

How to Open Your Eyes

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Translated from French by Patrick Kremer

- 1 Archive Harun Farocki Filmproduktion
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Certainly, there exists no image that does not simultaneously implicate gazes, gestures and thoughts. Depending on the situation, the gazes may be blind or piercing, the gestures brutal or delicate, the thoughts inept or sublime. But there is no such thing as an image that is pure vision, absolute thought or simple manipulation. It is especially absurd to try to disqualify certain images on the grounds that they have supposedly been 'manipulated'. All images of the world are the result of a manipulation, of a concerted effort in which the hand of man intervenes – even if it is a mechanical device. Only theologians dream of images which were not made by the hand of man (the *acheiropoietic* images from the Byzantine tradition, Meister Eckhardt's *ymagine denudari* etc.). The question is rather how to ascertain, each and every time – in each image – what exactly the hand has done, in which way and to which purpose the manipulation took place. We use our hands for better or for worse, we strike or stroke, build or break, give or take. We should, in front of each image, ask ourselves the question of how it gazes (at us), how it thinks (us) and how it touches (us) at the same time.

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A photograph, certainly taken by one of his friends, shows Harun Farocki in spring 1981 in front of the Arsenal film theatre in West-Berlin, which was running a programme of films organised by *Filmkritik*, the journal he edited as part of a collective. Sitting on a gate, the stern-faced filmmaker raises his fist towards us spectators – like a demonstrator, albeit a rather strange one: a solitary demonstrator.¹

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Lifting one's thought to the level of anger (the anger provoked by all the violence in the world, this violence to which we refuse to be condemned). Lifting one's anger to the level of a task (the task of denouncing this violence with as much calm and intelligence as possible).

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Harun Farocki was part of the first graduate class of the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie in Berlin in 1966. He was expelled from the film school as early as 1969 because of his political activism along with his companions Hartmut Bitomsky, Wolfgang Petersen, Günther Peter Straschek and Holger Meins. His early student films, as Tilman Baumgärtel has so aptly put it, proceeded from a 'guerrilla' thinking which was fuelled by political anger and borrowed its formal devices from Situationism, the French New Wave and Direct Cinema.² Farocki was making very harsh judgments on the most prominent directors of "Young German Cinema" of that time – Wim Wenders, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff – whom he accused, and would continue to be accusing for a long time, of "conforming to the idea everybody had of what a film was supposed to

¹ See Tilman Baumgärtel, *Vom Guerillafikino zum Essayfilm: Harun Farocki Werkmonographie eines Autorenfilmers*, Berlin 2002, p. 203.

² See *ibid.*, pp. 25-103, and Tilman Baumgärtel, "Bildnis des Künstlers als junger Mann. Kulturrevolution, Situationismus und Focus-Theorie in den Studentenfilmen von Harun Farocki", in Rolf Aurich and Ulrich Kriest (eds.), *Der Ärger mit den Bildern. Die Filme von Harun Farocki*, Konstanz 1998, pp. 155-177. See also Klaus Kreimeier, "Papier-Schere-Stein. Farockis frühe Filme", *ibid.*, pp. 27-45.



Unfortunately the photo with the raised fist is missing, presumed lost. [Editor's note].

be", notably in their editing or by their habit of resorting to the canonised forms of, for instance, the shot-countershot.³

In 1967, Holger Meins had been the cameraman on Farocki's film *Die Worte des Vorsitzenden* (The Words of the Chairman), who in turn noted that "Holger Meins' work at the editing table consisted of examining the shots so as to form his own judgement".⁴ Shortly afterwards, Holger Meins disappeared into the underground, was arrested on 1 June 1972 together with Andreas Baader and Jan-Carl Raspe, was convicted of terrorism, and died on 9 November 1974 in Wittlich prison on the 58th day of his third hunger strike, which he had begun in order to protest against the conditions of his imprisonment. Farocki, like everyone else, was to discover the photograph of his dead body in the press – the image of an emaciated body, incised from the autopsy and sutured for whatever 'good public occasion' presents itself. An image itself incised, divided and dividing Farocki's gaze: between its status as a horrific "police trophy" – a state image which was deliberately *without duration* and which, according to Farocki, seemed to say: "Look, we didn't kill him, he did it himself, and it was outside our power to prevent it" – and as a 'figure of Passion inscribed' nonetheless in the image as time endured, the *time suffered* by this poor body.⁵

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³ Harun Farocki, "La diva aux lunettes", in *Trafic*, no. 55/2005, p. 62.

⁴ Harun Farocki, "Risquer sa vie. Images de Holger Meins" (1998), in Christina Blümlinger (ed.), *Reconnaître et poursuivre*, Courbevoie 2002, p. 29. ("Risking his Life. Images of Holger Meins", in: Harun Farocki, *Nachdruck/Imprint*, ed. by Susanne Gaensheimer, Nicolaus Schafhausen, New York/Berlin 2001, p. 288).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22. (p. 270).

⁶ Hanns Zischler, "Travailler avec Harun" (1998), in *Trafic*, no. 43/2002, p. 27.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Un étrange réaliste: Siegfried Kracauer" (1964), in *Notes sur la littérature*, Paris 1984 (ed. 2009), p. 267. (Theodor W. Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer", in *New German Critique*, no. 54/1991).

Lifting, therefore, one's thought of the image to the anger provoked by time endured, the time suffered by human beings in order to determine their own history.

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So one had to take a stance. To intervene. Some of the photographs from that time show Harun Farocki with placards or megaphones in public spaces. All the while he was paying close attention to the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Luc Godard. In 1976 he staged two plays by Heiner Müller, *The Battle* and *Tractor*, together with Hanns Zischler. "Working with Harun", Zischler later wrote, "is both a trying and stimulating endeavour. He obstinately, and seemingly without hesitation, maintains the primacy of the profound impression over immediate success. A patient insistence on duration, an anti-nihilist perspective and a materialist impulse determine the ethic and the aesthetic of his work. There are beautiful moments where the flow of his thoughts inadvertently stops because something new, something strange, the uncanny part of that which is familiar, has suddenly crossed his path. We then witness him wondering aloud, and this is when the *interlocutor* we always dreamed of reveals himself."⁶ These words remind me of what Adorno said somewhere about Siegfried Kracauer, this 'curious realist': "He thinks with an eye that is astonished almost to helplessness but then suddenly flashes into illumination."⁷

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Taking a stance in the public realm – even if it means intervening on one's own body and *suffering for some time*. Such is the strategic pivot which, in 1969, the film *Nicht löschesbares Feuer* (Inextinguishable Fire) represents in Farocki's entire oeuvre. A film for which the artist still claims full responsibility, showing it, for instance, alongside his most recent installations in his exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris a few weeks ago, that is thirty years later.⁸ *Inextinguishable Fire* is a film that combines action, passion and thought. A film organised around a surprising gesture: Farocki's fist is no longer raised at us in a sign of rallying (taking sides), but rests on a table in a neutral and calm room, is not at all acquiescent in its anger provoked by time endured. It adopts this position because it forms part of a well thought-out choreography, a carefully elaborated dialectic. Firstly, Farocki reads out aloud a testimony deposited by Thai Binh Dan, born in 1949, to the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm: "While washing dishes on March 31st 1966, at 7 pm, I heard planes approaching. I rushed to the underground shelter, but I was surprised by an exploding napalm bomb very close to me. The flames and unbearable heat engulfed me and I lost consciousness. Napalm burned my face, both arms and both legs. My house was burned as well. For 13 days I was unconscious, then I awoke in a bed in an FLN hospital."⁹

Secondly, Farocki, in the manner of the best philosophers, presents us with an *aporia for thought*, or to be more precise, an *aporia for the thought of the image*. He addresses us, looking straight into the camera: "How can we show you napalm in action? And how can we show you the damage caused by napalm? If we show you pictures of napalm damage, you'll close your eyes. First you'll close your eyes to the pictures; then you'll close your eyes to the memory; then you'll close your eyes to the facts; then you'll close your eyes to the connections between them. If we show you a person with napalm burns, we'll hurt your feelings. If we hurt your feelings, you'll feel as if we've tried out napalm on you, at your expense. We can give you only a weak demonstration of how napalm works."¹⁰

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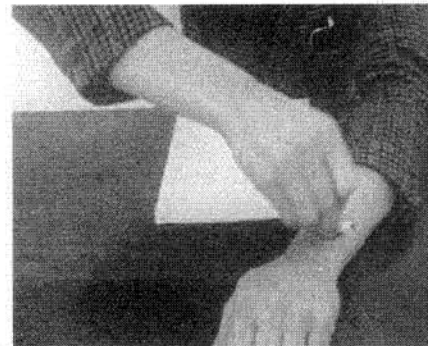
Let us halt the speech and briefly reflect on the *aporia*, which is here articulated as three conjoined problems. An aesthetic problem: Farocki wants to address his spectator's 'feelings', and wants to respect them. A political problem: a few seconds later, the sensory tactfulness turns into a linguistic punch as Farocki brutally questions that same spectator's 'responsibility'. 'If viewers', he says, 'want no responsibility for napalm's effects, what responsibility will they take for the explanations of its use?'¹¹ (A reasoning which, incidentally, is inspired by Bertolt Brecht). So you don't want responsibility? Then it is also a problem of knowledge [*connaissance*], of misknowledge [*méconnaissance*], and of

⁸ See Chantal Pontbriand (ed.), *HF/RG: Harun Farocki/Rodney Graham*, Paris 2009, p. 200.

⁹ Harun Farocki, "Feu inextinguible" (1969), in Blümlinger (ed.) 2002, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.



acknowledgement [*reconnaissance*]. But how to invest someone with knowledge who refuses to know? *How to open your eyes?* How to disarm their defences, their protections, their stereotypes, their ill will, their ostrich politics? It is with this question constantly in mind that Farocki considers the problem of his entire film. It is with this question in mind that his gaze returns to the camera lens, and this is when he starts to take action.

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Thirdly, then, as can be read in the scenario of *Inextinguishable Fire*: "DOLLY IN to Farocki's left hand resting on the table. With his right hand he reaches off-screen for a burning cigarette and then presses it into the back of his left arm, midway between the wrist and elbow (3.5 seconds). Off-screen narrator: *A cigarette burns at 400 degrees. Napalm burns at 3,000 degrees.*"¹²

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Let us halt the image and not forget that this simple *crying point* – just as one refers to the 'crying truth' – this point of pain, of burnt skin, recalls other images that emerged at the time: the Vietnamese who immolated themselves and more recently still, Jan Palach burning on Wenceslas Square in Prague on 16 January 1969. Palach died from his terrible burns a mere three days later. I recently listened again to the only radio interview he managed to give, in a broken voice, from his hospital bed. What is deeply moving is that, as an example of *civil freedom*, in the name of which he has just suffered the worst ordeal, he spontaneously cites the *freedom of information*. He basically says that it is preferable to immolate oneself than to live deprived of the world, cut off from the necessary 'images of the world'. He addresses the world in these terms: 'Can't you see that we're burning?', referring to the hell of totalitarianism, and turning this very address into an image to be transmitted.¹³ It was to commemorate the anniversary of his death that large demonstrations were organised in Prague 20 years later; and it was for trying to lay a wreath on his grave that Vaclav Havel was arrested on 16 February 1989 and subsequently sentenced to nine months' imprisonment. A few months before the dictatorship collapsed.

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Lifting one's thought to anger. Lifting one's anger to the point of burning oneself. In order to better, to calmly denounce the violence of the world.

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German and French use a similar expression – *seine Hand ins Feuer legen; mettre sa main au feu*, literally 'putting one's hand in the fire' – to signify a moral or political engagement, one's responsibility when faced with truthful content. As

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹³ See Georges Didi-Huberman, "L'image brûle" (2004), in Laurent Zimmermann (ed.), *Penser par les images. Autour des travaux de Georges Didi-Huberman*, Nantes 2006, pp. 11-52.

though it had become necessary, in our current historic conditions, to truly dare 'to put (*legen*) one's hand in the fire' in order to better understand, to better read (*lesen*) this world from which we are suffering – which we must state, repeat, claim to be suffering from – yet which we refuse to suffer (*leiden*).

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Inextinguishable Fire had far fewer spectators in 1969 than in 2009, in the beautiful white exhibition spaces at the Jeu de Paume. Historic and political places – the Jeu de Paume, with its revolutionary past, provides a near-perfect example for this – quite often turn into places of cultural consumption. Why not – provided one remains attentive to an obvious misunderstanding: it is easier to watch *Inextinguishable Fire* today, in the context of a pacified history of art, than in the context of the burning political history in which this film effectively wanted to intervene. In the appeasement of the white cube, you are therefore less likely to think of the *barbaric acts* committed in Vietnam (occasioning cause) than of the artistic actions (formal causes) which were notoriously fertile during the 1950s, 60s and 70s; those years of 'performances' for which the aptly titled American exhibition *Out of Actions* attempted to provide a historic snapshot.¹⁴ Luckily, Farocki was not part of that picture. But what would an art historian spontaneously think of when confronted with *Inextinguishable Fire*? He would certainly think of the Viennese Actionists on the one hand and of Chris Burden's famous *Shoot* on the other. But this would merely obscure the very simple – yet very dialectical – lesson of this film.

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So let us compare. When, in 1971, Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm with a rifle, he remained, at least to my knowledge, quiet throughout his gesture. A famous photograph shows him standing upright but dazed from the shock, with two holes in his arm, from which flows a trickle of blood.¹⁵ His 'action' was only ever discussed in reference to subsequent or preceding 'artworks', for instance, Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs* or Gina Pane's *Corps pressenti*.¹⁶ Chris Burden himself later referred to the gun shot as a minimalist sculpture (in this sense, his 'sculpture' is the distant heir of the 'wall shot' by Marcel Duchamp in 1942 for the cover of the *First Papers of Surrealism*, the date of that work itself implying a historical allusion, at a time when there was a lot of shooting in Europe): "Suddenly, a guy pulls a trigger and, in a fraction of a second, I'd made a sculpture."¹⁷ The cigarette burn on Harun Farocki's arm in 1969 is quite different from the wound on Chris Burden's arm in 1971. Burden's injury was conceived as an artwork, and this artwork takes place – and ends – when the bullet is fired. It is therefore a means unto itself, an aesthetic means. Farocki's burn, on the contrary, is merely a means at the beginning of a film that will last another 20 minutes (which is the time it effectively takes to understand the terrifying *economy of napalm* in place throughout the world). Because his wound was an

¹⁴ Paul Schimmel (ed.), *Out of Actions. Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, London/Los Angeles 1998.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁶ See Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *L'Ordre sauvage. Violence, dépense et sacré dans l'art des années 1950-1960*, Paris 2004, p. 304.

¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 375-376. (Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the century*, New York 1996).

absolute means, Burden logically had no commentary to offer: there was no need of language since it was the rifle that had spoken (had shot) and it was the body that was speaking (was bleeding). Farocki's burn, on the contrary, calls for an appraisal within the language and, more so, a minimisation or an experimental relativisation (hence the opposite of a 'heroisation of the artist'): "A cigarette burns at 400 degrees, napalm burns at 3,000 degrees."

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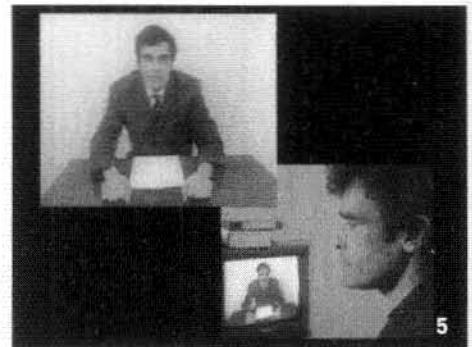
To compare – this is precisely what Harun Farocki had in mind with this self-inflicted burn. It seems to me that his gesture was not so much a 'metaphor', as Thomas Elsaesser¹⁸ puts it, than a choreography of dialectical comparison. Or even a metonymy, if one considers this punctual wound as a single *pixel* of what Jan Palach had to suffer in his entire body. It was, in any case, a carefully considered historic argument, which used real heat, at 400 or 3,000 degrees, as its pivotal point. The burning mark was not an *ultimate point* or its weakened metaphor, but a *relative point*, a point of comparison: "When he's done speaking, the author (this is how, in 1995, Farocki referred to himself in his installation *Schnittstelle/Interface*, 1996) burns himself, although only on a single point of skin. Even here, only a point of relation to the actual world."

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Harun Farocki was born in 1944, in a time when the world at large was still threatened by an unprecedented fury of political and military violence. It is as though not only the ashes of the bombed cities had landed directly on his cradle, but also the thoughts written at the same time, though at the other end of the world, by a few exiled Germans, among whom, from within their own *suffered time* (their dirty lives of exiles, their 'mutilated life'), thought had been able to lift itself to the level of political anger – as though they had been offered him for his entire life. I think of Bertolt Brecht, of course, and his *Arbeitsjournal*, in which nearly every single page reflects upon the question of the politics of the image.¹⁹ But I also think of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* composed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer during their American exile. Those are indeed two words dear to Farocki – *Dialektik* describing most accurately his own method of working, of editing, and *Aufklärung* signifying both the 'light' of enlightenment and the most menacing 'reconnaissance' activity of planes, as in those wars replete with cameras, which the filmmaker has questioned in several of his films, among which *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and the Inscription of War, 1988) or in installations such as *Auge/Maschine* (Eye/Machine, 2000). The two authors of this famous work – written in 1944 – certainly did not represent what Brecht appreciated most during his stay in the United States. For although Brecht discussed theatre and cinema with Adorno, listened to Hanns Eisler's records at home, took pleasure in shocking everyone by criticising Schönberg, and attended, among others in June and August 1942,

¹⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, "Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist", in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines*, Amsterdam 2004, pp. 17-18.

¹⁹ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L'œil de l'histoire*, 1, Paris 2009.



the seminar in exile of the Frankfurt Institute²⁰, he compared Horkheimer to a “clown” and a “millionaire [who] can afford to buy himself a professorship wherever he happens to be staying.”²¹ Still. Something fundamental nevertheless links all these great anti-fascists who paid dearly for their freedom of thought. It is precisely that which links the *Dialektik*, this word that speaks of negation, of truth, of history and *Aufklärung*, the light of enlightenment whose historic work of self-reversal and of self-destruction they had all observed with their own eyes, filled with anguish – an inextinguishable burning of oneself. It would thus seem even more accurate to describe this something as the *possibility of the worst* to which our most precious values – the light of enlightenment, the ideal of community, the truth of words, the accuracy of images – are constantly exposed.

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All things kept in perspective, Harun Farocki could thus be said to share with Adorno and Horkheimer the fundamental questioning that aims to understand “the self-destruction of enlightenment” right up to “the power by which the technology is controlled”, as stated in the very first pages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.²² Why does “the fully enlightened earth radiate[s] disaster triumphant”?²³ Why is it that “knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters”?²⁴ These are recurring questions in the work of many thinkers, such as Aby Warburg and Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Gideon, Hannah Arendt and Günther Anders, but also Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault, Guy Debord or Giorgio Agamben, Friedrich Kittler or Vilém Flusser, Jean Baudrillard or Paul Virilio; they are common questions, except that Farocki tackles them from the vantage point of specific and intensive observation: all these phenomena of self-destruction today – today admittedly as much as yesterday, yet today more than ever – involve a certain work on images.

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Thus, when Adorno and Horkheimer note that “abstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation [so that] the liberated finally themselves become the ‘herd’ (*Trupp*), which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment”²⁵, Farocki would presumably add that today the *treatment of images* in the social sphere in its widest possible understanding – from military aviation to urban traffic management, from the penitentiary to the shopping mall – commands both this abstraction and the liquidation of peoples into ‘herds’. The astonishing montage which, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, saw a chapter on the ‘Culture Industry’ (*Kulturindustrie*) followed by an exploration of the foundations of anti-Semitism²⁶, is today echoed by Farocki’s obsessive questioning of their very articulation, whether in *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* or in *Aufschub* (Respite, 2007).

²⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Journal de travail* (1938-1955), Paris 1976, p. 265 (27 March 1942), p. 276 (24 April 1942), p. 282 (9 May 1942), and p. 313 (13 August 1942).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201 (August 1941). (Quoted in Richard Wolin, *The Frankfurt School Revisited and Other Essays on Politics and Society*, London 2006).

²² Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *La Dialectique de la Raison. Fragments philosophiques* [1944], Paris 1974 (ed. 1983), pp. 15 and 19. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, Palo Alto 2002).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-176 and pp. 177-215.

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In the same way that certain philosophers want to maintain their thought at the level of a *critical theory* that deserves its name – we should remember that Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin had a common project, a magazine called *Krisis und Kritik*, and that Harun Farocki was an editor of *Filmkritik* from 1974 to 1984 – certain filmmakers have tried to maintain their practice at the level of what could be called a *critical montage* of images: a montage of thought accelerated to the rhythm of anger in order to better, to calmly denounce the violence of the world.

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This is an arduous task and, to be precise, a dialectical one. The *critique of enlightenment* cannot dispense with the use of *critical enlightenment*, as demonstrated, for instance, by the work of Theodor Adorno over its long course (one could, on the other hand, call nihilists, or 'cynics' in the modern understanding of the word, those who indulge in the laziness or 'luxury' of abandoning enlightenment altogether to those who use it for totalitarian purposes; the fact is that you should never surrender the slightest morsel of the common good to the political enemy, as Victor Klemperer²⁷ no doubt knew when he refused to surrender so much as a single word of the German language to Goebbels). Similarly, a *critique of images* cannot dispense with the use, practice and production of *critical images*. Images, no matter how terrible the violence that instrumentalises them, are not entirely on the side of the enemy. From this point of view, Harun Farocki constructs other images which, by countering enemy images, are destined to become part of the common good.

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Like Aby Warburg who, throughout his life, was obsessed with the dialectic of what he called the *monstra* and *astra* – a dialectic which, according to him, enshrined the entire 'tragedy of culture' – and like Theodor Adorno, who was constantly worried about the dialectic of self-destructing reason, Harun Farocki is relentlessly asking a terrible question (the same question, dare I say, which has spurred my work 'forever', as one so inadequately says, and which, in any case, provides me with the sensation of true *recognition* when facing the filmmaker's montages). The question is the following: why, in which way, and how does the *production of images* take part in the *destruction of human beings*?

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²⁷ Victor Klemperer was a theorist and author, renowned for his 1945 book *LTI - Lingua Tertii Imperii*. (The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist's Notebook, London 2005). [Editor's note].

First of all there are *images that dispense with the very human beings* they were intended to represent: "Just as mechanical robots initially took workers in the factory as their model, shortly afterwards surpassing and displacing them, so the sensory devices are meant to replace the work of the human eye. Beginning with

my first work on this topic (*Eye/Machine*, 2001), I have called such images that are not made to entertain or to inform, 'operative images'. Images that do not try to represent reality but are part of a technical operation."²⁸ But the 'dialectic of enlightenment' is more devious still, since the development of sophisticated technology is likely to go hand in hand with, for instance, the most brutal forms of human indignity. Farocki notes in this respect that when "the Nazis took the first jet-propelled plane and remote-controlled weapons into the air, when they miniaturised the electronic camera so that it could be built into the head of a rocket, there was more slave labour in Central Europe than ever before. And it is incredible to watch films from Peenemünde, the base of the V2 and other rockets: the high-powered weapons being rolled on hand wagons ..."²⁹

Then there are *images for destroying human beings*: images whose technical nature derives from their immediate connection – generally for reasons of 'reconnaissance' (*Aufklärung*) and guiding – to armamentation. "In 1991", writes Farocki, "there were two kinds of shots from the war of the Coalition Forces against Iraq that were something new, that belonged to a visual category of their own. The first shows a section of land, taken from a camera in a helicopter, an airplane or a drone – the name for unmanned light aircraft used for aerial reconnaissance. Crossing the centre of the image are the lines marking the target. The projectile hits, the detonation overloads the contrast range, the automatic fade counteracts it; the image breaks off. The second shot comes from a camera installed in the head of a projectile. This camera crashes into its target – and here as well, of course, the image breaks off. [...] The shots taken from a camera that crashes into its target, that is, from a suicide camera, cling to the memory. They were new and added something to the image that we may have heard about since the cruise missiles in the 1980s, but didn't know anything specific about. They appeared together with the word 'intelligent weapons'."³⁰

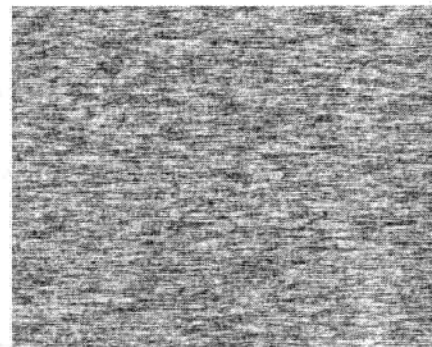
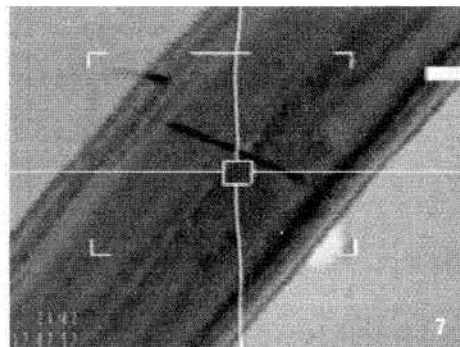
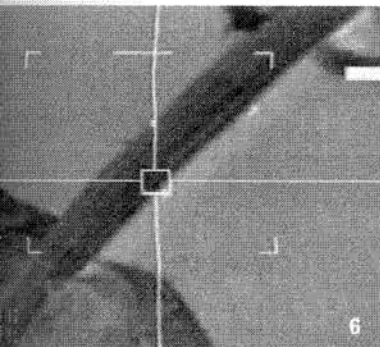
Needless to recall that these images, as beautiful as video games, were offered to the fascination of all while, at the same time, photo-journalists from all over the world were strictly kept away from the battle fields by the US Army, which meant that these *images of technical processes*, divided into squares by the viewfinder and saturated with explosions, these abstract and perfectly 'contemporary' images took the place of the *images of results* which a journalist could have – should have – brought back from the ruins caused by all these 'surgical strikes' (and those images would not in the least have seemed 'new', since nothing looks more like a burnt corpse than another burnt corpse). Farocki, in any case, asserts that, the "operative war images from the 1991 Gulf War, which didn't show any people, were more than just propaganda, despite rigid censorship, meant to hush up the 20,000 deaths of the war. They came from the spirit of a war utopia, which takes no account of people, which puts up with them only as approved, or perhaps even unapproved, victims. A military spokesman in 1991 said, when asked about the victims on the Iraqi side: 'We don't do body counts'. This can be translated as: 'We are not the gravediggers. This dirty work has to be done by other people.'"³¹

²⁸ Harun Farocki, "Le point de vue de la guerre" [2003], *Trafic*, no. 50/2004, p. 449. (Reprinted in Pontbriand 2009, pp. 90-101).

²⁹ Harun Farocki, "Influences transversales" (2002), in *Trafic*, no. 43/2002, p. 20. (Reprinted in *Harun Farocki: One Image Doesn't Take the Place of the Previous One*, ed. by Michèle Thériault, Montreal 2008, pp. 147-153).

³⁰ Farocki [2003], 2004, p. 445.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 451.



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There are also operative images simply destined to monitor human beings, often under the pretext – accepted, if not applauded by a substantial part of our frightened societies – of *keeping them from destroying themselves*. This is, to a certain extent, the reverse side of the automation of work which Farocki addressed in *Eye/Machine*: it can be seen operating in *Counter-Music*, in 2004, which no longer tries to demonstrate the economy of a chemical product such as napalm, but the economy of transportation, of passages and flows of populations in any given modern city.³² Christa Blümlinger has rightly pointed out the presence in Farocki's work of this "fundamental reflection on the control society"³³, which reaches its critical climax in the film *Gefängnisbilder*, in 2000, followed the same year by its 'installed' version entitled *Ich glaubte Gefangene zu sehen* (which translates as *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, the near-perfect quotation of Ingrid Bergman's reaction in Roberto Rossellini's film *Europe 51* when she sees factory workers).

Even to those who have not read Michel Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's fundamental texts on the 'control societies' – not to forget the stories by William S. Burroughs or Philip K. Dick – the papers nearly every morning declare that surveillance devices, far from preventing the destruction of human beings, mainly provide them with a new, even more spectacular, existence. While surveillance certainly produces "an abstract existence like the Fordist factory produced abstract work", as Farocki once wrote, the word *abstract* must here be considered in the precise understanding it was given by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, when they wrote that "abstraction, the instrument of enlightenment, stands [...] to its objects [...] as liquidation"³⁴. To convince oneself of this, it suffices to watch again, in *Gefängnisbilder* (Prison Images, 2000), this chilling moment where the camera has detected a fight in the prison yard, and the gun that is *linked* to it – for such is the complete device: to monitor *and* to destroy – fires a shot at one of the two prisoners without a warning.³⁵

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"In the first months of 1999, I was travelling to prisons in the United States to organise images produced by surveillance cameras. It's a type of image which is still hardly theorised. Most prisons in the United States lie far away from cities, and there's only a parking lot in front of them, nothing else that would suggest any kind of urban planning to create a public space. Instead of travelling to the prison, some federal states grant visitors the option to communicate with inmates from home via a kind of TV telephone. In California and Oregon I went to prisons which had been built in largely uninhabited areas, which reminds one that some time ago prisoners were sent to the colonies. [...] My prison visits were a terrifying experience. One prison director in California, who had been trained as a priest, told me that the former governor was of Armenian origin and

³² See Crista Blümlinger, "Mémoire du travail et travail de la mémoire – Vertov/Farocki (à propos de l'installation *Contre-Chant*)", in *Intermédialités. Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, no. 11, 2008, pp. 53-68. (In this book, pp. 101-110).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53. (p. 102).

³⁴ Horkheimer, Adorno [1944], 1983, p. 30.

³⁵ Harun Farocki, "Controlling Observation" [1999], in *CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. by Thomas Levin, Karlsruhe/Cambridge 2002, pp. 102-107, see also pp. 422-425.

therefore did not tolerate fences to be put under high voltage. It reminded him too much of the German camps. [...] In Campden, near Philadelphia, the prison was the only building on the main road that was still intact. You could see the common areas behind thick glass panels, and it smelled of sweat like in a zoo. The correctional officer who gave me a guided tour pointed at the nozzle in the ceiling, through which tear gas was to be funnelled in case of an emergency! This never happened since it turned out that the chemicals decomposed when stored for some time. [...] After we had filmed in the Two Rivers Correctional Institute in Oregon, I drank a cup of coffee with my camera man Ingo Kratisch on the terrace of the adjacent golf club. It was hardly bearable, it was like one of those cheap editing cuts aiming for maximum effect: from the hi-tech prison (subproletariat) to the artificially irrigated golf club (pensioners); the golf players were driving around in electric carts. Oppositions like these suggest a connection."³⁶

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Denouncing: lifting one's thought to the level of anger. Protesting. Separating, overturning things that seem to go without saying. But also establishing a connection on one level between things which, on another level, seem totally antagonistic. This, then, is an act of montage: the American prison and the German camp on the one hand, the prison for the dangerous and the golf club for the harmless on the other hand. But Farocki shows us that the camp – and, more importantly, colonial history and, of course, the question of slavery – is by no means absent from the memory of *this* prison, while *this* golf club is really located next to the prison. It becomes apparent that Harun Farocki's montages first and foremost concern what Walter Benjamin called the 'optical unconscious', and on this account, present themselves to our gaze as a true *critique of violence* through the 'images of the world', given that violence often starts with the implementation of apparently 'neutral' and 'innocent' devices: regulating visitor traffic, building a prison on a specific site, designing the window panels of a common area in a certain way, positioning 'security' devices in the conduits inside the ceiling, reintroducing some sort of organisation of labour among the prisoners which is presumed to be 'beneficial' to the institution etc.

A critique of violence, then. In order to criticise violence, one has to describe it (which implies that one must be able to look). In order to describe it, one has to dismantle its devices, to 'describe the relation', as Benjamin writes, where it constitutes itself (which implies that one must be able to disassemble and reassemble the states of things). Yet if we are to follow Benjamin, establishing these relations implicates at least three domains, which Farocki tackles simultaneously in each investigation that he conducts. The first is *technique* as the realm of the 'pure means' that violence puts to use: "The sphere of pure means unfolds in the most material human realm – conflicts relating to goods. For this reason technique [*Technik*] in the broadest sense of the word is its most proper domain."³⁷ The second territory in which one needs to constantly question violence is that 'of the law and of justice'³⁸. Hence, Farocki's investigation on

³⁶ Harun Farocki, "Bilderschatz (excerpts)" [1999], in Blümlinger (ed.) 2002, pp. 94-95.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Critique de la violence" [1921], in *Œuvres, I*, Paris 2000, p. 227. ("Critique of Violence", in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1: 1913-1926, Cambridge 1996).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210. [Italics by G D-H].

images will never be free from legal consequences, starting with the question of who “produced” them and to whom they belong, how to quote them and what risk one incurs when using them ... Finally, Walter Benjamin – despite the intrinsic philosophical difficulties of his formulations³⁹ – makes it perfectly clear that “the critique of violence is the philosophy of its history [which] makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive approach to its moment in time.”⁴⁰ Could it be, then, that the image is in league with violence simply because it is an inseparably technical, historical, and legal object?

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Lifting one’s thought to the level of anger, lifting one’s anger to the level of a work. Weaving this work that consists of questioning technology, history, and the law. To enable us to open our eyes to the violence of the world inscribed in the images.

³⁹ See Sigrid Weigel’s recent commentary, *Walter Benjamin. Die Kreatur, das Heilige, die Bilder*, Frankfurt a. M. 2008, pp. 88-109.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin [1921], 2000, pp. 241-242. [Italics by G D-H].