

# Two or Three Things I Know about Harun Farocki

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I last saw my friend Harun Farocki a few days before the opening of his exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof in late January 2014. Astonishingly, this was his first major one-person show in Berlin, a city that he called home and that had shaped his intellectual and artistic sensibility for over half a century. “I should have been born in Berlin,” he muses in his autobiographical “Written Trailers” (2009).<sup>1</sup> Farocki was initially drawn to West Berlin in the early 1960s because the island city had been spared the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) of the 1950s that had reshaped the rest of West Germany. It retained a forlorn rawness, a sense of bohemia, and a countercultural public sphere that attracted hippies, draft dodgers, political outcasts, and artists of all kinds. Farocki was a member of the first Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie (Berlin Film Academy) class, along with Helke Sander, Holger Meins, and Wolfgang Petersen. He lived in a commune, wrote criticism, and produced relatively obscure agitprop films such as *Herstellung eines Molotow-Cocktails* (*How to Make a Molotov Cocktail*) (1968), *Anleitung, Polizisten den Helm abzurissen* (*How to Remove a Police Helmet*) (1969), and the better-known *Nicht lösches Feuer* (*Inextinguishable Fire*) (1969). As Berlin changed over the years, however, so, too, did Farocki and his filmmaking practice.

Farocki was bighearted, and in addition to his work as a filmmaker, writer, and editor, he was a dedicated teacher involved in both formal and informal pedagogical projects. He taught at UC Berkeley in California in the 1990s, and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna for the past ten years. In the early 2000s, we team-taught a seminar at the University of Florida. In that class, we examined Jean-Luc Godard’s *Numero deux* (*Number Two*) (1975), whose multi-image experiment had led Farocki, together with Kaja Silverman, to theorize the notion of “soft montage” that would subsequently have a significant impact on the development of his later multichannel installation work. Soft montage comprises a general relatedness of images, rather than a strict equation of opposition produced by a linear montage of sharp cuts. If the dialectical montage of Sergei Eisenstein operates according to a binary logic that excludes any alternative not accounted for by a pervasive dualism, soft montage

1. Harun Farocki, “Written Trailers,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig Books, 2009), p. 221.

operates according to a logic of difference. In this regard the cut of soft montage is synonymous with the conjunction “and,” as multiple images are folded onto one another within the same spatial field, creating new configurations.

Farocki also made it a point to introduce the students to the breathtaking films of the Armenian director Artavazd Peleshyan, whose practice of “distance montage” offered an alternative to the montage of Eisenstein and whose strikingly beautiful black-and-white sequences stood in stark contrast to Godard’s cool, distanced, and at times shoddy video images (later reshot in 35-millimeter film). We watched Peleshyan’s *The Seasons of the Year* (1975), transfixed by the bobbing, haphazard movement of a shepherd and his flock caught in a rushing river whose force is further amplified by the soundtrack. Distance montage, Peleshyan believed, opens up the “seam” or “interval” between two elements; instead of “patching” them together, he advocated “ripping them apart” and adding more elements. The elements appear in a different context each time, and with varying connotations. They do not carry inherent meanings, and shots do not collide with one another. Signification depends on the montage of the contexts over the entire film. This structuring principle is operative in much of Farocki’s work, where the same images and sounds are repeated rhythmically throughout a single production. While both Godard and Peleshyan provided Farocki with alternatives to Eisenstein’s theory of montage, in which meaning is constructed through a linear succession of images, all three systems informed his media practice of the past two decades.

With *Schnittstelle (Interface)* (1995), his first double projection, Farocki developed a film practice in which discrete units occupy the same visual space. The segments are meant to be taken together, as a succession and simultaneous with one another. This play of images constructs temporal as well as spatial relationships. Each successive shot is as important as the one it follows, each concurrent image no more significant than the one beside it, the recto always dependent on the verso. As he explained in “Cross Influence/Soft Montage” (2002), “Imagine three double bonds jumping back and forth between the six carbon atoms of a benzene ring; I envisage the same ambiguity in the relationship of an element in an image track to the one succeeding or accompanying it.”<sup>2</sup> This practice of placing images into force fields is key to understanding why most of Farocki’s multiscreen projects were also made in single-channel versions, each of which is as carefully crafted and thought out as the whole, and where double projections are diagonally transposed and slightly overlap within one frame. Images in his work do not take the place of, but supplement, reevaluate, and balance those that preceded them.

Farocki’s scope was broad. There was a lot of ground covered and many issues explored in the trajectory from early 16-millimeter films like *Die Worte des Vorsitzenden (The Words of the Chairman)* (1967), which protests the shah of Iran’s official visit to Berlin, to his last multiscreen sculptural installation, *Parallel I–IV*

2. Harun Farocki, “Cross Influence/Soft Montage” (2002), p. 70.



*Harun Farocki. 2007  
© Hertha Hurnaus.  
Courtesy of Harun Farocki  
Filmproduktion and  
Greene Naftali, New York.*

(2012–14), which examines the development of the virtual world of video games and their relationship to space. Indeed, surveying Farocki's oeuvre serves as a revealing case study of the history of experimental filmmaking in Europe in the past half-century. His earlier work attests to the important role that television played in West Germany as a major source of funding and distribution. Commissions from broadcasting firms such as West Deutscher Rundfunk (WDR) allowed him to produce an enormous amount of work. They also enabled him to maintain key crew members such as the cinematographer Ingo Kratisch, with whom Farocki worked for many decades. Some of the television productions are quite short, such as the six-minute *Filmtip: Kuhle Wampe* (1986), while others are full-length features, like the 114-minute *Etwas wird sichtbar (Before Your Eyes Vietnam)* (1983), which remains one of his most powerful efforts in this genre. A number of the films focus on intellectual figures: *Kurzfilme von Peter Weiss (Short Films by Peter Weiss)* (1982), for example, or *Schlagworte, Schlagbilder: Ein Gespräch mit Vilém Flusser (Catch Phrases—Catch Images, A Conversation with Vilém Flusser)* (1986). Then there are the productions that critique their own medium, such as *Der Ärger mit den Bildern, Eine Telekritik von Harun Farocki (The Trouble with Images, A Critique of Television)* (1973). But the vast majority of these films are documentaries.

Farocki developed his interest in the “operative image,” as well as the working method of a *Verbundsystem* (integrated system), in the midst of, and probably as a direct result of, carrying out the large number of commissions he received from television. Sourced from scientific, medical, or military contexts, where it is meant to be studied in a technical or illustrative way, the operative image is a type of imagery that functions to present—rather than to represent—material things and events. It is a means of investigation; it is not meant to be viewed aesthetically. Moreover, this type of image is remarkably different from those produced for entertainment or advertisement purposes that proliferate in our general visual culture. The *Verbundsystem* is a procedure that Farocki developed to recycle, reassemble, and recombine footage from several different projects. Typically, when he took this issue up in his writings he drew an analogy to labor: “Following the example of the steel industry . . . I try to create a *Verbund* with my work. The basic research for a project I finance with a radio broadcast, some of the texts I use I review for the book programs, and many of the things I notice during this kind of work end up in my television features.”<sup>3</sup> However, what began as a practice spurred by pragmatic concerns and economic necessity soon developed into a powerful system of critique. The re-functioned images and clips were used to comment on the context in which they initially circulated.

Farocki used his television earnings to produce a number of extraordinary films for cinema. Features such as *Zwischen Zwei kriegten (Between Two Wars)* (1978), *Wie man sieht (As You See)* (1986), and *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Images*

3. Harun Farocki, “Notwendige Abwechslung and Vielfalt,” *Filmkritik* 224 (1975), pp. 368–69. Translated by Thomas Elsaesser in *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989) pp. 82–83.

of the World and the Inscription of War) (1989) are certainly among the most powerful filmic productions of the late 1970s and '80s. But in the '90s several institutional shifts occurred that would have a major effect on Farocki's ability to keep his practice and crew in place. The most pressing of these was the radical change in European public broadcasting—the offerings became much more homogenized, and the broadcast space (and in turn the economic resources) that used to be available to directors such as Farocki disappeared. The collapse of public funding for experimental filmmaking and its distribution coincided with the shift from analogue to digital image technology, as well as with the development of new projection equipment that facilitated the integration of large-screen film and video projects into art spaces. The latter phenomenon made available important new funding sources for the fabrication, exhibition, and distribution of moving-image productions. The pattern is quite clear: Instead of negotiating with television networks, experimental filmmakers increasingly began to look to galleries, museums, and large art-exhibition foundations such as the Venice Biennale or Documenta for production support. Projects such as *Schnittstelle* (1995), *Ich glaubte Gefangene zu Sehen (I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts)* (2000), and *Vergleich über ein Drittes (Comparison Via a Third)* (2009) were exceptionally well received when they were displayed in art spaces, and the relationship was soon solidified. Not coincidentally, Farocki's move from television and cinema to art galleries and museums corresponded to his transition from single-channel to multichannel work, as well as to his increasing experimentation with film loops, double or multiple screens, and spatial montages that employ the spectator's navigation of rooms in which multiple image-screens are installed as the fundamental component of the montage.

In the 1990s another important development occurred that had a significant impact on Farocki's work: namely, the deployment of a new type of "smart" military arsenal in the first Gulf War. *Eye/Machine I–III* (2001–2003), *War at a Distance* (2003), *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–2010), and to a large extent *Parallel I–IV* resumed his earlier focus on war and technology, but now his attention fell on automated weapons outfitted with digital cameras and sensors. Technology—in particular, military technology—was transforming not only warfare but also the human subject in ways that at once greatly troubled and endlessly fascinated Farocki. He brought those concerns and interests to bear on his production. Rather than being didactic, the films that followed, as with most of his work, encouraged the spectator to develop his or her own response to the phenomena he analyzed with meticulous precision. One cannot help but be simultaneously awed and terrified by the content of these productions. Yet, along with his focus on such serious themes, Farocki also permitted himself to engage topics that gave him pleasure, and to create projects such as *Deep Play* (2007), a twelve-monitor video installation that focuses on the 2006 World Cup hosted by Germany. Farocki was a huge fan of soccer, playing in a Berlin league until the age of 65 and avidly following the

sport. Indeed, he proudly recounted to me in the weeks preceding his death that he had watched pretty much all of the games of the 2014 World Cup, and was jubilant that his beloved German team had earned the gold trophy. Soccer was the only arena in which I ever saw Farocki express national pride.

Some have complained that Farocki traded his role as a filmmaker for that of an artist, as if this were a kind of betrayal. I think this assessment is misguided. Farocki continued to be interested in connecting with a cinematic public, and he did this successfully even after his productions came to be shown mostly in art spaces, though now not as a director but as a screenwriter and unofficial collaborator. In the past few decades, he was deeply involved in the film practice of Christian Petzhold, arguably the most successful of the Berlin School filmmakers. Farocki worked closely with Petzhold to realize international features such as *Die innere Sicherheit* (*The State I Am In*) (2000), *Yella* (2007), *Barbara* (2012), and most recently *Phoenix* (2014). Through his collaboration with Petzhold he finally reached a mass film audience.

Writing about Farocki's work twenty years ago, I used the expression "political in/visible" as a means by which to understand his essay film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*. This masterwork examines the im/perceptible, that which lies at or just beyond the margins of the field of vision (or of cognition, for that matter). In a way that resonates strongly with Walter Benjamin's notion of the "optical unconscious," Farocki found that the eye of the camera frequently records evidence that eludes the human eye. As he demonstrates in this film, we often see and do not see at the same time, or, to be more precise: We do not see what we are not looking for. He told me on a number of occasions how much the photographer Allan Sekula's "Reading An Archive: Photography Between Labor and Capital" (1983), which argues that the questions posed to an archive determine the meaning of its contents, resonated with his own notion of film capture. Film footage, from this perspective, functions as a picture puzzle, not unlike the image of a duck that may be that of a rabbit depending on one's perspective. Theodor Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory* (1969) that "every artwork is a picture puzzle [*Vexierbild*], a puzzle to be solved, but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that it remains a vexation. . . . Artworks are like picture puzzles in that what they hide . . . is visible and is, by being visible, hidden."<sup>4</sup> Part of Farocki's project in *Images of the World* was to show both sides of the puzzle. If, following Adorno, the picture puzzle functions as a metaphor for the operation of ideology in that it privileges certain perspectives over others, then in films such as *Images of the World* it is the ideology of the image-maker as well as that of the viewer that determines the way war is documented and seen. In *Minima Moralia*, certainly one of the most penetrating social critiques of the mid-twentieth century, Adorno applies the trope of the picture puzzle to contemplate the transformation of the perception of labor in advanced capitalism. The philosopher laments that workers in the new societies constructed around an economy of

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 121.



consumption are no longer able to perceive themselves as such. The treatise on the “Picture Puzzle” ends with the “grimly comic riddle” pondered by contemporary sociologists: namely, “Where is the proletariat?”<sup>5</sup> When I applied the trope of the political in/visible to *Images of the World* a couple of decades ago, I took it to illuminate a general critique of media and war, and employed it as a hermeneutical tool to reveal Farocki’s own hidden antinuclear agenda. Today, however, looking back at Farocki’s work with the benefit of hindsight, I realize that much of it was actually closer to Adorno’s original question than I had initially thought, and that he was very much concerned with bringing attention to the increasingly occluded image of labor. In other words, for Farocki, the disappearance of images of work was directly related to the growth of the culture industry, and film, one of that industry’s most powerful tools, played an important part in that vanishing act insofar as its gaze was turned on when and where alienated labor ended. As he observes in *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), from the moment the Lumière brothers pointed a camera at their factory in the late nineteenth century to the present conventions of cinematic representation, motion-picture culture starts at the close of the workday. The medium of television owes its very *raison d’être* to this phenomenon. Like the function of a photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG, to borrow Brecht’s often-cited critique of *neue sachlichkeit* images of the massive German armaments and electric companies, most films that depict factories tell us hardly anything at all about the working conditions within those factories, let alone about the labor carried out by those who spend the bulk of their day (and lives) in them.

Later, in *The Silver and the Cross* (2010), his contribution to the important exhibition *The Potosí Principle: How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land* (2010–2011), Farocki’s camera performs a meticulous iconographical analysis of a panoramic eighteenth-century painting of the silver mountain in what is today Bolivia that bankrolled the Spanish empire for nearly two centuries (Gaspar Miguel de Berrío’s *Descripción del Cerro Rico e Imperial Villa de Potosí*, 1758). As the deadpan voice-over explains, the canvas depicts Potosí as a bustling and vibrant city full of commerce, public squares, residential and religious buildings, and ceremonial processions. It highlights the complex system of waterworks that was developed to produce sufficient energy to pulverize the big rocks from the mines, as well as the piles of crushed ore mixed with mercury (the amalgamation compound for the production of silver) neatly arranged alongside the processing mills. But nowhere in the painting can the probing camera find any sign of the enormous exploitation of the indigenous population by the Spanish. Not even the entrances to the mines are represented. Once again, Farocki finds that key historical details, the ones that generated the city’s wealth and very existence, are absent. That conspicuous absence speaks to the massive violence—what the voice-over describes as “the large-scale genocide”—visited upon the indigenous population who labored and died in the millions in and around the mines. But

5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1987), p. 194.

the voice-over also observes that, as we contemplate this absence, this invisibility, “it is important to bear in mind that the philosophers of the European Enlightenment also made no mention of slavery, or of the slave trade.”

How to bring workers and their labor back into the picture? This became the goal of Farocki’s last project, *Labor in a Single Shot*, realized in collaboration with his partner Antje Ehmann between 2011 and 2014. Ehmann and Farocki conducted a series of thirteen video workshops in cities across the world from Moscow to Bangalore, Cairo to Buenos Aires. In the months that followed my last visit, Farocki and Ehmann traveled to Mexico City, Hangxiou, and Johannesburg to coordinate the final workshops. In each city, they teamed up with a local educational institution and invited participants to take part in ten-day working seminars where they would be taught the basic principles of direct filmmaking. The only strictures were that the topic had to focus on labor, and that the recorded footage would be presented without cuts. As such, the format harkened back to the early *actualités* of the late nineteenth century. After each workshop was completed, the videos, which ranged in length from one to two minutes, were posted online in an open-access format. Needless to say, the archive increased exponentially over the years. In the end, approximately four hundred contemporary portraits of labor (both material and immaterial) and laborers were made visible and audible.

This final project reveals much about Farocki. It captures his respect for labor and his commitment to knowledge production. It demonstrates his passion for filmmaking. It encapsulates his love for teaching, and his pleasure in bringing people together in order to produce something collectively. It is this genuine graciousness and unrelenting generosity that will be most missed by those who knew him. The photographs of Farocki that circulate publicly rarely depict him smiling. But as he reminded us in reference to the widely circulated photograph of his late friend Holger Meins, “photos don’t always say what they are meant to.”<sup>6</sup> The Farocki so many of us recall in our own picture puzzles is a warm man who loved to laugh, and did so easily, slapping his thigh while telling some of the worst jokes I have ever heard.

6. Harun Farocki, “Risking His Life: Images of Holger Meins” (1998), in *Harun Farocki: Imprint: Writings*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2001), p. 270.