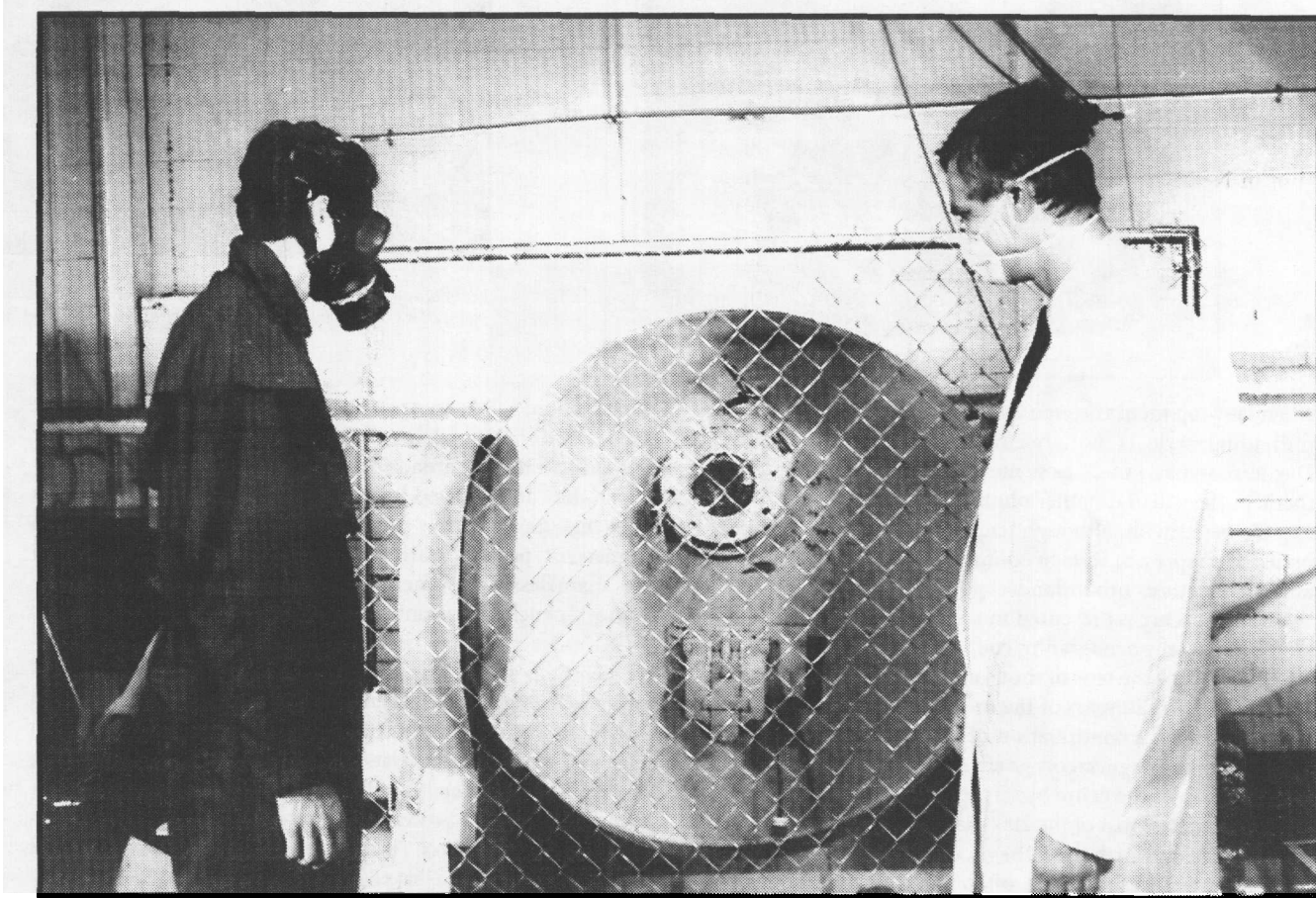


A PERFECT REPLICA:

An Interview with Harun Farocki and Jill Godmilow



JENNIFER HORNE and JONATHAN KAHANA

Still from *What Farocki Taught* (1998) by Jill Godmilow.

The questions were posed and answered by e-mail and fax; Harun Farocki responded from Berlin and Berkeley, CA, where he lives and works; Jill Godmilow, who teaches at the University of Notre Dame, responded from New York City. This seemed appropriate, given the feeling of spatial and temporal dislocation that pervades *Inextinguishable Fire*, Farocki's 1969 film about the research and development of napalm, and Godmilow's 1998 remake, *What Farocki Taught*. We asked both filmmakers to discuss the historical and cultural context of the films—how politics shaped their aesthetics, and vice versa. (Farocki's responses were translated from the German by Anne Bilek.)

Q: Harun Farocki, tell us about the context in which you were working when you made *Inextinguishable Fire*.

Farocki: In 1968 I, along with 17 others, fled the film academy in West Berlin. We were engaged in a constant political struggle

with the directors of the academy and in May of 1968, we occupied the academy. We even renamed it "Dziga Vertov Academy." This happened concurrently with a nation-wide campaign against welfare laws. Not only that but my daughters had just been born and I had to earn money—to make films that weren't simply exercises. In our circles at that time collectivity meant a lot and it was almost a crime if the impetus for a film came from a single person. Probably for this reason I sought out an area in which no one other than myself worked. I called it the agitation of technical expertise. I appointed myself Propaganda Minister for Engineers.

Q: *Inextinguishable Fire* is about the American production of the deadly chemical weapon napalm. Why did you choose napalm rather than one of the other weapons used during the war in Vietnam?

Farocki: Auschwitz has become the symbol for all concentration camps because so many types of camps were collected into one and because there were survivors who could tell their stories. In the Vietnam war there were many terrible weapons. The herbicides that were used to poison the water did not show their effects until years later. Napalm is a pre-modern weapon. Napalm stirs the imagination because it reminds us of when wars had a ritual and magical aspect.

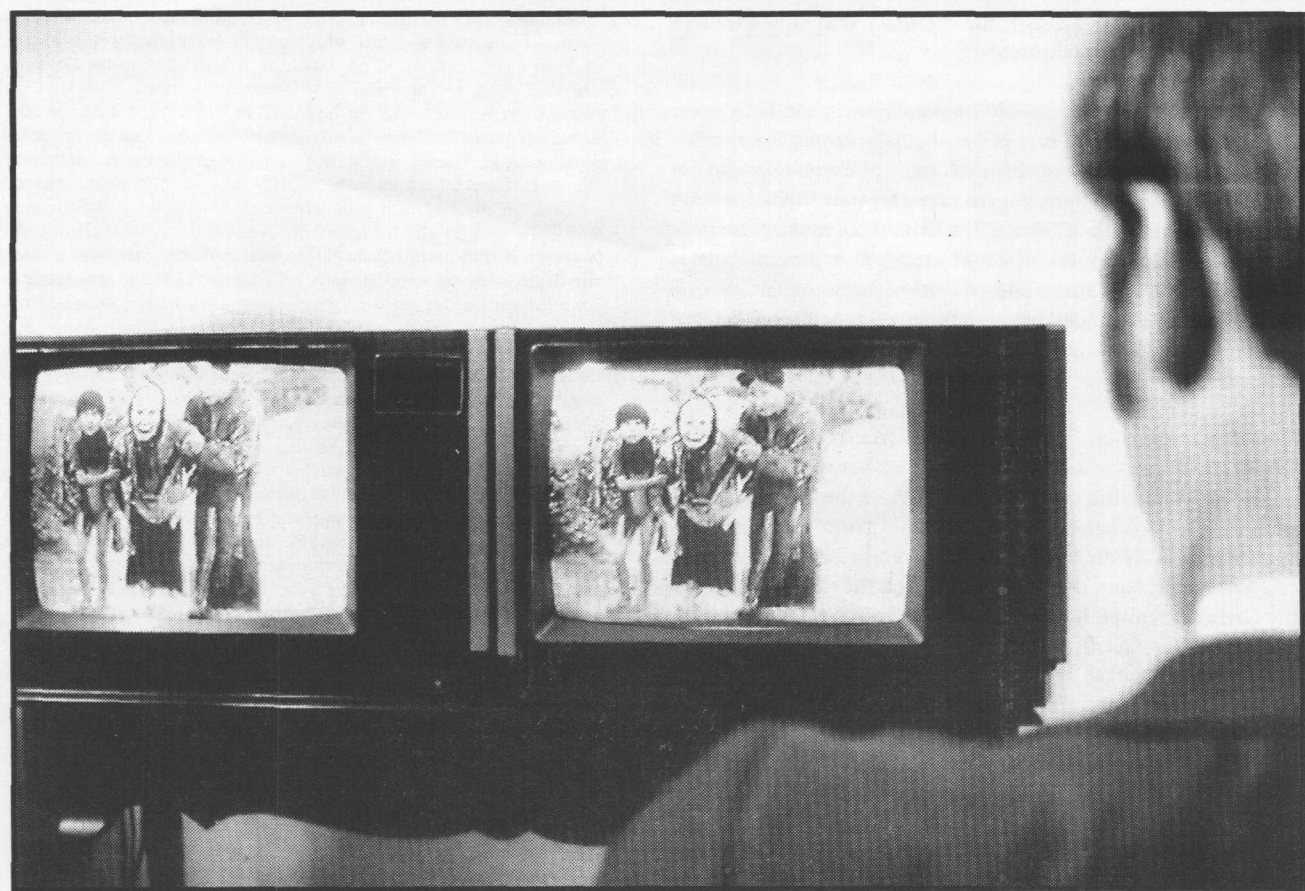
Q: How was *Inextinguishable Fire* received upon its initial release?

Farocki: In the fall of 1969 I showed the film at a festival in Mannheim. There were some criticisms of the technical quality of the film but otherwise the reaction was positive. Although one newspaper wrote that I would achieve nothing with the film, the writer mentioned that one *could* achieve something with a film and that even the aim (*das Anliegen*) of the filmmaker may be justifiable. The film was shown several times on television in Germany and I received continued encouragement, especially from people who had up until then found the student movement to be nonsense. Only recently did it occur to me that the film spoke of Hiroshima and Vietnam, but didn't mention Auschwitz. It had to do with the participation of the scientists and technical people in the crime; and the fact that the Nazi concentration camps were highly organized factories of death. My omission made me think that the terrible war the United States waged in Vietnam not only horrified the Germans, but unburdened them as well—we are not the only barbarians.

The film and television industry in Germany recognized that my film was different than what they had made. There was a short period in which I was invited to a screening of *Inextinguishable Fire* by studio producers. They treated me as if I could teach them something! But that didn't last very long, and soon it was impossible to make such a film. Many people in the political movement were devotees of Socialist Realism and found my punk aesthetic unbearable. I believe that the ugliness of the pictures taken with an extreme 10.5mm wide angle lens let loose more horror than the scenes of the burning of a dead rat.

Q: Jill Godmilow, to the extent that *What Farocki Taught* is about the Vietnam War, why remake a film about Vietnam now? Why change the title?

Godmilow: If you don't want anymore Vietnams, you have to understand how Vietnam came about—actually, and materially. Farocki's film offered significant information. He shows how the war was made in the laboratories of Dow Chemical and how the people participated in the war. The structure of



Still from *What Farocki Taught* (1998) by Jill Godmilow.

labor relationships at the research corporations of America is one good place to look at the Vietnam war, and by projection, a good place to look for the source of all the pollutants, poisons, waste products, useless products and wasted labor we live with today.

Q: *What Farocki Taught* doesn't follow the most typical approach to the remake. How did you decide to remake the film without significantly changing or updating it?

Godmilow: The idea was to "show" Farocki's film itself, its precision and its exact, deadly, logical structure, the largest meaning-making system in the film. To add to or change it would not have been to the point. It was that simple . . . I wanted to call attention to what Farocki had done, then, and to the plain fact that we should have been able to see his film back then and learn from it. Structures of distribution made it hard then, and in some ways even harder now. How many 29-year-old German documentaries are playing at the Film Forum in New York, on public television or in college film series today? None. Certainly it might have been possible to put out a video version of Farocki's film, but who would see it? So few people in this country know his work. It seemed obvious that the gesture of the perfect replica, in color and in English, would draw attention to *Inextinguishable Fire* and Farocki's work in general, and it has.

I should add that it was also an opportunity to extend certain theoretical questions about the original and the copy, the real and the fake (how they are the same or not, how the two are valued differently) into non-fiction cinema, a practice that takes authenticity and actuality for its pedigree.

In that way, I never set out to make a film about wars, or weapons. I saw a film in 1991 that I wished I had seen many years before. *Inextinguishable Fire* was very provocative in terms of non-fiction strategies because it successfully circumvented, and simultaneously marked out all of the classical documentary dilemmas and offered some solutions. It is a film that is useful to non-filmmakers and filmmakers alike. I wanted to show it to everybody because I felt that in this country what is called the left-liberal documentary is unexamined and out of touch. But it was impossible to start showing Farocki's film after I first viewed it in 1991. There is only one print left and he is not well known. So I remade Farocki's film, copied it exactly, thinking that maybe this somewhat outlandish, perhaps obscene, gesture of replication would bring some attention to it. So it's accurate to say that I set out to make a film about Farocki's filmmaking.

Q: Dow is a company fresh in the minds of many women as a producer of silicone breast implants. Did you consider broadening Farocki's critique to incorporate, so to speak, bodies of women? Is the end of *Inextinguishable Fire*, where we are presented with the potential coalition of the (male) factory workers and the (male) students, a place where the question of gender in oppositional politics might have been added to the film?

Godmilow: Yes, for a second I thought about that, but just for a second. There was a defensive, slightly self-conscious moment when it seemed I had to make this film more *mine*, by adding a particular feminist perspective, or updating it. Finally I shook off the compulsion and decided that my job was to re-make the film, exactly. My film speaks about film history by producing a perfect replica of an antique object but leaving it, hopefully, an intact and complete artifact, but also a new, useful and available object. Because of this, critics sometimes refer to my film as an homage. Certainly it can be seen that way, but that wasn't the point.

Secondly, Farocki's film was not about "getting Dow," as many American anti-war documentaries were. Dow itself, that nasty corporation in Midland, Michigan, simply stands

in—just as the actors stand in—for any/every research corporation. Moving on to breast implants was not the point. The point was to understand the structures of capitalism that produce both napalm and breast implants, as well as useful building materials and useful pesticides. However, I did update it a little; not in the replica of Farocki's film, but in the epilogue.

Q: You appear before the camera yourself answering questions about the relationship between Farocki's critique and yours, which had to be updated.

Godmilow: The concept of the "military-industrial establishment" as the generator of all corporate evil had to be revised, since so much has changed since 1969. In the full-tilt transnational corporate mode we are in today one has to identify other sites of production. In fact, I chose to identify a site of consumption—the huge discount stores like K-Mart and Best Buy—to point out the place where we all participate in the production cycle. The poisons, and the wasted labor that produce them, are dispersed now, and available to everybody.

Q: The images we see on the television screens when the Dow employees watch the news have the appearance of stock footage: they're scratched, spliced and otherwise marked as "used." At the same time, this is the only actuality footage in *Inextinguishable Fire*, and perhaps the only "documentary" reference to the Vietnam War. How does this footage work in terms of the reality effect of the film?

Farocki: That was really the founding idea of my film: in the evenings there are pictures on TV that have the taste of the real and the true. What we don't understand, however, is how we consume these pictures. Our own life, our own experience, doesn't appear to be presentable to us. We see images of the war in Vietnam, but what binds us to these images? We see people suffer, and as emotional beings, we can empathize with the victims. But what we can't understand from these images is that we also are or could be the perpetrators.

Godmilow: Farocki's use of that series of 19 very short shots of newsreel footage is one of the things I like most in his film. First, it was bold and brave of him to dare to include actuality footage in a film whose whole premise is that you can't understand napalm—that is, take it in with all its weight and meaning—by looking at newsreel footage from the war. In his film, Farocki asks the audience: "How can we show you the use of napalm in action? First you'll close your eyes to the pictures, then to the memory, then to the facts, then you'll close your eyes to the whole story. If we show you napalm burns, we'll hurt your feelings. If we hurt your feelings, you'll feel we've tried out napalm on you and at your expense. We can give you but a weak show of napalm's effects." I disagree with Farocki here. In newsreel footage of the war, you can only find excitement: the pornography of war, the horror-show. Audiences don't turn away from it or feel any guilt; rather, we seem programmed to enjoy that kind of horror by other kinds of experiences in the cinema.

But when Farocki uses Vietnam newsreel material, he doesn't produce pornography. He does something extraordinary, draining the shots of excitement by running this very formal sequence of newsreel shots that seem to mark off the progression of daily destruction. First there are two shots of generals walking around and a shot of a jeep passing by. Then there is an explosion and fire, bare trees; and children are seen praying. A bomber swoops down on a village, helicopters land and peasants flee. Two quick shots of napalm burns on human skin and then suddenly you're looking at the shot of the burned rat again, and the tweezers are tugging at the scar. Farocki is connecting the dots. The shots are the dots: taking the napalm burns back to the lab and to the people who discovered that a polystyrene developed for rubber shoe soles

was the perfect ingredient to get napalm to stick to human skin. The sequence is also a formal review or prod to remember how we watched the war, night after night, on television, not to reproduce that experience but to remind us of our experience watching it. Farocki shows the aforementioned sequence twice in the film. The Dow scientists need to watch TV to study the results of their work in the field, that is, in the rice paddies of Vietnam. That's how the two newsreel sequences are rationalized in the film. The blond chemist has said earlier, "What works in experiments won't always work in reality." Then she watches the news on the television to see if it does.

I made a mistake in making *What Farocki Taught* that I now regret. I asked Farocki if somehow the cut newsreel sequence had survived the intervening 29 years. It had not. So I had to reproduce the sequence as perfectly as I could by going through maybe 30 or 40 videotape documentaries about Vietnam, looking for matching shots. (I found all but one: I faked the two children crossing themselves with the children of a friend, a Chinese restaurant owner in South Bend, Indiana). Some of the shots I found were in color and some in black and white (the war years marked the period of transition). I converted all the color shots to black and white on AVID to make them consistent with each other. I should have done the reverse, "painted" in the black and white shots, because now, as a series of black and white newsreel shots on a television in a color film, they are marked too much as historical, made archival by their difference from the rest of the color film. In *Inextinguishable Fire* they exist concurrently with the rest of the black and white film. In my film, they end up being too much about "that war then," and don't sit well enough in the present tense of the film's diageitic plane.

Q: So *Inextinguishable Fire* and *What Farocki Taught* should not necessarily be classified as documentary films?

Farocki: At the time I made the film I found documentaries very suspicious. Because Marxism teaches us that history's laws of effect are invisible, that what is evident is untrue. (In any case, the truth must reveal itself in revolution, kind of the way it is with God.) For this reason I wanted above all else to portray the construction of thought or ideas the way a photo montage does. Today I'm more interested in less obvious constructions.

Godmilow: The word documentary is problematic for me. Everybody thinks they know what they mean by it but I don't. It's a term that masks or clouds the realities of film experience, seeming to deny that fiction can tell useful sober truths and affirming that documentary can do nothing but. When I teach documentary, I use a substitute term, "films of edification," because I think the best way to describe this group of films is by their stance. All non-fiction films claim to edify. (Whether they do or not is another matter.)

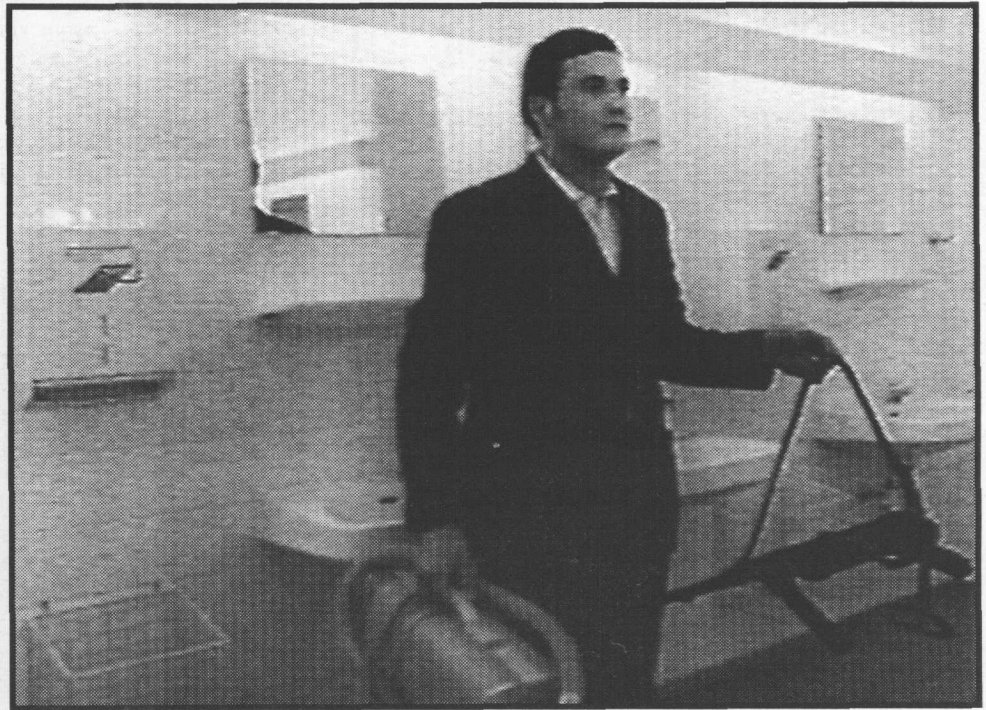
But as I say in *What Farocki Taught*, we need another term, a sub-category of the edifying film, for Farocki's *Inextinguishable Fire* and others like it. Clearly it's not bourgeois melodrama, but its strategies also put it outside the domain of the "documentary" as it's practiced and understood in this country. In my film I call it "agit-prop": *Inextinguishable Fire* has a clear political analysis that it puts forward very directly. The film is punctuated by inter-titles that speak direct political statements to the viewer about what to do. It takes responsibility for its thesis, something 99% of documentaries never do.

Q: The Kodachrome also distinguishes your film from a traditional documentary look.

Godmilow: Well, I thought of my replication or re-enactment of Farocki's film as a period piece, so I had to find cos-



Still from *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) by Harun Farocki.



Still from *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) by Harun Farocki.

tumes, sets and props from the late '60s. I even asked the male actors to let their sideburns grow if the character they were duplicating had long sideburns in Farocki's film. But how to get a period look to the filmmaking itself? The obvious choice was to replicate the film in black and white, but that presented a dilemma: I disagree with the film convention of using black and white to represent "the historical," *Schindler's List*-style. And I wanted to clearly separate Farocki's black and white film from mine. I looked for a color way to go and ended up picking Kodachrome, one of the reversal stocks from the '60s and '70s, to get the right feel and look. There was also a technical and economic reason: I planned to superimpose certain scenes from *Inextinguishable Fire* onto my color scenes. That is much cheaper to do with reversal than with color negative stocks, because you can avoid making expensive optical negatives.

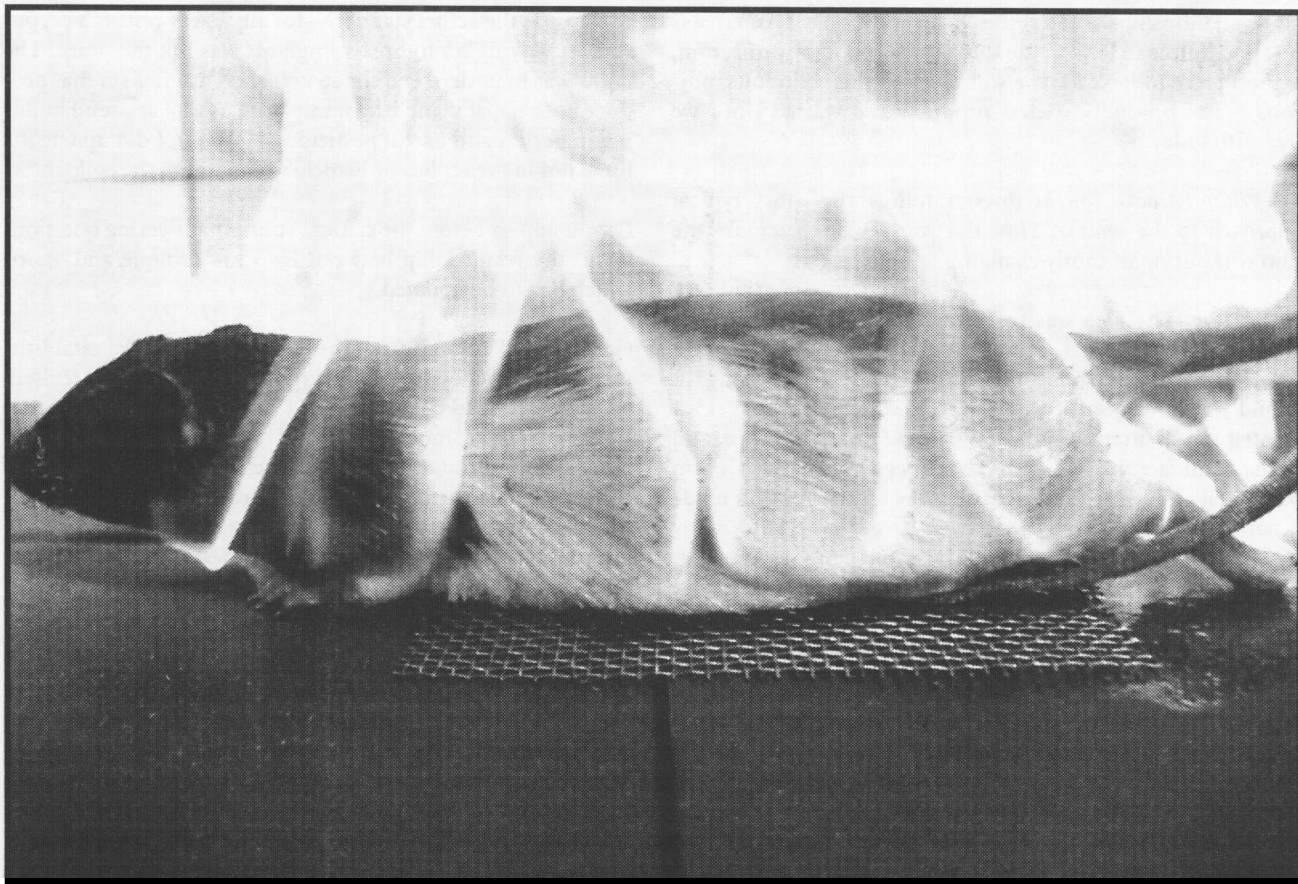
Q: You talk in front of the camera in your film. What does it mean to you to appear in front of the lens as you do in the self-reflexive epilogue?

Godmilow: Perhaps it's for lack of a better idea, but there were some things—simple things, I hope—that I wanted to say about Farocki's film and I couldn't think of a better way than just to stand up and say them. Because I could never have performed that much text in one take, I broke my thoughts up into a series of questions and answers. I was pretty sure I could answer questions on camera. I had my production manager ask the questions. Later I re-dubbed the questions with a very flat, youngish "studenty" kind of voice to mark the pedagogical nature of the sequence. A collaborator of mine, Gloria Jean Masciarotte, thought some of my answers were a little high-handed, so I interrupted my answers here and there with black film, which gave me time to explain what I "really meant" by what I was saying. At first I was fearful of how I would appear by doing this—perhaps lacking in authority, or just silly. Now I like the "corrections"—they seem to critique the viewer's expectations of finding perfect expression and clarity of meaning in the performance of an on-camera author. But also because *it was scary*. I went ahead. In my experience, that's been the source of everything fresh I've had to say in my films. *Far From Poland* (1984) was much scarier—making a film about current events in Poland without going there. What would legitimate my right to speak about such things, except *verité* footage from Poland? A friend said, make a film called *Far From Poland*. With weak knees and nightmares I tried it. Everything was different, everything had to be reinvented, and those are the most interesting things about the film. I think that you have to put yourself in the face of big problems to make something worth looking at in art, or you can't invent anything at all. That's how filmmaking goes for me—solving real problems as fearlessly and as well as you can.

Q: *Inextinguishable Fire* is a film that is clearly quite critical of the military-industrial complex and of a specific corporate entity within that complex. The film also raises questions about the place or role of cinema in capitalism, as a technology of reproduction, and also as a product.

Farocki: I wasn't very critical of technology in this film. However, the scene at the end with the vacuum cleaner and the machine guns expresses something like if the producers could control production, the world would be saved. A democracy of production could end the production of weaponry. Not only that, the film calls into question how people should appear in films. I am stylistically indebted to the early Brecht: his idea of "man is man." It has to do with the fact that Man himself is not that great, he is the raw material to be constructed. Both Brecht, in his play on British colonialism, and I, in my film on Vietnam, abhor the abuses that took place, but we also find that there are possibilities hiding in those situations. Look at how Marxists talk about industry: it's terrible at the moment, but you can't go back anyway, so you might as well develop it further. By the way, it was the producer who was afraid that the film would look too much like a bad film and not like an intentional deviation. I had each dialogue dubbed. We did that with very long loops so that the tone was never quite synchronized.

Godmilow: Certainly film is an industrialized process, although less so the small independent production with a crew of six and a budget of \$10,000 than a major motion picture with a crew of 200 and a budget of \$600 million. I remember being in France, in about the third week of production on *Waiting for the Moon* [Godmilow's 1987 feature about Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas]. One day I looked around at the crew of 45 and was struck by the disheartening thought that filmmaking was the ultimate capitalist process. I was squeezing labor out of 45 people for six weeks, and the juice out of \$950,000 of materials and goods, all of which would flow through me and my ideas to end up spread on a thin piece of celluloid with sprocket holes, weighing about 40 pounds, that could be endlessly reproduced into hundreds of copies, all of which could be running simultaneously in front of audiences watching it on 60-foot screens, and listening to it through huge speakers all over the world. This is advanced capitalist production of the highest order. You have to be morally responsible, and conscious of the experience you produce when you make a film.



Still from *What Farocki Taught* (1998) by Jill Godmilow.

Q: You are talking about ethical limits.

Godmilow: Yes, one could argue that the crew and cast had all read the script of my film before they signed on to the project, whereas most of the scientists and engineers who developed napalm could not have known what would come of their labors. And one can say that the two products operate very differently in the material world. Serious cultural products—and a good film is one of these—are objects of contemplation. You can't wear them, or eat them or kill anybody with them—at least not directly. They are for perception only, designed to open minds. (They can close minds too, and misrepresent, and raise violent emotions and stupid fears that result in destruction.) Napalm, on the other hand, was designed only to produce fear and terror, to drive Vietnamese peasants from their villages into American camps where they could be watched, controlled, and supposedly "protected from their oppressors," the Vietcong.

Q: Is *Inextinguishable Fire* addressed to a national public or an international one?

Farocki: I believe that the film appeals to anyone who saw the pictures from Vietnam on television every night. It has to do with the lifestyle, with consumerism and with the people in North America and Europe above all. It was never really meant as a criticism of the U.S. We criticized political and economic power—just as we did our own government. West Germany didn't participate in the Vietnam war, but the politicians and most of the media vehemently supported the U.S. Even Chancellor Willy Brandt expressly advocated the U.S. in the war. In this sense we were "internationalists," since the war was the opposition. We tried to make the war our issue.

Godmilow: Because *Inextinguishable Fire* speaks to its German audience very rationally about a specific war they are not responsible for, it creates an unusual space for American audiences—who are or were responsible for the war—to watch it with some distance, exactly because they are not the designated audience of the film. I think some of this space (and perhaps the unusual *frisson* generated by watching German actors take American roles) is lost for American audiences in *What Farocki Taught*, because of the translation into English and the use of American performers. Yet I'd argue that *What Farocki Taught* speaks to an international audience as well because of the analysis it offers, which is pertinent to people in any industrialized country in the world, whether they are engaged in a war or not.

Q: What sorts of directions did you give your actors?

Farocki: I was constantly telling them: "Don't do it that way, not that way! Separate the plot from the words! Separate the acting from your showmanship!" They didn't understand me. The resistance to my directions was at any rate occasionally very interesting. I made two feature-length films with actors: *Between Two Wars* in 1977 and *Before Your Eyes—Vietnam* in 1981. The actors once again rebelled and I understood that not only did they not understand me, but I also didn't have enough to say. You can only develop this kind of acting method over a period of years with a theater company—it's as difficult as learning Chinese mask theater or Javanese dance.

Godmilow: I used non-actors—mostly friends and university colleagues, as did Farocki—to play the parts. When I was shooting, I wasn't sure whether or not I would eventually dub

all the film's speeches, so I tried to get performances from these folks that matched Farocki's dubbed speech. It's hard even for professional actors to disavow emotional values when they're speaking lines like these. My actors, after lots of coaching and rehearsals, did well enough, but the complete "alienation effect" was not there, perhaps simply because of the effect of sync sound. Actors opened their mouths and perfectly synchronized speech came out. They became "people" and lost the aspect of just "standing-in" for others. So in the end, I dubbed all the on-camera dialogue, as Farocki had done, and made sure that the dubbed speech appeared to be dubbed, often slipping it a frame or two to move it out of sync just enough to achieve the right effect.

Q: The issue of place seems important to both *Inextinguishable Fire* and *What Farocki Taught*. Did you think that what you were doing was an attempt to have viewers understand their own social, historical or geographical place differently?

Farocki: The issue is interesting and has often occupied my daydreams. How unjust it is that some people are at the right place at the right time and others are not.

Godmilow: Ideologically, I think the first "location" you have to occupy, in order to oppose national policy, is an understanding of where your own labor goes. Who uses it and what is it used for? You have to cut through misinformation, as do the students, who are sure the vacuum cleaner plant they work in is making automatic weapons for the Portuguese, and the self-inflation, as does the female chemist, who asks, "I'm a chemist—what should I do?" Then you have to move your labor out of a system that produces napalm, or even, if you are a university professor, out of misinformation itself. So yes, it's always an individual matter first, requiring self-alienation from systems of thought and production. The film actively encourages audiences to think about their own labor.

What Farocki Taught will be screened at the *Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival* in New York City in November. It is distributed on videotape through Video Data Bank (112 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60603; (312) 345-3550; fax 541-8073). *What Farocki Taught* is available in 16mm for rental through the Museum of Modern Arts Circulating Film Library. MoMA (11 W. 53rd St., New York, NY 10019; (212) 708-9530; fax 708-9531) is now also the American distributor of 16mm versions of Farocki's *Videogramme of a Revolution*, *Images of the World and Inscriptions of War* and *How to Live in the FRG*. These Farocki titles are also available on videotape through Facets, 1517 W. Fullerton Ave., Chicago, IL 60614; (800) 331-6197; fax (312) 929-5437.

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