



# HARUN FAROCKI

A Retrospective

Goethe Institutes of the United States and Canada

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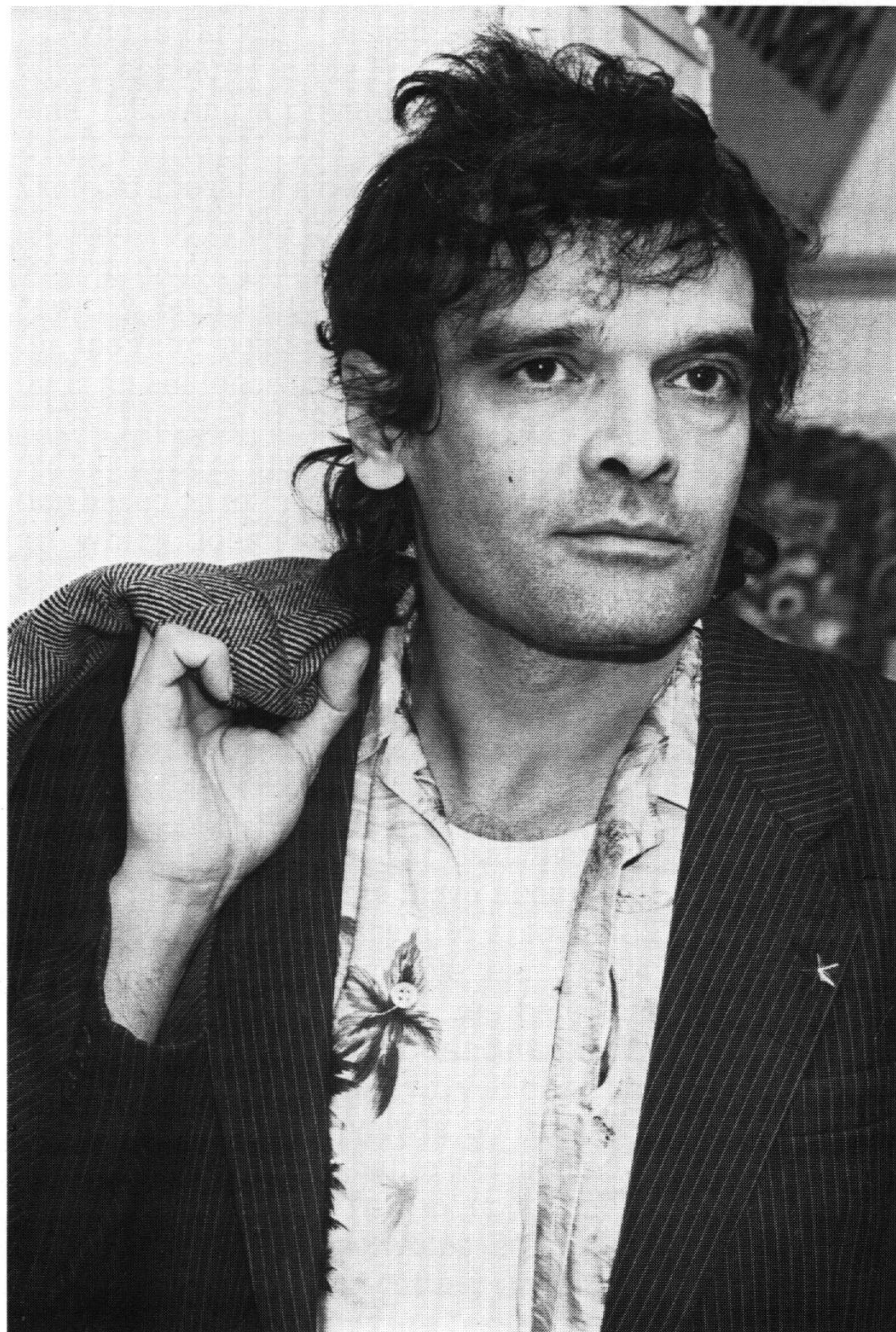
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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



When I was in school during the Adenauer era, nobody was interested in culture or social issues. Back then, if a doctor had three sons, all of them would study medicine and make money that way. Later, under Brandt, only one of the doctor's sons would become a physician, the second son would become a social worker and the third an artist. As the son of a doctor, I adopted the "Nouvelle Vague," which emerged at the end of the Fifties. My teachers were against the cinema and my fellow pupils were against culture and social issues—with the "Nouvelle Vague" I had something against both of them. Today, culture—including the culture of the teachers—comes mostly from the spirit of playing hooky from school. Just as things got better under Brandt with culture and social issues, I fell into a deep hole. I kept myself going with the smallest jobs for television while a biography was being published on one of my fellow students from film school. When I look at the films I made between 1967 and 1970, I ask myself where all that stuff went. In 1977, I produced a film without money and had to work a lot of jobs to pay off my debts—that's how I learned to make money. It has been the case since 1979 that I have had debts equivalent to the value of Europe's best-selling automobile, but there was always the prospect of more work. Films for television, which I thought I was producing only to make money, were sometimes better than films I thought I was making only for their own sake. I still can't believe that I was able to raise two daughters with that money. Even Godard made more money from the production of his films than from their screenings. He was already a role model thirty years ago: He could deal with both intellect and money—he used both of them for his productions. Today, he represents someone who thinks in terms of film.

**Harun Farocki**

## FILMOGRAPHY

- 1967 **DIE WORTE DES VORSITZENDEN** (The Words of the Chairman)
- 1968 **IHRE ZEITUNGEN**
- 1969 **NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER** (Inextinguishable Fire)
- 1970 **DIE TEILUNG ALLER TAGE** (The Division of All Days)
- 1971 **EINE SACHE, DIE SICH VERSTEHT**
- 1973 **DER ÄRGER MIT DEN BILDERN**
- 1978 **ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN** (Between Two Wars)
- 1979 **ZUR ANSICHT PETER WEISS**  
**DER GESCHMACK DES LEBENS** (The Taste of Life)
- 1982 **ETWAS WIRD SICHTBAR** (Before Your Eyes—Vietnam)
- 1983 **JEAN-MARIE STRAUB UND DANIELE HUILLET DREHEN EINEN FILM NACH FRANZ KAFKAS**  
**"AMERIKA"** (Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet at Work on Franz Kafka's "Amerika")
- 1984 **PETER LORRE: DAS DOPPELTE GESICHT**
- 1985 **BETROGEN** (Betrayed)
- 1986 **WIE MAN SIEHT** (As You See)
- 1988 **BILDER DER WELT UND INSCRIFT DES KRIEGES** (Images of the World and the Inscription of War)
- 1989 **LEBEN—BRD** (How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany)

## INTRODUCTION

"Who is Farocki?," asked Louis Skorecki in a 1978 article which appeared in the French film journal 'Cahiers du Cinéma' following a private screening of the film ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN. The result is a controversial discourse: Skorecki speaks of a beautiful, intelligent and moving film, of an aesthetic in the tradition of Lang, Dreyer and Brecht, of a seldom found quality of emotion and of highly pleasurable severity. Yet his alter ego contradicts: the film is too beautiful, too retro-political, too neo-marxist, a film which hardly finds an audience today.

The reaction to Farocki's films is indeed discordant—enthusiastic or angry—there is no middle ground, no reception based on refined boredom. Isn't this the characteristic of art which doesn't serve the standard reactions, which searches for and follows new paths, which isn't part of the universal "software" produced by an entertainment industry which spits out millions of images and sounds on a daily basis? Aren't the films of Alexander Kluge, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, or Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet also met with boredom or even blatant antagonism?

Farocki superimposes the rapid consumption of images with a tranquility for their examination. The objects and people in Farocki's films move about as if in slow motion. Sometimes he brings them to a standstill as if they were trying to resist the inexorable tempo of 24 images per minute: look, there is more to see here than the connection between the previous shot and the next one! In Farocki's work, every angle has its own value and its own depth. Every angle challenges the viewer not to look at things as they appear at first glance, but to look behind them, to search for the hidden meaning. This independent quality in Farocki's images is that which motivates the ascetic exactness and the tranquil ordering of the cutting rhythm.

Most of Farocki's films are "essay films," they examine an almost always socio-political theme from a decidedly subjective point of view. They are films which, as Farocki himself once said, are directed against television, against noncommittal and easy consumption.

The central moment of most Farocki films is the reflection on the functioning principles of capitalism and on its incredible stability. After the failed revolt of 1968, Farocki still maintains with a "flexible stubbornness, that the old questions remain the right ones, they only need to be posed in a new and different manner." (Klaus Kreimeier) The subjects of his

experiments are, among others, napalm production, the Vietnam War, the construction of highways, pornography, the societal division of labor, military reconnaissance, and the training of societal roles as simulation. These surveys do not give any answers, but challenge the viewer not to stop questioning.

Obviously, Harun Farocki is no simple director. The viewing of his films requires effort, an effort which provides priceless intellectual and aesthetic pleasure.

**Bruno Fischli**  
**Goethe Institute Madrid**

## **DIE WORTE DES VORSITZENDEN (The Words of the Chairman)**

**1967, b/w, 2 min.**

**Directed and written by Harun Farocki  
(based on a text by Lin Biao)**

**Camera: Holger Meins**

**With: Ursula Lefkes, Christine Schily**

**Narration: Helke Sander**

I was on a ship—this sounds like a novel: I had just embarked for Venezuela on June 2, 1967 as the Shah of Iran was arriving in West Berlin. There were demonstrations, a student was shot, and a new form of opposition came into existence. The idea for this film came to me while I was still aboard the ship. The film is structured like a commercial.

The film takes a metaphor literally: words can become weapons. However, it also shows that these weapons are made of paper.

The weapon spoiled everything for the Shah and his wife, they are wearing paper bags on their heads with faces drawn on them—the kind of bags worn by Iranian students during demonstrations to hide their identity from the Savak, the Iranian Secret Service.

When I showed this film to audiences in the late Sixties, it was highly praised. I think people understood then that overobviousness is also a form of irony. This capacity was lost a few years later. I think it's coming back today.

**Harun Farocki**

## **NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER (Inextinguishable Fire)**

**1969, b/w, 22 min.**

**Directed and written by Harun Farocki**

**Camera: Gerd Conradt**

**With: Hanspeter Krüger, Eckart Kammer, Caroline Gremm**

Near the end of 1968, a TV-producer called me—they had some money left over which would only go to waste.

When I look at this film today—it was always lacking technically—I suffer. Every frame was taken with a 10 mm lens as part of a kind of minimalism. An early punk film.

But in this film anger is transformed into strength. I think the film demonstrates the fact that analysis is also a form of destruction.

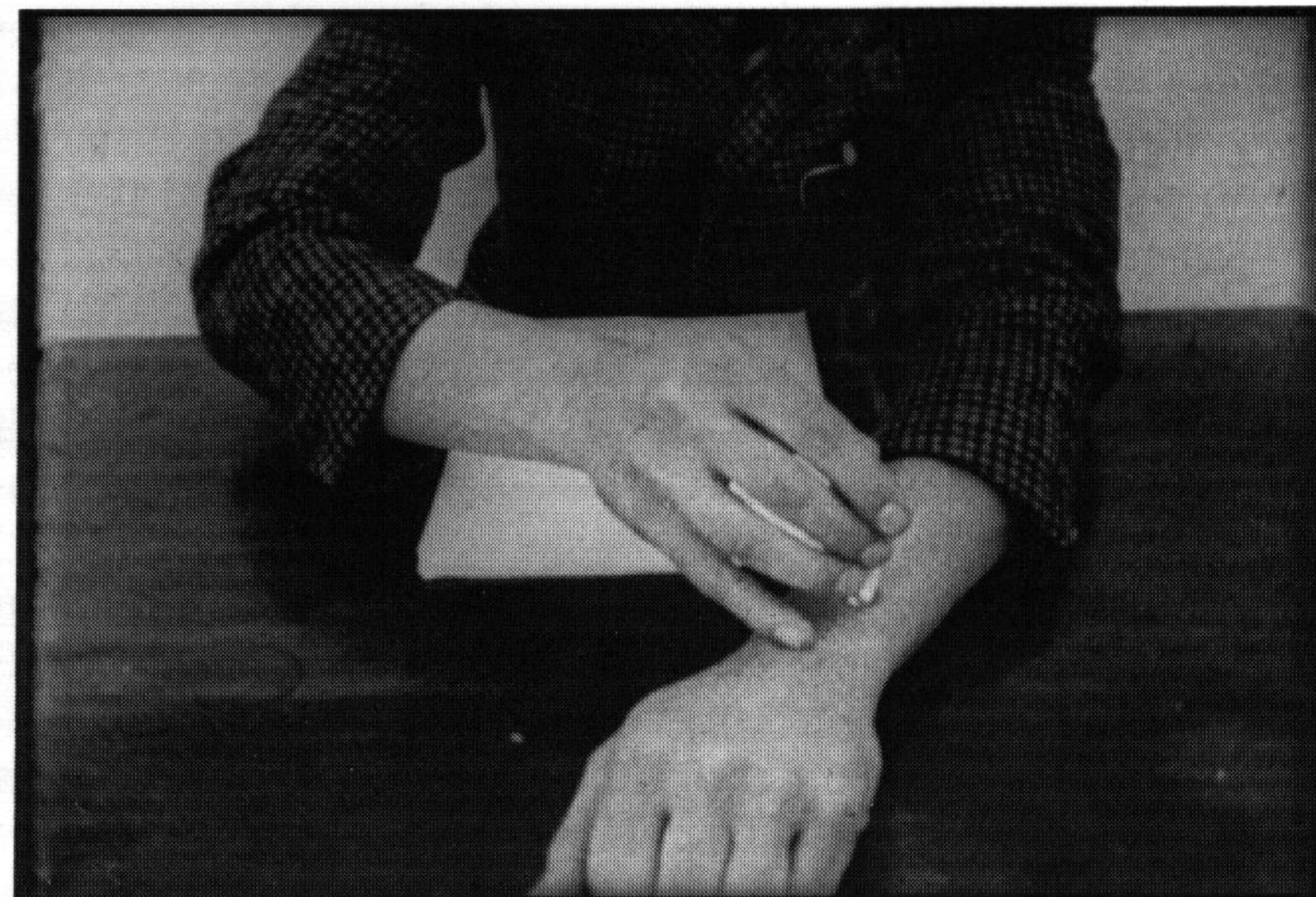
**Harun Farocki**

A naked, blank space. A man is seated at a table with only a single piece of paper. We hear the testimony of the Vietnamese, Thai Binh Dahn, at the Vietnam Tribunal in Stockholm. The account of a victim of the American napalm bombing during the Vietnam War is read by a speaker, who reads with an objective, disinterested voice, no trace of emotion, no look into the camera—nothing.

At the end of the account, the reader looks up at the observer. Shifting his gaze from the paper to the camera, he changes from the role of announcer to that of the filmmaker and begins to speak about the subject, his film: napalm—production, use, consequences; about filmmaking and the possibility of representing horror, the annihilation in film; the clearness of images—their questionable nature and their impossibility—of their necessary failure and their limits in reaching the audience, meaning: not wanting to see, not wanting to know, not wanting to remember, not wanting to be hurt. More than merely showing that which already exists—what can be said and represented—he speaks of what is not possible, that which eludes representation. The horror of destruction to this degree cannot be represented, much less imagined. One cannot represent the heat which comes from napalm—it becomes representable, imaginable through something much weaker which the filmmaker abruptly and unexpectedly puts in front of the camera: he extinguishes a glowing cigarette on his hand. A shock, an image like a slap in the face, the image of pain as if it were our own hand.

**Franziska Buch**

Inextinguishable Fire



## **DIE TEILUNG ALLER TAGE (The Division of all Days)**

1970, b/w, 40 min.

Directed and written by Harun Farocki and Hartmut Bitomsky

Camera: Carlos Bustamante

With: Peter Schleh, Ingrid Oppermann

This film is an educational film. Before the destruction of the worker's movement by facism, there were hundreds of working people taking courses in history, culture, politics, and economics without any benefit to their working life. We wanted to bring this idea back to life. But schools where such a film could be of use have not been reestablished. Life has changed so much, the pursuit of leisure time occupies people just as much as work did before.

Harun Farocki

## **ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN (Between Two Wars)**

1971-77, b/w, 83 min.

Directed and written by Harun Farocki

Camera: Axel Block, Melanie Walz, Ingo Kratisch

With: Jürgen Ebert, Michael Klier, Ingemo Engström, Hartmut Bitomsky, Jeff Layton, Hildegard Schmahl

A film about the time of the blast furnaces—1917 to 1933—about the development of an industry, about a perfect machinery which had to run itself to the point of its own destruction. The essay from the Berlin filmmaker, Harun Farocki, on heavy industry and the gas of the blast furnace, convinces through the author's cool abstraction and manic obsession and through the utilization of a single example of the self-destructive character of capitalistic production: "The image of the blast furnace gas is real and metaphoric; an energy blows away uselessly into the air. Guided through a system of pipes, the pressure increases. Hence, a valve is needed. That valve is the production of war materiel." BETWEEN TWO WARS is also a film about the strains of filmmaking and a reflection on craft and creation. Farocki distances himself radically from the thoughtless sloppiness of average television work. The clarity and the precise ordering of his black and white images, which do not illustrate



Between Two Wars

thoughts but are themselves thoughts, are reminiscent of the late Godard. The poverty of this film—its production took six years—is at the same time its strength.

Hans C. Blumenberg  
DIE ZEIT, February 2, 1979

### **WHO IS FAROCKI?**

I don't know. Or, more specifically, I don't know much about him: he is one of the twelve staff writers of *Filmkritik*, the austere and exciting German cinema journal, and it is Jean-Marie Straub who urged us to see his film, completed in 1978. This film is beautiful, extremely beautiful, and that should be enough.

- "Do you think so? Since when has beauty, the strength of a film, been sufficient to have this film shown, seen and loved? It will be a while before *Zwischen zwei Kriegen* (*Between Two Wars*), a film still unreleased by Farocki, is commercially shown here, in Paris, where, however, so many claim that everything is released, everything can be seen."

- "Indeed. We saw the film at a private screening, the projector was malfunctioning and we were the only two in the audience. Yet, nothing, ever, can replace the intoxicating, exhilarating certainty that something essential is happening

before our eyes. Whether there are a few or a thousand in the audience, when a film *does* exist, when you can guess the authentic presence of an author behind this film, nothing else matters. A message is given, a signal is issued, and *something* is spreading and is getting known. No matter how long it will take, the good news is on the way, already a few words are being printed: filmmaker Harun Farocki *does* exist, his film is here, we have to try and see it, grab it, show it, talk about it . . .”

- “How naive you are: it is too intelligent, too beautiful (as well as too dogmatic, academic, political—in fact, it reminds me a lot of *Not Reconciled*, which may be the most beautiful film by Jean-Marie Straub), it is also the kind of cinema that will take the longest time to *really* meet its audience! It is a cinema for a few perverse lost souls, that’s it, it is old-fashioned politics, neo-marxism. . . .”

- “No, no and no! This film contains great beauty, an art of framing and mise en scene directly influenced by Lang, Brecht and Dreyer, and a quality of emotion and rigor that is no longer found anywhere else . . . And pleasure, *pleasure*. Yes.”

- “You’re nuts, you are hypocritical, you are omitting the most important part: Why aren’t you saying how difficult the topic of *Between Two Wars* is—that it is a film whose goal is, quite simply, to explain *economically*, through ‘the production of coke, natural gas and ore in Germany and Europe between the two wars,’ the reasons for Hitler’s rise to power: How easy could it be to convince an audience to come to look at and to listen to such a thing!”

- “OK, I give up, anyhow, I’m depressed, I happen to experience a moment of weakness, and you cowardly take advantage of it. Maybe cinema is dead, maybe what you say is true. Will it ever be impossible to see this film here, in this city where everything is supposed to be released? Maybe. Yet, *Between Two Wars* is a sensual fiction about politics, it contains moments of vivid intelligence as you can hardly find them in the work of French filmmakers (the latter being rather slow) and it is as much a lesson of pure cinema as of political economy. And even the opposite—the most impure cinema possible, pure politics, total spectacle. Yes, total. And now I give up: others must continue. Let cinema go wherever it wants!”

**Louis Skorecki**  
**CAHIERS DU CINÉMA**



The Taste of Life

## **DER GESCHMACK DES LEBENS** **(The Taste of Life)**

**1979, color, 29 min.**

**Directed and written by Harun Farocki**

**Camera: Rosa Mercedes**

For years I’ve been looking for the means to capture everyday life just as it is perceived through a glance from the street. Twenty years ago, you could see young people standing with their bicycles on street corners, in fact, if the bicycles were there, you could be sure to find the young people standing there talking. I would like to document these kinds of events.

On this occasion, I was presented with the opportunity to do so. For two and a half months, I walked around different parts of the city with my camera and collected images for this film.

**Harun Farocki**



## ETWAS WIRD SICHTBAR (Before Your Eyes—Vietnam)

1981, b/w, 114 min.

Directed and written by Harun Farocki

Camera: Ingo Kratisch, Wolf-Dieter Fallert, Ebba Jahn

With: Anna Mandel, Marcel Werner, Hans Zischler, Inga Humpa, Bruno Ganz, Hartmut Bitomsky, Jeff Layton

Farocki also uses objects against the grain. He stages theorems which show that theory can delude, that abstraction is also art, and that art is also a mockery of nature. The characters in the film communicate through the use of sentences and ideas from books. This method seems improper for a film because for us a film is made according to one single model in which illusion is of the greatest importance. Farocki favors another equally genuine possibility in filmmaking: montage is a means to set fiction in motion. Thus, we think through images.

Farocki produces complete series of combined pairs like text/image, to read/to see, work/love, photography/film which appear in close proximity to one another but never

merge. Synthesis would be an ambiguous image. The blood of a terrorist is mixed with the blood of the CIA agent Bruno Ganz. These are demonstrative images—formerly called living images—which block the flow of images which normally move us. Images are created which force us to reflect. Between the informative, reflective and photographed images arise indirect ones.

The Situationists, who are occasionally cited in this film, were already talking about refusing the mediums of communication back in 1958. They justified their “hostility towards art,” saying that in the present-day society, a society of theatrics, the circulation of images constituted the final subtlety of commodification.

Films like this one are directed against the imperialism of the unified image, of habitual fiction, and against the documentary image whose monopoly on reality is no longer accepted. In the film, an American POW who believes he has been converted from soldier to philosopher says that images do not have the place in our society which they deserve. This formulation is not asking for more images, but for a different placement of images within a relation.

**Frieda Grafe**

**SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG, July 16, 1982**



### Rosa Mercedes and Harun Farocki—A Conversation.

**RM:** There are two things in this film, the love between Anna and Robert and the war in Vietnam.

**HF:** That isn't anything special. There is love in every war movie (although there isn't war in every love story). That's a producer's rule: whoever isn't interested in the one thing, might be interested in the other. I adopted this rule and looked for relationships between one thing and the other.

The only exception was the metaphor of love as war.

**RM:** One relationship is—for a while the Vietnam War is very close. One thinks of it every day. Then the war moves farther away, only a feeling remains that one has lost something—oneself or a concept. One talks about love this way, but seldom of war. War is put into the terminology of love, words which are normally used in the context of love are used in the context of war.

Things have contours, then they become less defined, one discovers that one has accepted a wish-form and not the thing itself. There are parallels—the manner in which one accepts a person, a war, a war of revolutionary nature.

**HF:** I didn't want to draw parallels—I didn't want one to jump in when the other one doesn't work. I wanted love to be the one coordinate and war the other. Between these coordinates is a potentially unlimited field. The field of imagination. Here two things move about: the concepts separation/connection, the question of what an image is, the opposition between mechanized production and craft.

## WIE MAN SIEHT (As You See)

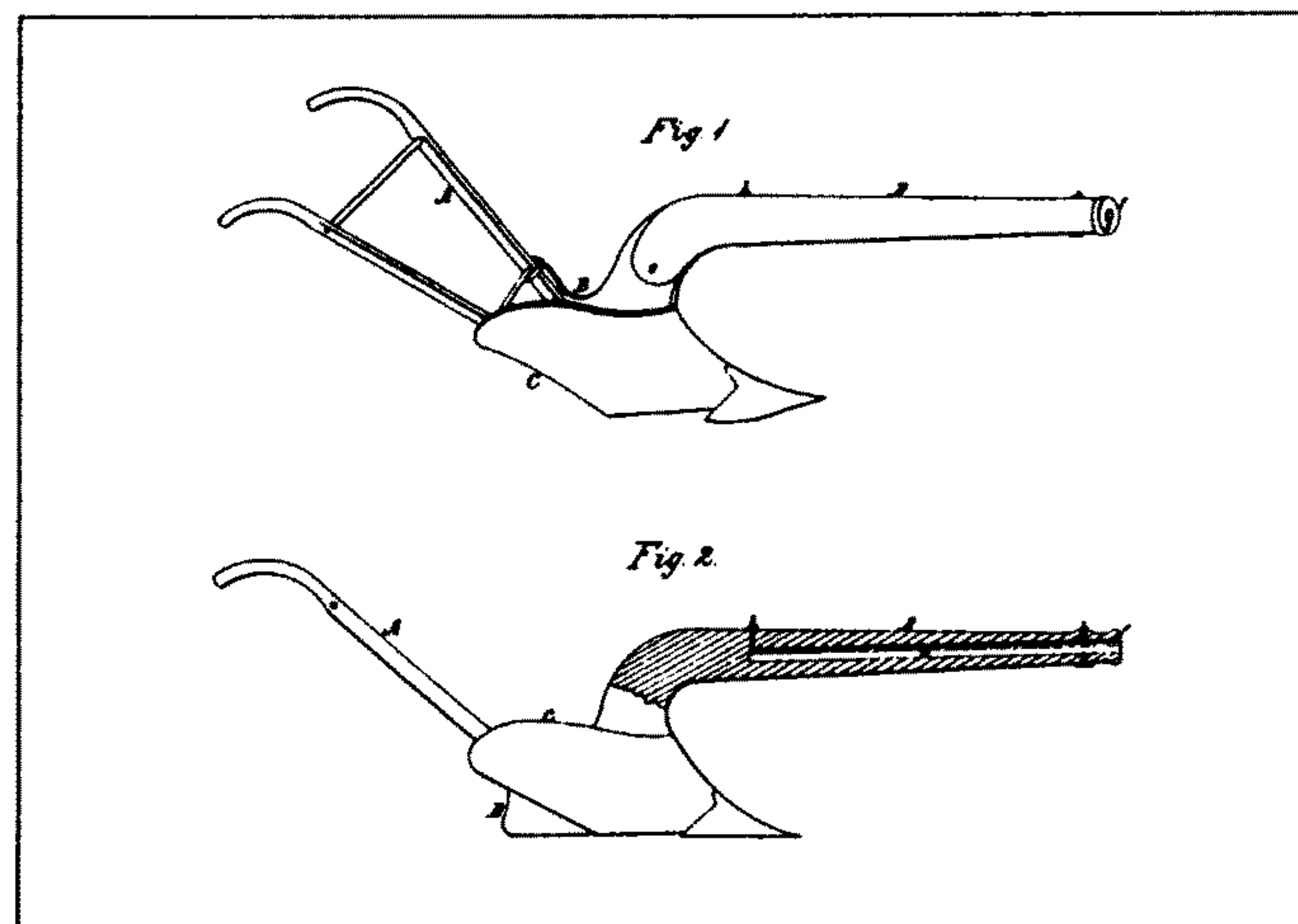
1986, color, 72 min.

Directed and written by Harun Farocki

Camera: Ingo Kratisch, Ronny Tanner

AS YOU SEE presents images we know all too well: a highway intersection, a trench, a pin-up girl, a factory . . .

With shrewdness and a seeming casualness, the film looks for the overlooked and the hidden, images are taken "at their word." The result is an attempt at understanding technological history in a political way and at showing the possibilities for a "practical critique of technology." The film presents with a skeptical sympathy exemplary designs for socially useful products developed by the workers of the British armaments company, Lucas Aerospace.



Farocki's documentary film essay, AS YOU SEE, demonstrates that it is not always enough to see things as they are, that there is something to discover in the images if one only would read between the lines. With a candid scientific meticulousness, Farocki treats totally concrete and totally abstract relationships: between war and earning a living, between rotary motion and the continuous production of goods, the linking of tool and computer, the fact that it doesn't depend on the worker anymore. Farocki presents technological history as political history—through a process for which, as the philosopher Günther Anders once wrote, "the parts are more than the whole."

Klaus Gronenborn

FRANKFURTER RUNDSCHAU, November 22, 1986

## BILDER DER WELT UND INSCRIFT DES KRIEGES (Images of the World and the Inscription of War)

1988/1989, color, 75 min.

Directed and written by Harun Farocki

Camera: Ingo Kratisch

Farocki's film "deals" with war, the production of images and photography as a medium of "enlightenment." There is a



Images of the World and the Inscription of War

double meaning in this term which Farocki uses dramaturgically. "Enlightenment" is a term from intellectual history, as well as a term from military and police language ("reconnaissance").

One can "enlighten" through photography in order to preserve things. But one can also use enlightenment ("reconnaissance") for destruction, like the bombers in the Second World War. Enlightenment and destruction come together in the medium of photography.

In the center of Farocki's essay film is a "reconnaissance photograph," from which was recognized far too late, what could have been destroyed. On April 4, 1944, from points in Italy, American bombers began flying over targets in Silesia. Cameras, which were mistakenly operated too early, photographed Auschwitz while flying over the construction site of the IG Farben factories. But the photo analysts in England only saw that which they already recognized: they saw from

a 7000 meter altitude a power plant and a carbide factory. They didn't recognize the lines of people in front of the gas chambers, because it wasn't their job to look for a camp. Auschwitz was never bombed.

Farocki connects the perspective from above, the aerial shots, with the perspective from below, with images drawn by the prisoner Alfred Kantor. That which was only partly visible from above becomes painfully clear. Kantor wanted to visualize and preserve the horror of the camp in his sketches, to attest to this incredible reality with a visual testimony. The Nazis, the SS, also photographed in Auschwitz. They photographed the people on the selection ramp.

Farocki understands and interprets these images as inscriptions of war from the perspective of the victims as well as of the perpetrators. He ties the images together in a visual essay, in a text which speaks from and about the images. Farocki's questioning of images—with a dramaturgic sense

of repetition, pauses, intensification—brings seemingly disparate elements together in a classic syllogism and “enlightens,” not in the military sense, but in the sense of a “critique of knowledge.” One doesn’t necessarily see only that which one knows—at least not when one looks carefully enough.

**Klaus Gronenborn**  
**ZELLULOID, 28/29, May 1989**

## **Jean-Marie Straub und Danièle Huillet drehen einen Film nach Franz Kafkas “Amerika” (Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet at work on Franz Kafka’s “Amerika”)**

**1983, color, 26 min.**

**Directed and written by Harun Farocki**

**Camera: Ingo Kratisch**

During the filming of Straub and Huillet’s film, *CLASS RELATIONS*, in Berlin and Hamburg, Farocki made his documentary based on the work of his colleagues. In this manner, he utilizes the film medium to continue the work he had started at the film journal, *FILMKRITIK*, in creating a public forum for the difficult film from two “Frenchmen in exile.” Farocki also sees himself as an actor in front of the camera. In *CLASS RELATIONS*, Farocki plays the role of Delamarche.

## **EIN BILD (An Image)**

**1983, color, 25 min.**

**Directed and written by Harun Farocki**

**Camera: Ingo Kratisch, Melanie Walz**

Surrounding the naked woman in the centerfold of *Playboy* magazine move printing presses and publishers, advertising companies, hotels and clubs, millions and millions of dollars—a commercial universe.

*AN IMAGE*: Filmed from July 19 to July 22, 1983 in the studios of *Playboy* Munich.

The film, *AN IMAGE*, is part of a series I have been working on since 1979. Another film in this series is *DIE SCHULUNG*.

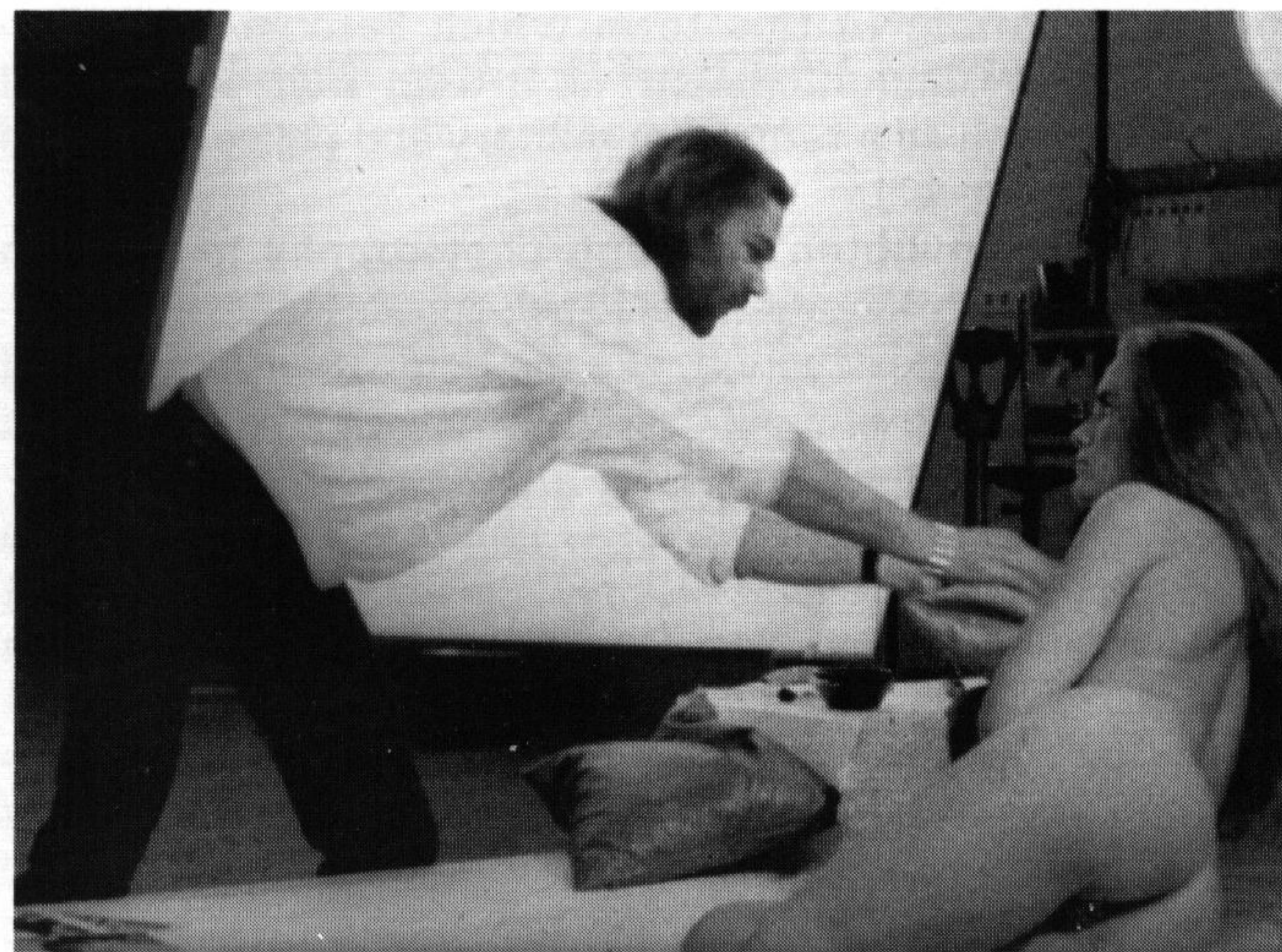
The television company which commissioned the film assumes that the film is a critique of an object and the owner or controller of the filmed object assumes that my film is an advertisement for his object. I’m trying to do neither of the two—not something in between but something outside of both.

I’m looking for a process that can be repeated frequently, whether fully or in partial form. When you make a film, you might begin with blocking, then the props, the sets, the equipment, the costumes, masks, the scripts—sound, camera, lighting—all of this requires thirty or fifty takes. Only when you have these takes can you grasp the scene and then accentuate it into a moment—let’s say—in the moment where the positioning of the camera is chosen.

During the filming of *AN IMAGE*, we observed the actions repeat themselves twenty to thirty times and were able to choose the camera positions through this observation: At first we maintained the same distance from the model as the photographer. Once the photographer found his frame and snapped his picture, we jumped over the ramp. There was so much repetition that we kept having to move from one side to the other with a dolly between the photographer and the model as we attempted cinematographically to get to a point where the ray of light would free us to get a pathway to the woman. In fact, in one of these moments she picks up a Polaroid and looks at images we had taken of her.

**Harun Farocki**  
**ZELLULOID, October 27, 1988**

An Image





Betrogen

## **BETROGEN (Betrayed)**

**1985, color, 90 min.**

**Directed and written by Harun Farocki**

**Camera: Axel Block**

**With: Roland Schäfer, Katja Rupé, Nina Hoyer, Timo and Denis Menzel, Swenja and Ilka Höwe**

The idea for this film came to me in 1972—I found it on the last page of the newspaper. Since then I've worked with and come upon lots of stories, but this one has stayed with me.

The funny thing about stories which are on the last page is that they usually seem concocted. As if by chance, unformed life acquires form, like when one in a million pebbles on the beach looks like a woman's body. That was my point of departure: an unformed life and the exceptional nature of such a story.

After having worked in film for fifteen years, as a filmmaker and as a critic, I have so many cinematic formulas in

my head which simply have to come out, look for a place. That's why this story, which is both sincere and ironic, interests me.

The story of Fred and Anna, and Fred and Edith is a double story. It can be understood in a metaphorical sense or equally as a simple occurrence. Concepts of love are analyzed, but the analysis is inscribed in an almost accidental way; a man loves a woman whom he knows is simulating love. Behind the theatrics he searches for the truth. He is conscious that, in a serious approach, the question of the truth of a person causes vertigo and leads an individual to face his/her own abyss.

While Anna lives, she represents a photograph or an image of that which Fred imagines a woman to be. Her sudden death makes her into a threat to the person of Edith, and in this manner she is transformed into something real . . .

I didn't want to banalize the subject, but I can't imagine another way of treating it on film. Moreover, BETRAYED is also a film that hides its mystery from reason. An image, but not a lie.

**Harun Farocki**

# **LEBEN—BRD**

## **(How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany)**

1989/90, color, 83 min.

Directed and written by Harun Farocki

Camera: Ingo Kratisch

Here we have a “playful film.” We filmed in offices, schools, self-help groups, welfare centers, vocational schools, and clinics, as life itself was being enacted—when life was being enacted in order to demonstrate something, to instruct, to practice, to beseech, to overcome.

Women enact childbirth, policemen the arrest of tenants, bank employees the calming of angry customers, passers-by being trapped in an overturned car, war with soldiers, a woman depicts the yellow porridge overflowing from the pot on the stove.

These role-playing games, psychodramas, sociodramas present a view of life in the Federal Republic of Germany. Here, a life can be seen which is diversely organized and exercised. Life like a school where every inhabitant of the FRG is a special, star pupil. The FRG as a training camp in which techniques for living are practiced by the professionally living. Social reality is driven to the level of absolute clarity. That's something it doesn't like.

### **Notes**

**20. Internationales Forum des Jungen Films  
Berlin 1990**



How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany

# IMAGES AND THOUGHTS

## People and Things Materials and Methods

by Jörg Becker

Harun Farocki's 1990 film "Leben BRD" ("How To Live in the Federal Republic of Germany") is a montage assembled of short scenes taken from 32 instructional and training classes, and therapy and test sessions from across the Federal Republic. The individual film segments are all "acted scenes," recorded during practice sessions in which some real life situation is being introduced, taught, practiced, imitated, invoked, or mastered. "Leben BRD" is a film composed entirely of these scenes—"a documentary film with performers." The various types of performance in the film all have specific rules, sometimes revealing a depressing banality and sometimes an enticing, all too obvious perfection. The effort demanded by these performances represents a particular form of labor—indirect and contrived. True human action is ruled out, what is important here is the significance of preparatory and follow-up work, which appear as exercises in wasted human knowledge, or as a drill in modern marketing methods. These "didactic plays on mastering life" are intended to be instructional in the carrying-out of certain administrative and service activities, that is, in the rehearsing of certain functions. In addition, they—much like a "false bottom"—are meant to discover and cure, per therapy, the effects of actual events and actions on the human spirit. "Leben BRD," in its brief shots of the tests that various consumer goods are put to, has created its own cinematic method of editing, its own form of punctuation. It is precisely these images, absent of people, that reinforce the human situation. "Matter is more magical than life" (Roland Barthes)—this magic appears to imbue the film's scenes, somewhat similar to a concept of "endurance," whether of human beings or of objects. Just as material and product testing reveal something about our utilization of things—in the face of endless, rhythmic endurance/application/torture testing of consumer goods, the essence of ordinary activity emerges—so the various trials and errors and re-enactments and role-playing reveal something of the control that the forces of big business, the insurance conglomerates, and the military impose on human life through their representation of the world—a standardization that human beings do not completely assimilate. To practice for a life the rules of which are visibly lacking in coherence means two different things

at once in terms of life and work processes. One is that a biased attitude (or in today's language: a philosophy) is imparted and secured in people, through schooling, practice and rehearsal. The other is that something in these people is forced open, something that is supposedly hidden in each of us individually, and is then brought to light (economics and therapy . . .).

"Leben BRD" is assembled according to associations, contrasts, key-words, movements and gestures. The scenes were not meant to connect, their particular montage form emerged from them—in the coupling, for example, of the rhythmic sounds of computer porno and the product testing of mattresses; couplings that derive from the attention given in each scene to synthetic objects, from the concentration on didactic material and subject matter. Montages are based as well on linguistic usage: "Would you like me to help you?" the psychotherapist says to the child "playing" at being tested, directly followed by a mother saying to the same therapist: "It doesn't matter where, I'd like her . . ." Four or five conversational situations are spliced together to form one conventional dialogue, on the subject, for example, of how a bank clerk learns to pacify an angry customer by deliberately ignoring his question and countering it with a question of his own. Or similarly: a montage of midwife training films in which different students practice a simulated birth on an artificial womb addressed as "Frau Müller." There is the incessant repetition of conversational fragments from similar practice session scenes, following one another in rapid succession. The attention to and minimizing of the bank customer's complaint corresponds inversely to the strategic training of insurance agents, targeted at alarming the client. All this produces a dramatic back-and-forth—the rhythm of product testing has roughly the same beat; a short film on objects and sounds that are subjected to the stress-test of phantoms simulating humans in the torture chamber of product testing. The thematic montages combine disparate situations: etiquette classes, diet classes, and therapeutic play-acting for anorexics, for example, are connected to a social welfare agency where the homeless learn how to cook. A sequence of door images represents arrivals on the scene. Two scenes are coupled involving people off camera. One is from a police training film, in which a policeman has led a

man playing a troublemaker out of view, and the other is a landscape shot of a training ground where two soldiers converse off camera in a “directed dialogue” before walking into the scene with an anti-tank gun. The “war game” at the end of this segment is set to music to which a striptease act is then rehearsed down to the tiniest detail.

The particles of reality of which “Leben BRD” is composed offer a simulated life. The sections are connected as in a feature film. Johannes Beringer has noted the stylistic affinity of this film to Walter Benjamin’s plan to write a book consisting entirely of quotes from foreign languages. The “image of the present” that “Leben BRD” assembles offers a rediscovery of the concept of “factography” (according to Sergei Tretjakow), with an altered meaning: not as a rolling text in which relationships are ordered contextually by function, but as a form of synchronous compression, a visual as well as conceptual denseness surrounding a phenomenon that is rewritten visually in order that it might be seen.

It cannot be determined which of the ideas imparted in Farocki’s films were already there from the beginning, what descriptive quality they might have possessed, or which visual associations they already carried and which originated on the cutting table. In terms of his documentary work, particularly those films in which individual work processes are recorded and compressed—“Ein Bild” (“An Image”) (1983); “Image und Umsatz oder Wie kann man einen Schuh herstellen” (Image and Returns or How Can You Make a Shoe) (1989); “Die Schulung” (Schooling) (1987); and “Leben BRD” (1990)—the adage applies that one should “not think one’s way into the picture, but rather one’s way out of it.” One should not use thought to fashion the original material, but instead look at it until its form and rhythm is found. This method—which could also be termed *veracity* in film—is one that places Farocki outside the mainstream of contemporary documentaries. Compared to them, he is not really a documentary filmmaker at all—which can be seen from his rejection of the standard forms of documentary groundwork and research. This is particularly clear in his opposition to the rejection of autonomy of form and artistic presentation. In his films, Farocki demonstrates a creative counter-position to that rejection of form which, analogous to a dogmatically scientific mind-set, is also driven by a seemingly purist documentary method, a form demanding that every content be indifferent to its representation, which should be conventional and not dictated by the subject matter (see T. W. Adorno: “The Essay as Form,” 1954-58). The fact that he is not

actually a documentary filmmaker links him to the films of Peter Nestler, whose stringent imagery, derived from a close look at production methods and living conditions, Harun Farocki quoted in his film “Zwischen zwei Kriegen” (“Between Two Wars”) (1971-77).

Farocki’s films make their operative means visible in portrayal; they are self-reflective. There is no thought that, in its forward or backward movement, has not been tested; no sequence of ideas that doesn’t follow some rule of composition and rhythm—a rhythm that has prescribed what the film will become. The valence that words possess in a grammatical system—an ordering of accumulation—is comparable to the valence of chemical elements that determines a compound’s balance, but not its form. Replace the word or element with an image, and the composition the author creates takes on its own meaning, which may change. The coupling process is decisive, a mental leap in a certain direction executed by an invisible linking. Farocki speaks of an “irregular web made up of the most diverse found objects,” within which is revealed a thinking oriented to an object introduced and set in perpetual motion, now disappearing, now reformed, now confronted—film as paraphrase, a paraphrastic technique of transposition. A “boldness, anticipation, of each essayistic detail” (T.W. Adorno) clearly emerges in the films “Wie man sieht” (“As You See”) (1986), and “Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges” (“Images of the World and Inscriptions of War”) (1988), Farocki’s two explicit film-essays. In them, historical excursions and investigations into and the examination of a given visual subject are mixed with actual footage to create a synchronous-diachronous web, a filmic structure that is closely related in its numerous openings and its main and side tracks, to the work of Alexander Kluge.

### **Film As a Form of Thought Following the Structure of an Idea**

Farocki’s handling of images—his reworking of images so that they become *new*—is an exemplary reading: an illuminating process of critique. The author captures his specimen and submits it to analysis. Placed in a new context, these visual specimens offer new perceptions, a new text, one could say, gained from a new message. Film as an essayistic exercise reveals itself here as thought constantly oscillating between viewing/visual analysis and a core scientific/epistemological interest. As early as 1983, with “Etwas wird sichtbar” (“Before Your Eyes”), Thomas



Elsässer wrote that Harun Farocki, in treating pictures as archeological finds, or as the evidence of phantoms and traumas, could win back for the work and for the image's materiality a critical intelligence. Whoever "speaks with images," as Farocki does, whoever organizes given images in such a way that they become new, whoever works between the images' levels of meanings, must struggle resolutely against the flood of excessively synthetic, stylized images and sounds. He must counter the delirium of a wealth of imagery with an extremely conscious, economical vigilance. "He must be selective and compile with care, to keep the passageways clear through which what is new can flow, so that the film may breathe. The ethical diet that Harun Farocki subjects his images and sounds to does not disavow his models (Bresson, Straub, Godard . . .) and yet achieves the status of fully accountable speech, an individual language." This according to Johannes Beringer.

In the stringent self-restraint of his films, Farocki approaches the film idiom of Jean-Marie Straub (in particular his "Nicht versöhnt"), Bresson and Dreyer. His choice of visual elements and their disengagement from a familiar context represents a method of historical reconstruction that is the opposite of the illusory depiction of history and recasting of time. The images of "Zwischen zwei Kriegen" (1971-77) offer the greatest contrast imaginable to the illusion of realistic set design; a recovery, the distillation of a learning stage; they witness to the realization that history cannot be reset. Hitler's speech to the Düsseldorf Industry Club, and the shiny radiator hood of a Horch limousine are to each other as a historical fact and its transference into symbol. The express references in Farocki's first long film ("Metropolis, Streik, Kuhle Wampe . . .") modify the significance of the narrative moments, giving them unique meaning: The suicide of the young unemployed man that Brecht and Dudow placed at the beginning of the film (as an initial tragedy which then makes way for the optimism inspired by the workers' movement of the last years of the Weimar Republic), is positioned at the end of Farocki's "Zwischen zwei Kriegen." It is the destruction of an entire class, represented by the chalk figure left behind on the asphalt of the rear courtyard. In the figure of the chalk outline that reveals that the furnace man has thrown himself from a window (it rains and the rain washes away the outline, turning it into a trickle of chalky water)—in these profoundly symbolic motifs a different historiography, a more materialistic counter-text to history, points to a "dignity of the nameless" (Hartmut Lange) that—as if underlying

civilization's memory for faces or names—speaks from effaced artifacts, transience, and forgotten billions of the anonymous.

"The philosophers ask: What is man? I ask: What is an image?" This line is spoken by a G.I. in "Etwas wird sichtbar" ("Before Your Eyes—Vietnam") (1982). And, accompanying the image of a worker looking through the viewfinder of his camera at a factory wall ("Zwischen zwei Kriegen"), this is heard: "I have begun to take pictures. One picture is too few, incidentally, you have to take two pictures of everything. Things move around so, and only by taking a minimum of two pictures can you at least fix the direction of the movement." The central theme of the film-essays is what occurs between the human eye, the feedback of its perceptions to the memory, and objectivity: the image between an occurrence and the viewing of it. In "Bilder der Welt . . ." every object and every event is seen at least twice; in this way the material provides direction and demonstrates a range of possible applications. One such application is the image's praxis, its context and utilitarian character and what, ultimately, jumps out as though an incidental result of the capturing of the pictures. Another is the image's symbolism, what it stands for, what it demonstrates, simulates, and how it misleads ("Wie man Sieht" and, above all, "Bilder der Welt" repeatedly return to the topos of elucidation in the form of military aerial reconnaissance).

The author addresses the objects of his investigations with a sense of loss that speaks from historical events and the conditions they have occasioned. These are basic cultural models that tell how industrial labor, the organization of work, and the evolution of the forces of production have transformed one another. Harun Farocki's objects are "aggregate states" of capitalism (Kreimeier), states of war and of crisis, of technological upheaval and anachronistic forms of production. What is demonstrated is the attempt by the forces of production to attain the level of the ruling forces, a compensation for handicaps (assimilative behavior and machine performance), and, even in the critique of the present, the will to become aware of a potentially "synchronous" familiarization with circumstances. "I would like most of all to bring time to a standstill, for events have an advantage over our understanding;" "Things disappear from view before they're even halfway understood," ("Zwischen zwei Kriegen"). In Farocki's films, decline appears inevitable, whereas the increasing flexibility and acquisitive power of the status quo concerning the motor processes of things and

human relations are revealed. In the age of automation, both a visual sense and human labor appear to be disappearing from history (the transition from analogue to digital systems in "Wie man sieht"), as the partisan disappears after a war of liberation, "like a dog from the autobahn."

"You have to be able to understand things as they happen, not later," says Anna, the protagonist of "Etwas wird sichtbar," speaking both of war and of herself.

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## BRESSON, A STYLIST

One can count the elements which form the basis for Bresson's cinematic style.

**No long shots.** Bresson almost never uses long shots and never in order to give an overview of something before the details have been examined. In *AU HASARD BALTHAZAR*, there is only one scene in which the entire village landscape where the action takes place can be seen, and in this instance only because the camera looks toward the sky where a storm is brewing. The camera looks to the sky only because the stingy farmer had just said that he would only keep his donkey until the rain came. In *LE DIABLE PROBABLEMENT*, the highway is visible only once and is filmed so that one can see neither the horizon nor the sky. There is nothing of the freedom and open space to which a highway normally leads in a film. There is, however, a long shot at the end of *LANCELOT DU LAC*. The camera makes a broad jump, far back from the action and one sees the kind of pitiful little forest in which the knights slaughter each other. The slaughter loses its existence and its importance as it acquires an edge and does not fill the space of the image. *LANCELOT* is a historical film, a costume film, and Bresson shows through this long shot the limited range which history has in the film. This use of long shots opposes its usual use—usually a long shot is used in a costume film to show how large the costumed and staged world is and that this world has no limits and also that the landscape is sought out and photographed in a way so that it is suited as a setting. This manner was often used in filming the mountains and deserts of the United States.

When Wim Wenders outlined a film in *FILMKRITIK*, which was to be made up entirely of long shots, he was concerned with the monstrosity of the long shot. With a long shot, one can hardly show more than the fact that a carriage moves—how it moves, with whom and where and what it is all supposed to mean—for that one needs closer shots. Godard often uses long shots to go against his own narrative and representational intentions. He creates something and then moves it into the distance of a long shot so that the how and where and what all that is supposed to mean is weakened.

**Bresson uses close ups.** In *LE DIABLE*, when Charles looks up to a window behind which his girlfriend is with a man, only a few meters of the hotel facade can be seen and not the entire airport terminal building. From this small segment, I (as a film tourist) was able to recognize the entire hotel in Paris. Charles doesn't care about how the cities are starting

to look today, he only sees the window behind which his girlfriend is with another man.

Bresson is entirely with his subjects and their work, their work or that which occupies them. One can't always say that city dwellers work, but they are occupied, their actions can be empty ones, but they are carried out with an even larger sense of naturalness. When a man loves a woman in Bresson's films, he simply pursues her as if performing a task, something often misunderstood as coldness. But whoever works or does some kind of work doesn't necessarily stop to look around while doing it. For that you need a nervousness and futility which doesn't exist here. When I saw Kurosawa's *UZALLA*, I noticed that this film about someone living in the nature of Sibiria had shots of landscape which were narrow. Since then, the panoramas showing the land of the American farmers and cowboys of the West has seemed touristy to me.

Bresson's actors can't even really look around when they are standing there. If they aren't looking at a particular point, then their heads are slightly bowed (a zero position, they don't let their gaze wander). When their hands aren't doing something, they are simply hanging at their sides (a zero position, they don't grasp mindlessly for things around them). The hands aren't completely open, the arms aren't completely extended, that would be something for soldiers.

A script by Bresson is full of notes like P.M. (plan moyen, medium shot) and G.P. (gros plan, close up). P.M. stands for shots which show a person from head to waist and for shots which show a group of people from head to toe with space around them. *LE DIABLE*, shot 64: Panoramique (pan, Bresson doesn't say anything about shot size here). Alberte climbs in triumph to Charles and Edwige and leaves. You could say this picture is a long shot, but one in which the total picture can be seen and only the total picture. Bresson frames his characters narrowly, he doesn't allow the camera that which we call autonomy. It would be as if you were writing literature in statements. This is an art: Bresson demands that every value appears as a statement. Through this grammatical metaphor, every scene, every object becomes a derivation. Paris becomes "Paris," or as in a mathematical interpretation, a cup becomes "a cup." And because his skill couldn't be used to its best advantage in *LANCELOT*, where the scene of costumes, props and constructions appeared as if it might begin to look too prepared, he used the contrast of the long shot of the forest.

**How the persons/characters face one another and how the camera records it.** Bresson's camera places itself between the characters, it almost stands on the axis of the action. The axis of the action is the name for the conceived line which runs between two characters who relate to one another. It refers to the procession or course of glances, words, gestures. This line is like a river in geography (and like a river in military strategy), an orientation and a frontier (here a "natural" one, even if the river is a rivulet). It is important on which side one has his point of view and one must change the term with the changing of sides. Because Bresson's camera stands nearly on this axis, the characters look a little bit past the camera. This little bit irritates: the camera shoots the character frontally—the character does not return the glance, but dodges the attack. The presence of the camera is clearly apparent and the glance of the character denies it. Now the counter shot comes, the image of the character standing opposite. The camera changes its point of view almost 180 degrees and again a character appears whose gaze evades the eye of the camera. This dodging conflicts with the composed firmness of Bresson's actors.

In short sequences, when the setting appears only once, the orientation is made more difficult, as in the beginning of *L'ARGENT* as Norbert asks his father for money. Here, both of them not only look past the camera, but also past one another. As far as I know, only Ozu has shot opposites in a similar manner, at least since talkies.

What we can do with shot/counter shot has been most completely explored in the classic American talkie (ca. 1930-60). In this system, a rule is enforced that a shot is all the more subjective when it comes from the line of vision of the opposite character. The close-up, from which the star should be recognized, is usually an en-face shot. The important actor steps into this ramp, only his eyes do not look into the camera, and affirms the continued context. Bresson adopted some of this concept.

Bresson did not adopt the contrasting of "subjective" and "objective." But Bresson does not withdraw from a character, only later to bring the character closer in an erratic way. He denies himself the whole rhetorical repertoire of variation. Usually the shot sizes change—perhaps not from shot to counter shot, but during the course of a sequence. For this reason one stages the movements of the characters in dialogue—someone goes farther away and a medium shot is created—someone comes closer and a medium close-up is created. Bresson does the opposite: when the characters

move he tries to keep the shot size constant through a pan or an accompanying camera. Once again, the camera is not given any autonomy. At the same time, the takes are missing a reason from the work of the articulation: from which angle and at which cut, that is a tenet for Bresson.

If Bresson cuts from one person to another, then the cut is like the support point on a scale. The operation of weighing makes the opposites equal, things which are fundamentally different become equivalents. Bresson often did this to the point of creating mirror images. In *BALTHASAR*, Gérard and Marie run around the donkey—Gérard, the pursuer, Marie, the quarry. The film dismantles this pattern and shows one person at a time behind the donkey, the opposite appraised and then in movement, so often that one does not know where the action began. (Before Marie gives up the protection of the donkey and falls into the grass, the image of Marie running around the donkey is assembled twice; the image of Gérard is missing, but the viewer is already too dizzy to perceive this effect). In *UNE FEMME DOUCE*, a man and a woman sit silently across from each other eating a meal. They are eating soup. Bresson cuts from the descending soup spoon of the one person to the rising soup spoon of the other. The movements of the spoons connect the man and the woman like the spokes of the wheels of a locomotive.

Shot/counter shot, that is an element in film language which is often criticized—Bresson criticizes it by using it even more intensely.

Bresson always liked cutting together surprising things, deriving movements from similarities and contexts. In *LANCELOT*, he cuts the folding down of visors one after another in ever-shorter intervals. (In other films, it would be something vulgar.) In *BALTHASAR*, when he cuts from the door which Marie closes to the window which she opens, it is fantastic. One can go through the door, one can see through the window. Marie looks only at Gérard who lures her—the film montage shows how the one relates to the other, or that the houses have eyes and feet. To show is not the correct word, Bresson includes the spoken word, without pausing or wandering.

In *LE DIABLE*, Michel and Alberte meet again and again in the small apartment, where Alberte has moved to be with Charles. Alberte sits down and Michel stands up, these two movements appear to be related, as if they were mechanical—scale, seesaw, machinery—connected to one another. Often the image of Michel is like a rhyme on the image of Alberte. Through these meetings or contrasts, Bresson works out a harmony or unison between the two.

Later they embrace in a narrow shot, they stand next to a tree, behind them the wheels of the Paris street traffic, they have the large space for themselves.

**The shots of objects and the shots of actions.** Continuously looking at the importance of speaking people (with words and with facial gestures) is unbearable, even if the camera is placed before the most elaborate thing. Before Bresson shows a close-up of a face, he shows the close-up of a hand. With passion, he cuts off the head and with that the face, and concentrates on the actions of the head (or the foot).

In *UN CONDAMNÉ À MORT S'EST ÉCHAPPÉ*, there is a prisoner who makes materials for escape out of things in his cell. He sharpens a spoon handle into a tool, he breaks up the wire netting of his bed frame and wraps the netting with shirts and rags to make a cable. Such a film about work and what work means has hardly ever been made before.

“Tools and machines are not only signs of imagination and creative capabilities of human beings, they are certainly not only important as instruments for transforming and bending the earth to man’s will: they are inherently symbolic. They symbolize the activities they make possible, which means their own use. An oar is a tool for rowing and it represents the capability of the rower in all its complexity. Someone who has never rowed before cannot see an oar for what it really is. The way in which someone who has never seen a violin views that instrument is different from the perception of a violinist. A tool is always a model for its own reproduction and an instruction for the renewed application of the capabilities which it symbolizes. In this context, it is an educational instrument, a medium, for teaching people in other countries, who live at another level of development, the culturally-acquired methods of thinking and acting. The tool as a symbol in every way transcends its role as a practical means for a definitive end: it is constitutive for the symbolic remaking of the world through human beings” (Weizenbaum).

Bresson made two black and white films in the countryside. *MOUCHETTE* and *BALTHAZAR*—here this symbolic power is evident. A moped is as incredible as a donkey. Bresson does shots of objects and actions with a slight top plan view from the place which corresponds to the object and the action. There is no derivation in the sense that the camera comes out of the eye level of the standing viewer/participant and, as with the low positioned camera of Ozu, apparently from the seated Japanese.

It says something about Bresson’s courage that he went into the city and shot in color. Color is less a tone of humility

than black and white. In his images, Bresson attempts a clarity without reaching for the manifest remedies, contrast and space. (He often chooses one color and a 50 mm lens.)

Bresson's city dwellers, often idlers, bohemians, cannot dive into the stream of the history of human work. They try by their actions: stealing something, giving something, taking themselves by the hand, making dinner, making tea, touching a revolver, killing someone with a hatchet—nevertheless, a “symbolic remaking of the world through human beings.” They become the acolytes of their own lives.

In *L'ARGENT*, Yvon is accused by a waiter of circulating counterfeit money. He doesn't want to let the waiter confiscate the money, so he grabs the waiter and pushes him away. We see his hand grabbing the waiter and pushing him away. While the sound of the waiter falling against a table is heard, Yvon's hand pauses. It shakes from the strain. A hand, as if it had just thrown a pair of dice. Dice are an image of fate as well as of killing time.

**Harun Farocki**  
**Filmkritik, 1984**

# RETROSPECTIVE HARUN FAROCKI IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA FALL/WINTER 1991-1992

	<b>PARTNERS</b>	<b>DATES</b>	<b>INFORMATION</b>
Goethe Institute Boston	Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston U. of Massachusetts, Amherst	November 1-5	617/262-6050
Goethe House New York	Anthology Film Archives FILM FORUM I Hallwalls Center for Contemporary Art, Buffalo	November 7-14	212/439-8700
Goethe Institute Toronto	Cinematheque Ontario, Toronto	November 15-19	416/924-3327
Goethe Institute Vancouver	Pacific Cinematheque	January 17-25, 1992	604/732-3966
Goethe Institute San Francisco	Pacific Film Archive	January 27 to February 1	415/391-0370
Goethe Institute Los Angeles	Film Forum California Institute of the Arts Beyond Baroque	February 3-8	213/854-0993
Goethe Institute Chicago	Chicago Filmmakers	February	312/329-0915
Goethe Institute Montreal	Cinémaèque Québécoise	March	514/499-0159
Goethe Institute Atlanta	in house	March	404/892-2388
Goethe Institute Houston	Rice Media Center	April 6-11	713/528-2787