

Cover of *film*, November 1969, which includes Harun Farocki, "Primär-Kommunikation und Sekundär-Kommunikation" (Primary communication and secondary communication).



The Labor of Authorship: Harun Farocki's Early Writing

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Outside Germany, most will remember Harun Farocki as an important filmmaker and video artist. Speaking of Harun Farocki in these terms is certainly not wrong. However, it means ignoring a substantial part of his production. Throughout the five decades of his career in cinema, television, and the visual arts, Farocki wrote continually. Besides realizing an impressive body of films and installations—including seminal works such as *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) and *Before Your Eyes—Vietnam* (1982); media-reflexive films such as *As You See* (1986), *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988), and *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992); as well as research-driven installation cycles such as *Eye/Machine* (2000–2002), *Serious Games* (2009–2010), and *Parallel* (2012–2014)—Farocki produced a remarkable quantity of newspaper articles, magazine and book texts, and scripts for radio broadcasts since 1964.¹ For German subscribers of the influential journal *Filmkritik* in the 1970s, Farocki was an established writer. For many today, however, the significance of his writing from the 1960s and 1970s remains to be discovered, which is why *Grey Room* has decided to make several of his early texts available in English.

How is Farocki's writing activity related to his constant production of films, TV, radio, and (more recently) video works? The five texts from the years 1965 to 1975 selected for this issue of *Grey Room* provide a glimpse into Farocki's first decade as an author by focusing on a few crucial parameters of his work. An early encounter with Roland Barthes ("Everyday Myth," 1965) foreshadows Farocki's long-standing engagement with the notion of "operational images." "Vacuum Cleaner or Submachine Gun" (1969) sketches an attempt at elaborating and formalizing an agitational cinema. "Film Courses in Art Schools" (1972) attests to Farocki's ongoing interest in teaching and pedagogy. "*Snowdrops Bloom in September*" (1975) is an early example of Farocki's emergence as an idiosyncratic film critic and polemicist. Finally, the key autobiographical text "Necessary Variation and Variety" (1975) provides insight into the precarious working life of a freelance writer and director.

All of these texts reveal a specific attitude that, from the outset, maintains a distance from a romantic notion of authorship and its emphasis on originality. In his writing, Farocki is always a producer and receiver at the same time. Kaja Silverman, Farocki's closest confidante in the 1990s, once described the "author as receiver" as a model in Jean-Luc Godard's late works.² In a similar vein, Farocki proceeds by amalgamating his own observations with impressions taken from his readings. He makes sure that the original material does not become invisible in the act of writing and that the fault lines and stages of processing clearly emerge.

From the outset, Farocki's readings—and, by extension, his writings—transcend the boundaries between art, politics, and scholarly discourse. With him, acquiring and processing knowledge does not start from a fixed discipline or medium but from the flexible, unstable, and exploratory position of the autodidact. Perhaps Farocki's practices can best be understood as overlapping tracks in different media, be they textual (articles, essays, conversations), acoustic (works for radio), or audiovisual (cinema, TV, art). These tracks sometimes meet, cross each other, separate, weave, and unravel to form patterns like the threads in the Jacquard loom, which later, in *As You See* (1986), becomes the conceptual matrix of a film.

1964 to 1966: Early Texts

Farocki's journalistic activities began in 1964, when the twenty-year-old enrolled at the Free University of Berlin.³ While studying journalism, theater, and sociology, he started to publish articles in the *Spandauer Volksblatt* at monthly intervals. The daily had been founded in 1946; from 1962 onward it attempted to develop a new profile by engaging left-wing celebrities such as Günter Grass and Wolfgang Neuss and by recruiting young authors. Both strategies were explicitly directed against the anticommunism of Berlin's Springer press.⁴ Christa Maerker, head of the feuilleton section at the time, recalls, "Farocki was one of many students and youngsters who stood at our doorstep and wanted to get something printed."⁵

Movies and cinema are absent from Farocki's articles for the *Spandauer Volksblatt*; current literature is much more prominent. Tellingly, however, in his reviews Farocki not only addresses the literary texts themselves but pays close attention to their infrastructural backgrounds, such as publishing houses and creative-writing workshops. A twin focus characterizes his perspective: not literature as a product but the conditions of its production are at stake. Here we might see the first indications of a materialist method of analysis that becomes more elaborated around 1968. When the "edition suhrkamp," a soon-to-be famous paperback series in Willy Fleckhaus's colorful cover design, was launched in May

1963, Farocki jumped at the occasion to ridicule the series and discredit it as a mere marketing stunt. Other book reviews in this period examine works by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Witold Gombrowicz's novel *Transatlantik*, and *Das Waisenhaus* by Hubert Fichte, whom Farocki knew from the notorious Hamburg bar Palette.⁶ Farocki also pays close attention to the political and cultural development of the German Democratic Republic, which had been insulated by a wall and border fences since 1961.

Arguably, Barthes's book *Mythen des Alltags*, the partial translation of *Mythologies* published by Suhrkamp in 1964, had the biggest impact on Farocki's subsequent work as teacher and filmmaker.⁷ Two short but incisive reviews, one written for the radio, the other published in *Spandauer Volksblatt* and translated for this dossier, document Farocki's early engagement with Barthes's concept of everyday myths. In the following decades Farocki would return to this book time and again. He read Barthes's essay on "Myth Today" with students in his film school classes and transferred Barthes's idea of an "operational language," which is completely immersed in the process of labor, to the realm of images. When a woodcutter uses the word *tree*, Barthes argued, it has an "operational" character. The man "speaks the tree," he does not speak about it; his language is subsumed entirely in the functional acts of the work he carries out. In *Eye/Machine* (2000–2001) and accompanying texts such as "Phantom Images," Farocki argues that in the early twenty-first century we face, in the most varied contexts, "operational images."⁸ This novel type of image is wholly identical with its technological deployment, it nearly always remains invisible, and, in the words of one intertitle in *Eye/Machine*, it is "without a social goal, not for edification, not for reflection."⁹ Moreover, Farocki's purely observational films—starting with *An Image* (1983), which patiently documents a *Playboy* photo shoot without any voice-over commentary—also echo Barthes's book: on the one hand, because they patiently document ritualized, "mythical" modes of negotiation and role play (e.g., job application training, financial negotiations); on the other hand, because they abstain from metalinguistic voice-overs and try to get as close as possible to the operational level of these processes.

Safe to say, in 1965, it still remained open for Farocki which medium—radio, literature, or film—and which form of articulation would be adequate. Only with the founding of the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB)—the first film school in West Germany, which was formally opened in September 1966 by the mayor of West Berlin, Willy Brandt—would Farocki take the first step toward an intimate engagement with film.

1966 to 1969: Film Academy and Beyond

Farocki began his studies at the DFFB in September 1966. His time at the film academy was short and marked by two dismissals—a first, temporary one after his first year of study and a second, definite one in November 1968 due to his role in the student protests. That his DFFB films from 1967–1968—*The Campaign Volunteer*, *The Words of the Chairman*, *White Christmas*, and *Their Newspapers*—have left no immediate traces in his writing is perhaps unsurprising. Amid the political turmoil of 1968—including the occupation of the rector’s office; a confrontation with the two directors of the DFFB, Heinz Rathsack and Erwin Leiser; and, finally, the academic dismissal of Farocki and seventeen other students in November 1968 after the occupation of the directors’ office—little time would have remained to even think about writing.

Inextinguishable Fire (1969), on the other hand, which was shot immediately after Farocki’s departure from the DFFB in December 1968 with a Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) production budget, finds its resonances in several texts from 1968 and 1969. In “Vacuum Cleaner or Submachine Gun,” the first of five articles he wrote for the monthly magazine *film*, Farocki documents the final scene of this agitprop film. In the manner of a Brechtian *Lehrstück*, the actor Gerd Volker Bussäus turns to the audience three times, first as a worker, then as a student, and finally as an engineer, assuming a different perspective on the same situation each time. “Vacuum Cleaner or Submachine Gun” was selected for inclusion in this issue of *Grey Room* because it forms an important document from Farocki’s agitational phase in 1968–1969. Not only does the text provide exceptional insight into the short phase in which the filmmaker experimented with an Ampex video system and a flexible production and projection unit as part of the so-called Technology Campaign; it also illustrates Farocki’s modular working method.¹⁰ The vacuum cleaner sequence, initially part of the film *Untitled or: Traveling Cinema for Engineering Students* (1968, now missing), reappears unchanged in *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), the film that was foundational for Farocki’s reputation as a political filmmaker:

An actor says: I am a worker and work in a vacuum cleaner factory. My wife could really use a vacuum cleaner. So every day, I take a single part of one with me. At home, I want to assemble the vacuum cleaner. But whatever I do, it always ends up as a submachine gun.

An actor says: I am a student in an engineering school. At the moment, I work in a vacuum cleaner factory. But I think this isn’t true and the factory

is manufacturing submachine guns for Portugal. We could really use this evidence. So I take a single component home every day. At home, I want to assemble the submachine gun. But whatever I do, it always ends up as a vacuum cleaner.

An actor says: I am an engineer at an electronics company. The workers think we are manufacturing vacuum cleaners. The students think we are manufacturing submachine guns.—This submachine gun can become a useful household item. This vacuum cleaner can become a useful weapon. What we manufacture depends on the workers, students, and engineers.¹¹

Farocki's theoretical project at this moment was ambitious. On the one hand, he attempted to formalize cinematic methods of agitation and didactics. Aiming at an explicitly political adaptation of structuralism, he would often, for instance, incorporate diagrams, tables, and charts into his texts as evidentiary means. On the other hand, he struggled to find a proper relationship between agitation and didactics and tried to find a way to combine a practice-oriented politics with a Marxist analysis of the political economy—a project that Farocki and Hartmut Bitomsky would pursue together in the following years.

1970 to 1975: Educational Film, Television, Film Criticism

Many of Farocki's articles of the early 1970s reflect his pronounced interest in pedagogy and didactics. "Film Courses in Art Schools," in which he evaluates his teaching experiences at various art schools, is a good example: "Basically, an educational film program should be a research institute. Since making educational films means to be able to cooperate with fields other than film, an educational film program must be made up of instructors, filmmakers, linguists, and information theorists."¹²

Dictated by economic need, Farocki's correspondence of the years 1970 and 1971 records his ongoing attempts to launch projects and earn money. In addition to teaching at film and art schools, he read novels for WDR and reported on their suitability for TV adaptation. He also tried to get funding for numerous film projects, mostly with Bitomsky. Their two "Educational Films on Political Economy"—*The Division of All Days* (1970) and *Something Self-Explanatory: 15x* (1971), recently included in the exhibition *Learning Laboratories: Architecture, Instructional Technology, and the Social Production of Pedagogical Space around 1970*—try to provide political tools for teaching Marxism.¹³ A project with multiple working titles—including "AUVICO" (for "Audio Visual Codes"), usually called

“Language of Film”—dominates the abundant correspondence. What the two former DFFB students had in mind was a multipart series—they sketched out ten episodes of thirty minutes each—that would teach how film works. From this project they would extrapolate a general audiovisual pedagogy. In autumn 1970, Bitomsky and Farocki shot two pilot episodes.

“Kapital im Klassenzimmer” (Capital in the classroom; 1971), the extensive pirated print of a radio broadcast (too long to be included in this dossier), pursues the ambitious plan of synthesizing Marxist analysis, cybernetics, and pedagogical theories. From a Marxist perspective, Farocki formulates a critique of cybernetic-pedagogical utopias—not, however, in order to reject their technological optimism in its entirety but to evaluate their possibilities and “use” them (in the sense of critical appropriation). According to Tom Holert, “Farocki’s interest . . . lay in examining how cybernetic pedagogy, as an advanced techno-ideology of late capitalism, could be appropriated and revaluated for the purposes of agitation.”¹⁴ At an early stage, we can sense the fascination with, and at the same time critical distance to, technical automation processes in images and labor that continued to characterize Farocki’s work to the end—consider his repeated examinations of “intelligent” weapons in the *Eye/Machine* cycle, or of military and civilian gaming technology (*Serious Games*).

From 1970 to 1975, two institutional contexts became central to Farocki’s practice. The first of these was the monthly journal *Filmkritik*, where he published “Film Courses in Art Schools.” The journal was chronically underfunded but largely independent in its choice of subjects and modes of writing. Farocki’s name entered the journal’s imprint in the January 1974 issue; the number of his texts for the magazine then increased rapidly. Until 1983, when he retired from the editorial staff, *Filmkritik* was the independent platform from which a wide variety of projects, both by Farocki and the other editors and writers, were coordinated. The second gravitational center was the WDR, the Cologne-based broadcasting organization that became Farocki’s most important ally in the financing and realization of his film projects. The station’s legendary film unit included commissioning editors such as Werner Dütsch, who produced fifteen programs with Farocki—including *Industry and Photography* (1979), *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), *The Expression of Hands* (1997), and *Nothing Ventured* (2004). Farocki also collaborated with the WDR’s Literature and Language Department (directed by Christhart Burgmann, later with Annelen Kranefuss) on four programs through 1979.

Filmkritik and the WDR—writing essays and producing television programs—are the two most important coordinates of Farocki’s activities in the years 1973 to

1975. They also provide the background for his reflections in the autobiographical text “Necessary Variation and Variety” (1975), which shows Farocki as a precariously working “freelancer.” He realizes four episodes of the WDR series *Telekritik*, the first of which—“The Trouble with Images” (1973)—provokes heated discussions within the station. In a sharp polemic, Farocki formulates a critique of the conventions and phrases of documentary practices as expressed in TV formats such as the “feature.” Combining text and image, the articles “Drückebergerei vor der Wirklichkeit” (Shirking reality; published in *Frankfurter Rundschau*) and “Bilder aus dem Fernsehen” (Images from television; published in *Filmkritik*) condense the arguments that Farocki turns against the genre of the feature: “‘Feature’ means a certain way of churning up image and sound information; of marketing a topic with a minimum of depth of information; of covering up pictures taken without care with a flood of half measures.” The tools of Farocki’s analysis are the same ones that will remain crucial for his work as a whole:

The archive and the editing table are, in the case of the feature, a particularly sharp instrument against the rhetorical shell. For in this sad genre “feature,” almost all means of representation are means of cover-up. How it is edited, how the information follows one another, how the images relate to the sounds: all this is there to cover up. Like the speech of a man who has nothing to say and dresses this nothing up in complete sentences.¹⁵

Step by step, Farocki the film critic developed in parallel to reflections like these. In each of Farocki’s film-critical texts—about films by Robert van Ackeren, Peter Nestler, Roland Klick, or Werner Herzog—a similar oscillation between detailed observation and generalizing symptomatic reading can be found. A scathing review such as “*Snowdrops Bloom in September*” provides a more seasoned example of Farocki’s mode of film criticism. The review, about Christian Ziewers’s eponymous film, shows Farocki’s critical distance to the so-called Berlin School of worker’s films that had emerged from DFFB in the early 1970s—films that tried to find a political stance by focusing on stories set in the milieu of workers, unions, and factory labor. To Farocki, his fellow students’ attempt at a political cinema leads to nothing but “Eckcouchrealismus,” a watered-down version of realism that relies on the right topics and well-meaning attitudes but fails to recognize the politics of form. “With the same movement that assigns meaning to his images and sentences, one assigns living space to people, divides the work, selects children at school. The movement of bureaucratic terror. It’s bad that there are so few people who sense the political aspect in film language.”¹⁶

The Compound System: Company-like Conduct

In “Necessary Variation and Variety” (1975), a key text of the 1970s, Farocki allows us to get a sense of his own working method between radio, television, and *Filmkritik*. Reflecting on his work, he describes his strategy of combining various works so that no energy is lost as “company-like conduct”:

I am attempting a compound system of my work following the model of the steel industry, where every waste product flows back into the production process and barely any energy is lost. I am financing the basic research about the material through a radio broadcast, I discuss certain books, which I studied in relation to my research, in programs about books, and some of what I view during this work is incorporated in TV broadcasts. If I am successful with the composite method, I can do more than usual. For a program about history books, driving to an archive, and inspecting a furnace; but still less than is necessary.¹⁷

The reflections tie in with Farocki’s first feature film, *Between Two Wars*, which was released in 1978 after a long and difficult production history. The project starts with an argument by the national economist and social philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel and accompanies Farocki through the 1970s. Sohn-Rethel’s central argument is that the economically motivated merger of large German industrial groups at the end of the 1920s was the primary cause of National Socialism’s rise to power. The *Verbund* (alliance) of heavy industries made it inevitable that all sections of production plants could be involved at 100 percent, and only the armament efforts of the Nazis had been able to guarantee this.

Farocki did not shy away from describing his own working method as a “compound system,” thus appropriating and repurposing a term which, in Sohn-Rethel’s original argument, described the rise of fascism out of economic necessity. Later Farocki was skeptical about this model and thought one needed to be more generous and less frugal in dealing with one’s work. In the 1970s, however, no economic alternative was available to him.

In light of Farocki’s international reputation and standing after 2000, it is easy to forget that well into the 1990s his films hardly found an audience and that funding for each new project remained extremely difficult. As the filmmaker recalls, only two people attended when *Videogramme einer Revolution* (*Videograms of a Revolution*, 1992) premiered in two cinemas in Berlin in 1993.¹⁸ Only during his period as a teacher at the University of California at Berkeley and his collaboration with Silverman did Farocki’s work start to attract more attention from U.S.

academia. Starting with his first installation, *Interface* (1995), and Catherine David's invitation to contribute to Documenta 10 in 1997, a slow but steady shift into the spotlight of contemporary art began, as theorists, art critics, museums, and galleries began to take notice of his work.

Notes

1. Together with the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, the Harun Farocki Institut began to publish Farocki's complete writings in 2017. This article is based on an abridged version of the postface to the series' third volume, which contains all of Farocki's writing from 1964 to 1975. More of his writing in English can be found in *Nachdruck/Imprint—Texte/Writings*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen (Berlin: Vorwerk 8; New York: Sternberg Press, 2001); and *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004). Farocki's book *Speaking about Godard*, coauthored with Kaja Silverman, was published in 1998 (New York: New York University Press).
2. Kaja Silverman, "The Author as Receiver," *October*, no. 96 (Spring 2001): 17–34.
3. See Harun Farocki, *Zehn, zwanzig, dreißig, vierzig: Fragment einer Autobiografie*, ed. Marius Babias and Antje Ehmann (Cologne: Walther König, 2017), 41–84.
4. See Bernd Matthies, "Spandauer Volksblatt: Die linke Stimme West-Berlins kam vom Stadtrand," *Der Tagesspiegel*, 28 February 2017.
5. Christa Maerker, telephone call with author, 12 April 2017.
6. See Jan-Frederik Bandel, Lasse Ole Hempel, and Theo Janßen, *Palette revisited: Eine Kneipe und ein Roman* (Hamburg: Nautilus, 2005), where Farocki speaks in detail about his relations to the scene around the Hamburg pub. In the last decade, Jan-Frederik Bandel, Diedrich Diederichsen, and others have contributed to a massive rediscovery of Fichte's work and his position between pop culture, queerness, bohemia, and ethnography. Through exhibitions, conferences, and translations of Fichte's writing, his work has become much more visible internationally. See the comprehensive website Hubert Fichte: Love and Ethnology, <http://www.projectfichte.org/>.
7. Harun Farocki, "Der tägliche Mythos," *Spandauer Volksblatt*, 16 May 1965, 22.
8. See Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images," *Public* 29 (2004): 12–22. The term has since been taken up by Trevor Paglen and many others.
9. See Volker Pantenburg, "Working Images: Harun Farocki and the Operational Image," *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict*, ed. Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017), 49–62.
10. See Johannes Beringer, "Technologiekampagne 1968 mit Harun Farocki," *new filmkritik*, 9 October 2014, <http://newfilmkritik.de/archiv/2014-10/technologiekampagne-1968-mit-harun-farocki/>.
11. Harun Farocki, "Staubsauger und Maschinengewehr," *film* 6, no. 12 (December 1968): 7.
12. Harun Farocki, "Filmklassen an Filmhochschulen," *Filmkritik*, no. 182 (February 1972): 66.
13. The exhibition, at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2 December 2016–5 February 2017, was curated by Tom Holert.
14. Tom Holert, "Tabular Images: On *The Division of All Days* (1970) and *Something Self Explanatory* (15 x) (1971)," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?* ed. Antje Ehmann und Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig Books, 2009), 83.
15. Harun Farocki, "Drückebergerei vor der Wirklichkeit," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2 June 1973, xi.

16. Harun Farocki, "Schneeglöckchen blühen im September," *Filmkritik*, no. 219 (March 1975): 139.
17. Harun Farocki, "Notwendige Abwechslung und Vielfalt," *Filmkritik*, no. 224 (August 1975): 368–69.
18. See Harun Farocki, "Written Trailers," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?* 229.