen deutschen Stummfilm*, ed. Klaus Kreimeier (Marburg: Schüren, 1994).
9. Beyond her early work with *Filmkritik*, Grafe has written critiques of various directors, including Wenders, Straub/Huillet, Herbert Achternbusch, and others: *Wim Wenders*, ed. Peter W. Jansen,

Wolfram Schütte, Grafe, Jacobsen (Munich: Hanser, 1994); “Er macht Film um Film um Film,” in *Herbert Achternbusch*, ed. Jorg Drews (Suhkamp, Frankfurt, 1982), 161–204; Serge Daney, Gräfe, Patalas, “Nicht versohnt: A Film by Jean-Marie Straub,” in *Documenta X the Book: Politics Poetics*, ed. Catherine David, Jean-Francois Chevrier (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1997). Recent articles include influential essays likewise on staging and mise-en-scène: “New Look: 13 filmische Momente” in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, ed. Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, Hans Helmut Prinzler (Metzler: Stuttgart, 1993); and “. . . der praktische Beweis für die mise-en-scene,” *Revue pour le Cinema Français* 30–32 (1991): 53–66.

10. Farocki had already made his first films before he came to work with *Filmkritik*. Some of the better-known directors who would be included in this group are Helma Sanders-Brahms, Ewin Keusch, Ulrike Ottinger, Bernhard Sinkel, Niklaus Schilling, Adolf Winkelmann, and Christian Ziewer.
11. It is not true that they entirely ignored Fassbinder. In 1974, *Filmkritik* 12 published an interchange between Friedrich and Gansera on Fassbinder’s *Effi Briest*. This interchange gives some sense of what Farocki means by the weighty accusation of sectarianism. Both critics compared Fassbinder’s film as a work of historical realism to that of Straub/Huillet. Friedrich denounced Fassbinder in general as reactionary, citing Straub/Huillet as the most developed in the existing conditions of filmic understanding. Fassbinder’s work appeared to him as a rejection of Straub’s concept of history as the becoming of the present. Fassbinder attempted a reproduction of the past, hence an antirealist fantasy, part of the same fantastic film production that one finds on TV or out of Hollywood studios. Gansera corrected Friedrich, indicating that there were multiple forms of understanding, dependent on one’s position. Straub’s, however, was the most radical of them. Otherwise they were in general agreement.
12. Here Farocki expresses a critical sentiment that was common among the editorial board at *Filmkritik*. Unlike the central influence that the *Cahiers* had in creating a forum for the discussion of the French *Nouvelle Vague* by director and critic alike, it was felt in Germany that there was no central forum, even though *Filmkritik* sought to serve this role. New German directors did not cooperate with each other. Rather they competed with and against each other for limited public funds. And it is difficult

to identify a central aesthetic behind New German Cinema, each director fostering his or her own style.

13. Farocki and Kaja Silverman, *Speaking about Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
14. St. Stephen's Cathedral, or the *Stephansdom*, is the central landmark at the heart of Vienna. As a tourist attraction it is also perhaps one of the most commonly cited images for Vienna, and Austria in general.
15. Farocki is referring here to Adorno's interest in atonal music and especially the influence of Alban Berg and Arnold Schönberg.
16. Dieter Strunz, "Film" *Berliner Morgenpost*, 12 May 1995.
17. *Arte* or *Association Relative à la Télévision Européenne* was founded in 1991 at the level of the EU. Its chief participants are France and Germany with secondary support from a number of other countries including Belgium, Poland, and Finland, among others. It has proven fairly successful, attracting 35 million viewers throughout Europe. It presents itself as a European cultural channel, programming high cultural programs with a transnational interest. With a programming budget of 195 million Euros in 2000, 8 percent goes to film production.
18. Farocki is referring to the broadcasting station on Romanian television. At the time all television was state owned and state controlled. Farocki's *Videogramme* relies on footage from the studio itself that documents the beginnings of the revolution, the takeover of the media by the revolutionaries, and the collapse of the officially censored media as precursor to the collapse of the Ceausescu dictatorship.
19. Historically the German television and radio stations were set up as publicly owned media supported in part by a yearly television and radio licensing fee on all privately owned sets. The media had three primary channels, the first two being generally national while the third was devoted to regional programming. WDR out of Cologne has been one of the most important regional stations. The emergence of private television stations in the late 1980s and their success throughout the 1990s resulted in dramatic transformations in the funding of the public stations. It has also meant that stations like WDR have had to change their formatting to become more entertaining and less educational.

### **Selected Filmography**

- 1967 *Die Worte des Vorsitzenden* [The words of the chairman]
- 1968 *Drei Schüsse auf Rudi* [Three shots at Rudi]  
*Nicht löschesbares Feuer* [Inextinguishable fire]
- 1974 *Die Arbeit mit Bildern* [The work with images]  
*Zwischen zwei Kriegen* [Between two wars]
- 1979 *Der Geschmack des Lebens* [The taste of life]  
*Etwas wird sichtbar* [Before your eyes: Vietnam]
- 1984 *Das doppelte Gesicht* [The double face] (Peter Lorre)  
*Wie man sieht* [As you see]  
*Ziele: die Schulung* [Goals of the training]  
*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* [Images of the world  
and inscription of war]  
*Leben BRD* [Life in the Federal Republic]
- 1991 *Was ist los?* [What's up?]
- 1991/2 *Videogramme einer Revolution* [Videogrammes of a  
Revolution] (co-dir. Andrej Ujica)  
*Ein Tag im Leben der Endverbraucher* [A day in the life of a  
consumer]
- 1994 *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* [Workers leaving the factory]  
*Der Auftritt* [The appearance]
- 1997 *Die Bewerbung* [Interview]  
*Stilleben* [Still life]

### **Selected Writings by Farocki**

Harun Farocki, "Unregelmäßig, nicht regellos," in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992).

Harun Farocki and Kaja Silverman, *Speaking about Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

———, *Über Godard sprechen*, (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1999).

### **Selected Writings about Farocki**

Tilman Baumgärtel, *Vom Guerilla-Kino zum Essayfilm* (Berlin: b-books, 1998).

Ulrich Kriest, *Der Ärger mit den Bildern: Die Filme von Harun Farocki*  
(Cologne: UVK Medien, 1998).

Neil Christian Pages and Ingrid Schieb-Rothbarrt, ed., *Harun Farocki. A Retrospective* (New York: Goethe House New York, 1991).

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*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* [Images of the World and Inscriptions of War, ] (dir. Harun Farocki, Germany, 1988).