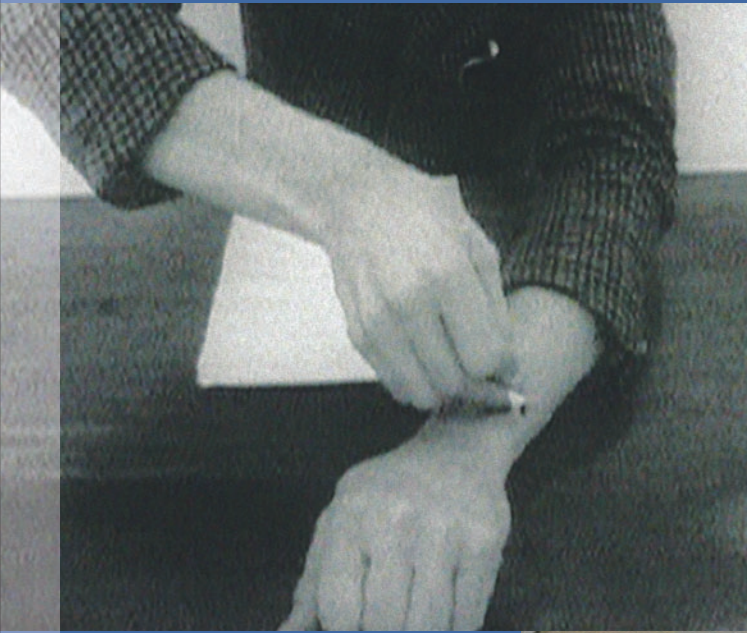


FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION



Harun

Farocki

Working on the
Sight-Lines

EDITED BY

THOMAS ELSAESSER

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

Harun Farocki

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Working on the Sightlines

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Amsterdam University Press

Front cover illustration: SCHNITTSTELLE, © Harun Farocki
Back cover illustration: BILDER DER WELT UND INSCHRIFT DES KRIEGES,
© Harun Farocki

Cover design: Kok Korpershoek, Amsterdam
Lay-out: JAPES, Amsterdam

ISBN 90 5356 636 8 (hardcover)
ISBN 90 5356 635 x (paperback)
NUR 674

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Introduction

Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist

Thomas Elsaesser

More than anything else, electronic control technology has a deterritorialising effect. Locations become less specific. An airport contains a shopping centre, a shopping centre contains a school, a school offers leisure and recreation facilities.

What are the consequences for prisons, themselves mirrors of society as well as its counter-image and projection surface?

*Harun Farocki*¹

Documenting Change: Questions of Agency, Visibility, and Territory

If I am interested in how the technological, and subsequently electronic media have transformed civil society, I can find no better chronicler of their histories, no more intelligent observer of their unexpected connections, no more incisive critic and yet interested party to their epoch-making significance than Harun Farocki. The fact that Farocki is both a writer and a filmmaker is therefore as much a sign of the times as a choice of vocation. Having early on decided to be, in the spirit of Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire, 'resolutely modern', Farocki availed himself of the most resolutely contemporary medium. But a filmmaker, by making images, not only adds images to their store in the world; he comments on the world made by these images, and does so *with* images. Aware that the medium chose him as much as he had chosen it for documenting public life under the rule of the image, he treats cinema with the utmost respect. So central are the technologies of picturing and vision to the twentieth century that there is little Farocki cares about which is not also a reflection on cinema itself. In this perspective, however, its role as our culture's prime storytelling medium is almost secondary. Instead, cinema is understood as a machine of the visible that is itself largely invisible. This is why talking about airports, schools, or prisons is as much a part of the *post-history* of the cinema, as a fork in the road leading to the foundation of cities, the Jacquard loom with its programmable sequence of coloured threads, or the deployment of the Maxim machine gun at the battle of Omdurman are part of the *pre-history* of cinema.²

Certainly since the early 20th century, and probably since the invention of the camera obscura, the most pervasive – material and mental – model by which to picture ourselves in this world and acting upon it, has been the ‘cinematic apparatus’. It is present as an arrangement of parts, as a logic of visual processes, and as a geometry of actions even when (especially when) camera and projector are absent. It existed as a philosopher’s dream in Plato’s parable of the cave, and it has a technical-prosthetic afterlife in surveillance videos and body scans, so that its noble golden age as *the* art form of the second industrial age represents a relatively brief lease on its overall life. Or to put it differently: the cinema has many histories, only some of which belong to the movies. It takes an artist-archaeologist, rather than a mere historian, to detect, document and reconstruct them. Today, perhaps the cinema’s most illustrious artist-archaeologist – and as we shall see, allegorist-archivist – is Harun Farocki.

‘Detect, document, reconstruct’: the terms are deliberately ambiguous. They highlight, along with the contested meaning of the word documentary in cinema history and the somewhat *noirish* connotations of detection, a particular challenge of agency when talking about an artist who also considers himself an activist. If the word had not paled into a cliché, ‘intervene’ might be the (Brechtian) term that applies to Farocki’s early work and to its radical ambitions when he began making films in the 1960s. But over the years, he has also demonstrated forms of action with his films that are normally more associated with a social scientist, laboratory technician, or media theorist than with a political activist. To put it in more metaphoric terms: the descriptive distance of the writer has alternated with the constructive patience of the model-builder, and the careful probing of the test lab scientist has competed with the reconstructive skill of the plastic surgeon. Farocki has been an exceptional witness of the second half of the last century, literally keeping his wits about him, especially as he noticed how the visible and the intelligible were drifting ever further apart. For an eyewitness is not at his best when only using his eyes: ‘It is not a matter of what is in a picture, but rather, of what lies behind. Nonetheless, one shows a picture as proof of something which cannot be proven by a picture.’³ Events, accidents, and disasters can be turned over to see what lies behind them and to inspect the recto of the verso: except that even this ‘image’ belongs to a previous age, when a picture was something you could touch with your fingers and pass from hand to hand. Now it is a matter of recognising the invisible within the visible, or of detecting the code by which the visible is programmed. Farocki once commented on the editing of the evening television news after the air show disaster at the Ramstein airbase in January 1989, noting a cutaway, just before the planes collided, from the fatal manoeuvre to the subsequent official press conference:

The cut of January 16 had the direct effect of compelling the viewer to contemplate the interrupted scene in his imagination. [...] By sequencing the images so that the press conference provided a mere background for the afterimages of the air show, it demoted the Bonn government's image-politics, secretly and decisively. [The cut] is the television-makers' revenge against the business of politics which forces them to use their recording and editing equipment to deal with nameplates, office corridors, official cars, porters' lodges, or staged pseudo-events like press conferences.⁴

What Farocki here spots in the 'afterimage' effected by the cut is the power of cinema, visible in an absence (the missing image) and as its absence (the cinema negatively figured in the use of its basic apparatus, the 'recording and editing equipment' for derisory ends). Around a real-life spectacular disaster, which, like so many in recent years, imitated the movies, Farocki emblematically confirms the 'end of cinema'. But by the same token, he also asserts that if cinema is dead, long live its afterlife (as our best media theory).

The practice of filmmaking has thus obliged Farocki to be a theorist, making him a special kind of witness, a close reader of images, and an exegete-exorcist of their ghostly 'afterimages'. But nearly forty years of directing films, with a list of some eighty titles to his credit, have also established him as one of the great artist-survivors of his generation: of the bohemian-anarchist scene in Hamburg during the early 1960s, of the student protests in West-Berlin from 1968 to the mid-1970s, with their revolutionary dogmatism and activist aspirations. Building up such an oeuvre against the considerable odds of 'independent' film financing and contract work for television, he must also be considered a survivor of the New German Cinema of the 1980s (to which he, properly speaking, never particularly wished to belong). Ironically, it is he who in the 1990s became an international *auteur*, at a time when the term – in Germany at least, as *Autorenfilmer* – had turned from a distinction into an insult (for a filmmaker with mainstream ambitions). As author and artist, Farocki has now made the transition to a new art form and different exhibition venues (his multi-screen installations are being commissioned by museums and media arts festivals), where his work, including his earlier films, reaches audiences beyond the German-speaking countries, in France, Belgium, Latin America, Australia, and the United States, for instance.

An Uncanny Timeliness

With Farocki, then, the gesture of 'documenting' the world of the media and bearing witness to their vanguard role in contemporary life is complicated by

the respective kinds of autonomy, authorship and agency involved, which extend to his published texts, sometimes written to accompany his films, sometimes to prepare them and sometimes to finance them. But his particular authorship can also be located in the director's performed presence within the films. Farocki speaks in his own voice and person in *NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER/INEXTINGUISHABLE FIRE* (1969), *ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN/ BETWEEN TWO WARS* (1978), *SCHNITTSTELLE/SECTION INTERFACE* (1995); at other times, a multi-layered dialogical situation is set up between the characters and the filmmaker (*ETWAS WIRD SICHTBAR/ BEFORE YOUR EYES – VIETNAM*, 1982), or a carefully scripted commentary directs attention and instructs the mind's eye (*WIE MAN SIEHT/ AS YOU SEE*, 1986), occasionally intoned by an off-screen female presenter (*WIE MAN SIEHT, BILDER DER WELT UND INSCRIFT DES KRIEGES/ IMAGES OF THE WORLD AND THE INSCRIPTION OF WAR*, 1988). At other times, the camera is a distant and cool observer, with no voice-over telling the viewer what connections to make, other than to attend to the cuts and connections that the images make (*LEBEN – BRD/ HOW TO LIVE IN THE FRG*, 1990, *DIE SCHULUNG/ INDOCTRINATION*, 1987). One could take the implied distance, the unhurried didacticism and the underplayed irony for the filmmaker's manner of marking his intellectual involvement, while keeping his critical detachment and thus keeping his mastery over the material intact. After all, these are some of the expected positions in the repertoire of documentary filmmakers, well-established since the late 1920s, especially when they come politically from the left. Their films testify to social injustices or the abuse of power, they show the world as it is, give glimpses of how it might be or once was, and they hold a mirror up to mankind in order to shame it into change. But key impulses of Farocki's work seem altogether differently motivated, and they make him finally an unlikely *documentarist*, cast neither in the heroic-constructivist mould of the 1920s and '30s, nor situated on the side of 'direct cinema' of the 1960s and '70s. With respect to the latter, he has probably remained too much of an agitator-activist to create the openness that usually gives the viewer the illusion of entering into the ongoing events as a participant or co-conspirator; and with respect to the former, he is too much of an artist-artisan to presume that he is doing anything other than to work on realities already constituted: replaying them for the sake of the small differences, the small deferrals, so that something (else) may become visible (*'etwas wird sichtbar'*) in the repetition, in the gaps and through the duplication. For Farocki – to use a variation on Sigmund Freud – finding an image is to re-find it.⁵ It also makes him a close reader of 'found' images.

This last point is important: just as the image and its imagined afterimage belong together in the Ramstein television news broadcast, so each image – visual as well as verbal – is already shadowed. The reason is the degree of 'inter-

ference' provided by the medium of cinema itself, with its vast store of images already present before any event occurs, but also always slipping away from any single event. Farocki once found a wonderfully apt image for it, all the more apt because it was probably unwitting: '[In Basel] we were living in a furnished apartment house. It was five-thirty on Saturday, and we stopped reading or listening to music and went to see a girl and to watch the sports show on TV. She made donuts, but the reception was so bad that the ball disappeared between the lines and the players were covered man-to-man by their own shadows. We had to keep adjusting the antennas so we could at least hear the game we were missing.'⁶ We too have to keep adjusting our antennas when we view Farocki's films. Their themes at first glance seem to directly 'cover' the turbulent half-century he has been part of: agit-prop films and essays against the War in Vietnam (NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER, ETWAS WIRD SICHTBAR); an examination of the collusion of heavy industries with Nazism, and its consequences for labour relations and working class organisations (ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN); oblique reflections on the placement of U.S. nuclear weapons on German soil, and more evidently, a history of the increasing – or persistent – interdependence of cinema and warfare (BILDER DER WELT UND INSCRIFT DES KRIEGES); several ironic diagnostic tests that chart the rise of self-help and service industries in the security-conscious consumer society of West Germany, before (LEBEN – BRD, WAS IST LOS?/ WHAT'S UP? (1991), DIE SCHULUNG, EIN TAG IM LEBEN DER ENDVERBRAUCHER/ A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE END-USER, (1993), during (DIE FÜHRENDE ROLLE/ THE LEADING ROLE, 1994) and after German re-unification (DIE UMSCHULUNG, 1994). VIDEOGRAMME EINER REVOLUTION/ VIDEOGRAMS OF A REVOLUTION (1992), a (tele)visual analysis of the end of Communism in Central Europe (the fall of Ceauçescu in Romania), was followed by films/installations tracking the changing function and administrative logics of key social institutions, such as factories, prisons, shopping centres (ARBEITER VERLASSEN DIE FABRIK/ WORKERS LEAVING THE FACTORY, 1995, ICH GLAUBTE GEFANGENE ZU SEHEN/ I THOUGHT I WAS SEEING CONVICTS, 2000, DIE SCHÖPFER DER EINKAUFSWELTEN/ THE CREATORS OF THE SHOPPING WORLDS, 2001) (see ill. 81). A tenacious curiosity for 'what goes on' (*was ist los*) and how things work focuses Farocki's attention on how life is organised at the micro-levels of power, language and social relations. His encyclopaedic knowledge feeds this close observation of the day-to-day in offices, schools, or military training camps, while an elegant economy of language and terse visual style find words for images, and images for concepts that light up in the sudden spark of an unexpectedly illuminating comparison, or become the slow-burn fuse of a gradually developing and finally exploding insight.

This symptomatic topicality of Farocki's subjects – their uncanny 'timeliness' – is one of his self-confessed concerns: 'to constantly assure oneself of the

present', as a sort of information feedback loop of the kind he often depicts in his films. But the impression that he has a journalist's eye for issues that are 'in' is as deceptive as his detached, didactic, or deadpan manner of treating them. He is extremely selective, single-minded even, in his choice of themes, while his engagement is total, to the point of requiring careful self-protection and even decoy camouflage.⁷ In fact, Farocki takes up a topic only when it fulfils at least three minimal requirements: he must be able to picture the phenomenon in its details as well as show how it partakes of a larger process; he must be able to establish, however obliquely, a level of reflexive self-reference; and finally, he must be able to hint at a hidden centre, an Archimedean point, more often sensed than seen. The principle is illustrated by his early feature-length film, *ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN*. Based on an essay he had read in a political journal, Farocki tries to explain Hitler's rise to power and his ability to wage a world war, by pinpointing a crisis in the German steel industry, itself the consequence of a 'successful' piece of modernisation in its production process, by which a new kind of feedback loop is created between the coal, coke, and steel industries.⁸ The idea of this feedback loop (*Verbund*) then serves as a model for a much larger historical process, namely the peculiar interconnectedness of industrialisation and warfare, and of the different man-machine symbioses typical of modern industrial and media societies. The reflexive self-reference sets in when the same *Verbund* principle becomes the very condition of possibility of *ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN* itself: 'taking my cue from the steel industry, where every waste product flows back into the process of production and as little energy as possible gets lost, I try to organise a *Verbund* for my own work. The basic research for a project I finance with a radio broadcast, some of the books I use I review for the book programme, and many of the things I notice during this kind of preparatory work end up in my television features.'⁹ However, the film's Archimedean point is more difficult to pin down: it most likely has to do with a 'feedback loop' between accident and design, and the role of contingency and unintended consequences in the life of technological systems.

Farocki seizes a situation in flux, preferably when poised for a (dialectical) reversal. Even the most literal event may turn – before our eyes and in real time – into a metaphor that expands into a concept. By suddenly revealing in miniature a social or political totality, each recorded moment unfolds in several dimensions at once, with one dimension invariably referring back to his own position as filmmaker and writer. How this locates the physical as well as moral space from which he speaks is most graphically illustrated in one of his first surviving films *NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER* from 1968-69. The camera, head on, frames Farocki in a static medium close-up, sitting by an empty table in an apparently equally bare room; it could be a teacher's desk, a witness stand before

an investigating magistrate, or the police taking a statement from a suspect. In a monotone, he reads from the eyewitness report by a Vietnamese man describing the methods used by the Americans in their bombing raids. The Vietnamese man is a survivor of a napalm attack on his village, napalm being the 'inextinguishable fire' of the title. Upon finishing the report, Farocki faces the camera to say: 'how can we show you the deployment of napalm and the nature of the burns it causes? If we show you pictures of the injuries inflicted by napalm, you will just close your eyes. At first you will close your eyes before the pictures, then you will close your eyes before the memory of the pictures, and then you will close your eyes before the realities the pictures represent.' Farocki then takes a cigarette from the ashtray, draws on it to make it glow. As the camera slowly tracks into a close-up, he takes the cigarette from his mouth and extinguishes it on the back of his hand. A voice-off in the meantime explains that a cigarette burns at roughly 500 degrees Celsius, while napalm burns at approximately 3000 degrees Celsius.

The scene, in retrospect, includes all of Farocki, and prefigures the fundamental preoccupations of his filmmaking. One recognises the absence of the key image, as in the Ramstein news report twenty years later, but instead of this being the revenge of the television crew for the humiliations inflicted on their craft by the pseudo-events of politicians, this is the revenge of the filmmaker on the politicians who perpetrate such horrific, obscene real-life events as ordering a napalm raid on civilians populations, executed from the distance and safety of a US Air Force B-52 bomber. The scene shows the filmmaker taking the side of the Vietnamese in this war. But his gesture of self-inflicted solidarity derives its moral power (and distinguishes itself from the false pathos of so much self-proclaimed solidarity with the victims, on the part of politicised students at the time) from the implied inadequacy and radical incommensurability of the act. On the other hand, the inadequacy is justified on other grounds: it demonstrates the fundamental need for metaphor – one thing standing for another, the cigarette for the bomb, the back of the hand for the villager's body, the familiar for the horrific – when depicting the realities of this world and when trying to bring the unimaginable 'into the picture'. Metaphor makes something visible, but it also makes it 'uncanny' (unfamiliar), allowing Farocki to re-claim a legitimate place for art and aesthetic practice. And this at a time when many artists – not only Berlin filmmakers at the DFFB, the film and television academy from which Farocki was relegated – no longer saw a justification for art, and instead devoted themselves to 'direct action', or at the very least, felt obliged to make instructional films, thereby rehearsing future direct actions.¹⁰ As Tilmann Baumgärtel has argued, the film is a kind of *poetological*-political manifesto: 'This radical, auto-destructive gesture [of stubbing out the cigarette on his own hand] marks the endpoint of a [...] period, in

which Farocki as a student of the DFFB between 1966 and 1968 had participated [...]. Several of his fellow students did, in the years that followed, opt for active militant resistance: Holger Meins joined the Red Army Fraction, Philip Sauber became a member of the "June 2nd Movement". Farocki for his part decided in favour of filmmaking. His self-mutilation in *NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER* [...] must be read as an act of self-initiation to being an artist (renouncing direct political activism), [...] a sort of aesthetic-political partisan, whose films are acts of resistance against conventional mainstream cinema, produced with "guerrilla tactics"¹¹ (see ill. 1).

The Poetics of the Cut: Montage and Metaphor, Mirror and *Mise-en-Abime*

That Farocki himself regards *NICHT LÖSCHBARES FEUER* as a key work is clear from the attention he gives it in *SCHNITTSTELLE*, the installation piece he produced to reflect upon but also to cut himself loose (*Schnitt* meaning a cut) from his early work. In the new context, as Christa Blümlinger notes, the surviving scar of the cigarette burn draws attention to another metaphoric feature of the scene, which refers back to the cinema: it is as if Farocki's own hand becomes the bodily equivalent of the indexical trace once thought unique to the cinema.¹² The photographic index is, of course, increasingly absent from all images, now that these images – still or moving – have as their material support the electronic video signal or digital-numerical algorithms, instead of (light- and heat-sensitive) celluloid. In a historical reversal that makes the non-organic stand for the organic, celluloid is now an ironically apt metaphor for human skin ('the skin of film' is a phrase often used by Alexander Kluge, a fellow filmmaker whom Farocki has great respect for). The scene, which perhaps will become known as a turning point in film aesthetics as strategically placed as was Luis Buñuel's slitting of a woman's eye in *UN CHIEN ANDALOU*, illustrates the second condition needed for Farocki to take an interest in a topic, and for him to find it absorbing enough to make it the subject of a film. This condition is that the topic invites and even morally obliges him to take sides against himself. In other words, it must develop a dynamic of self and other that allows him to interrogate his own practice and jeopardise his own intellectual self-assurance, in the meticulous (or sometimes merciless) depiction of the other (enemy, antagonist, secret alter ego). In *ETWAS WIRD SICHTBAR* it is literally a mirror into which the protagonists – and through them, the filmmaker – are forced to look, in order to realise their collusive kinship with the point of view of the aggressor in the Vietnam War (see ill. 23). In other films, the commentary does

not relent until it has found such a moment of self-reference as self-exposure, verbal or visual, often disguised as a witty metaphor, a provocative comparison or a particularly bold simile. Consider, for instance, his realisation in the 1980s that some of his Maoist ideas might have been naive, or that his pro-Vietnamese stance from the mid-1970s could not survive the historical moment:

Ever since revolutions have existed, there has been enthusiasm, followed by disappointment. 'How could I have been so blind as to believe that the Vietcong would create a better regime?' One says 'blind' because love is blind. But to be faithful to an idea means not to exchange it right away for another, more opportune one. Perhaps one has to be prepared even to endure the death of an idea, without running away. To be faithful means to be present even in the hour of death.¹³

So prominent is the habit of thought to express one thing through another, and to 'see' the self in the other that it must be considered the founding gesture of Farocki's body of work and the signature of his mind at work. Whether it is the point of departure or finishing line, the moment of metaphoric 'conversion' marks the pull of gravity of his imagination. Juxtaposing apparent opposites and if necessary, torturing them until they yield a hidden identity or an unsuspected similarity, provide the (temporary) moments of closure for his trains of thought. In this sense, metaphoric equivalence and (almost as often) metaphoric discrepancy (catachresis) establish Farocki's poetics as well as his politics.¹⁴ But metaphor also defines what an image can be and what are its limits, and metaphor passes the responsibility for taking care of the image back to language, where it holds it accountable.

Farocki himself discusses his poetics under a different heading, not metaphor but montage. His montage takes two forms. One is as a sort of meta-commentary, traversing especially the early films like a steady murmur, repeating the need to 'separate and join'. The other type of montage is embedded in the movement of the thought, as its structuring dynamic, but verbalised, if at all, only as the cut, the gap and what becomes visible 'in-between'. Where film theorists speak of segmentation, Farocki (or his characters) discuss the difficulty of thinking things together at one level, while at another, making distinctions and keeping things apart. Only when the two levels are aligned, are the preconditions of new knowledge present: making connections on the basis of having taken something apart is thus where the rhetoric of metaphor meets the technique of filmic montage. In *ETWAS WIRD SICHTBAR*, separating/joining defines the entire movement of the plot, as if its macrostructure had to be repeated at the microlevel, a sort of fractal relationship between the big themes (how to link a political struggle for liberation to a personal act of emancipation, how to separate as a couple while maintaining a friendship) and the small

formal concerns (the relations from shot to shot, keeping shots static and nonetheless creating an inner movement linking these self-contained units of meaning). In trying to find new building blocks for film narrative, and a new grammar for film language, Farocki works towards creating the formal basis for his metaphoric thinking, by for instance, 'reinventing' the tableau shot of early cinema, and by devising several kinds of frame-within-a-frame compositions. In many cases, the voice-over commentary or the scripted dialogue between the characters verbalises both tenor and vehicle, while the visuals repeat the metaphoric figure by literalising it: in *ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN*, one finds sentences like: 'the chemist Kékulé was looking for the molecular structure of benzol [...] one night, he dreamt of serpents swallowing their own tail.' In a hand mirror, held up to an imagined window, we see a group of children down in the street, dancing in a row and slowly forming a circle (see ill. 13). 'So Kékulé proposed the form of a circle for the benzol molecules' – 'It's like a bird that eats its own eggs, in order to feed itself while it is hatching them.' The scene with its metaphoric relays and its visual *mise-en-abîme* introduces the key concept of the film, that of the *Verbund*, i.e. the creation of a connection between steel production and the coking plant, in order to maximise the energy use of the industrial processes involved, so that the waste products of one can become an energy source for another. As the engineer puts it: 'our task today is to direct whatever energy is generated in a production process to wherever it can be optimally utilised. We have to create links between mines, coking plants, steelworks, and blast furnaces.' To which the industrialist replies: 'I started off as a farmer. A sow gives birth to a litter of twenty, of which two or three will be too weak to survive, and the sow will eat them. Pigs can eat piglets. But piglets are much too valuable to just make them into pig-feed as a matter of principle. Yet that is exactly what we are doing when we feed the gas from the coke plant back into the firing up of the coking ovens. No farmer would ever fatten his pigs with piglets, with the idea that this lowers his feed costs.'

If in his early films, the metaphoric principle is verbalised, and applied somewhat externally, by way of political slogans ('mass battles are like factory work, the trenches are the assembly lines'), the later ones integrate their metaphors, by providing the implicit structure for an entire film. Thus, *LEBEN – BRD* consists of a series of such tableau vignettes, each showing a different group of people or locations, where an exercise, a rehearsal, a training programme or a demonstration takes place: schoolchildren are taught to safely cross the road, pensioners are rehearsing an amateur theatrical performance, trainee midwives are shown how to deliver babies, soldiers are taken through their paces with tanks on open terrain, police rehearse the arrest of a resisting suspect, and so on (see ill. 57). Each vignette is itself cut into different seg-

ments, so that the film can return to them several times, even to the point where the second appearance retrospectively explains the first. But intercut into the intercut segments are also scenes of mechanical tests: a metal weight falls rhythmically onto an armchair, to test the durability of the internal springs; car doors are mechanically opened and slammed shut; robots insert car keys into locks, give them half a turn and pull them out again, toilet seats are raised and lowered, washing machines are rumbled and tilted until they crash into corners. Machines impersonate the human users who brutalise the object world. The metaphor is evident, and if understood as an exact equivalence, is highly polemical: today, people are nothing but objects, commodities that, in order to remain in the market place as tradable goods, have to be regularly and mechanically tested as to their utility, durability and stress resistance.¹⁵ But precisely because no commentary is offered, and no verbal paraphrase links the one sequence to the other, or compares the animate with the inanimate, the viewers are given ample room for their own reflections. The sequences may elicit a troubling image of parallels, but also one that focuses on the differences between the groups, or they may pass through a whole gamut of recognition- and estrangement-effects, as daily life before our eyes takes on the contours of a permanent fire drill, a coaching lesson, a therapy session, a job interview, or awareness training. Are these dress rehearsals a sensible behavioural insurance policy against a risky, uncertain future, or do they confirm just the opposite: the foolishness of believing that life is a script that can be learnt by heart or by rote? Thus, if as viewers we come to the key metaphor (that human beings are like commodities and the social system is like a stress-testing machine) from the other side, from its verso – the patchy analogies, the ironic asymmetry, and the painful rather than cynical equivalences – we see the film more as a series of Chinese boxes. A sort of mental *mise-en-abyme* begins to connect the segments, potentially undercutting and even inverting the paratactic (but pointedly non-chronological) succession of segments produced by Farocki's mimicry of the observational, direct-cinema editing style.¹⁶

In his most recent works, notably the installation pieces, the metaphors become strikingly bold and revealing in other respects: linking prisons to shopping malls, for instance, seems provocative in quite a different way than his earlier comparisons of First World War trenches with Fordist assembly lines. It is precisely because some of the visual analogies no longer fully support the wide-ranging argument – such as the juxtaposition of a surveillance video of a prison visiting hour, and one of shoppers pushing carts through supermarket aisles – that the comparisons between the architecture of prisons, modern theatres of war, and the design of shopping malls remain conceptually sound. The Bentham Panopticon prison that he shows in the opening scenes of *ICH GLAUBTE GEFANGENE ZU SEHEN*, with its tight alignment of camera eye and gun

sight is, as he himself remarks, already obsolete in light of the new tagging, tracking, and deterritorialising surveillance technologies. Farocki's very point is to indicate the limits of the visible itself in the new commercially high-profit but politically low-profile *Verbund* systems emerging with the 'synergies' between computer software firms, security specialists, and consumer service industries. They also pose a new challenge to film history, as Farocki argues in 'Controlling Observation':

We have already mentioned the fact that the prison visitation scene [so central to the prison film genre] will soon no longer correspond with reality. The introduction of electronic cash will make bank robbery practically impossible as well, and if it turns out that in the future all weapons will be electronically tagged, [...] the end of the screen shoot-out will also be just around the corner. [...] With the increase in electronic control devices, everyday life will become just as difficult to portray and to dramatise as everyday work already is.

In a sense, Farocki's cinema has consistently anticipated this state of affairs: what is decisive in our society and what shapes much of our everyday lives, has almost totally withdrawn itself from the visual plane and escapes traditional representation techniques, including those of cinematic montage. Hence the importance of the cut or gap that one not only finds in his editing of filmic segments, but also in the conceptual montage of his argument, which always leaves a space between the missing shot or missing link for the viewer to either notice or not, but in any case, to figure out for himself. As with all metaphors, there is also a *tertium comparationis* in Farocki's work that is not always entirely spelled out, and which at times becomes the hidden Archimedean point around which the comparison finally turns. In the case of prisons and shopping malls, the missing link might be '(enforced) (leisure)', with, in each case, a significant shift of emphasis from one institution to the other.¹⁷ If the more overt link is, of course, the presence of surveillance cameras in both prisons and shopping centres, then the intended goal of this close circuit visibility, namely to make all contact routine, that is to say: predictable and programmable – 'safe' – is the more pertinent and thought-provoking connection. In Farocki's accompanying text, on the other hand, the factory principle, the assembly line and the kinds of discipline associated with mechanised labour returns as the focal point. There, he brings together prisons and shopping malls, military training camps and factories, as examples of artificial environments carefully designed to permit the friction-free sequencing of production processes: be they the processing of model prisoners and model shoppers, or the production of combat soldiers and of quality-controlled consumer goods (see ill. 42).

The Man with the Writing Desk, at the Editing Table

Farocki's poetics, I want to argue, has developed from a montage cinema to one encompassing installation art. But is this a natural progression, in line with the times, a shift of conceptual plane and register, or an advance that simultaneously implies a step back? From the point of view of the centrality of metaphor in his cinema, the question is particularly acute. But as I have tried to indicate, the problem of the semantic versus the spatial relation between images posed itself right from the start. When a filmmaker edits a sequence of images, either consecutively or in contiguous opposition, it is almost too difficult to create metaphors that are not purely rhetorical gestures or pre-structured linguistically (as in Eisenstein's, or Chaplin's actualised 'inner speech' metaphors). By contrast, in a twin screen installation work, where there are two images side by side, it is almost too easy to create metaphors: the installation itself becomes a sort of metaphor machine, which may have to be constrained, synchronised by voice, sound and a new kind of syntax, in order to also produce contiguous-metonymic relations and, by extension, an argument or a sense of progression. The task is to distil (con)sequentiality out of pure succession, to trace a trajectory out of random access, and to effect the sort of spacing that can generate meaningful syntactic relationships between images. Cinema and installation art illustrate two principles that potentially conflict with one another: the sequence and simultaneity, 'one thing after another' and 'two things at the same time'. Given the contending claims of these two principles throughout his work, it is possible to argue that Farocki's cinema has always aspired to the condition of installation art, while his installations are especially creative ways of tackling the problem how to keep the movement of thought going, even when two image-tracks are running side by side. Already in *ZWISCHEN ZWEI KRIEGEN* (1977) one finds the following sentence as a sort of manifesto for the logic of his installation pieces: 'I have started to take photographs. *One* image, incidentally, is too few; you need to take *two* images of everything [that matters]. Things are in flux so much that it requires two images at the very least to properly register the *direction* of the movement.' A few years later (1981) he published an article that argued the pros and cons of shot-countershot as the (all too convenient but nonetheless apparently indispensable) base-line of cinematic thought and its temporal articulations:

It is authors, author-authors, who are against the shot-countershot technique. The shot-countershot technique is a method of montage which in advance has an effect on the shooting, and thus also upon the invention, choice, and the way one deals with types of filmic images and prototypes. In the end, shot-countershot is the first rule, the law of value. [...] Shot-countershot is such an important technique in the

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