

1: The Future of “Art” and “Work” in the Age of Vision Machines: Harun Farocki

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The Post-Avant-Garde: Cinema Enters the Museum

NOTHING IS MORE STRIKING, when we ponder the fate today of the filmic avant-garde from the 1960s and 1970s, than its makers' virtual eclipse and exodus from the cinema screens and their partial reappearance as gallery artists and in museum exhibits. Some of the reasons are obvious, such as the distribution impasse: over the last twenty years the traditional venues that once were willing or able to show “experimental,” “structuralist,” or non-narrative films — art house cinemas, *Programmkinos*, cinémathèques — have become scarce and increasingly reluctant to take risks, unless the work is programmed within a broader context: generally to remember an anniversary or when themed as the retrospective of an already established signature artist. Neither occasion favors the production of new works, with the result that funding is the second major reason for the crossover. Television — at least in West Germany — used to be the avant-garde's main source of finance as well as its prime exhibition outlet. But this source, too, dried up during the 1980s with the rise of commercial broadcasting, and a single late-night slot was never a satisfying place to show work that may have taken months, if not years, to create.

Installation art offers an alternative. Filmmakers discovered in the exhibition curator a patron to commission new work: a gallery or museum can guarantee a more extended run, where the work encounters *visitors* who are prepared to give an avant-garde film the kind of contemplative attention that neither *viewers* would have granted it when channel-hopping at home, nor *spectators* are willing to invest when “going to the movies.” Beyond these possibly very obvious reasons for filmmakers to migrate to the museum, what are the further implications for our understanding of the current position of the cinema's “post-avant-garde”? Without opening up an extended balance sheet of gain and loss arising from the “death of (avant-garde) cinema” and its born-again mutation into installation art, a few preliminary conclusions can be drawn. First, the historical avant-gardes

have always been antagonistic to the art world, while nevertheless wholly depending upon its institutional networks. This is a constitutive contradiction that also informs the new alliance between the film avant-garde and the museum circuit, creating deadlocks around “original” and “copy,” “commodification” and “the market”: film as the epitome of “mechanical reproduction” now finds itself taken over by the institution dedicated to the cult(ure) of the unique object, whose status as original is both its aura and its capital. Secondly, productive tensions also arise, for instance, between the temporal extension of a filmwork (often hours: Jean-Luc Godard, Douglas Gordon, Ulrike Ottinger, or Phil Collins), and the exhibition visitors’ own time-economy (rarely more than a few minutes in front of a single installation). As a consequence, repetition, loops, juxtaposition, mirror-mazes, and serial forms take over from linear, narrative, or argumentative trajectories as structuring principles.

Matthias Müller, Christian Marclay, or Martin Arnold). Third, the programmatic reflexivity and self-reference of the modern artwork is both echoed and subverted by installation art, by new forms of performativity and self-display that may involve the body of the artist (Carolee Schneeman or Yvonne Rainer), even to the point of self-injury (Marina Abramovic). Finally, installations also give rise to other ways of engaging the spectator more directly: by means of sound that creates a special kind of presence (Jean Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet), or by means of image juxtapositions that provoke the viewer into “closing the gap” by providing his or her own “missing link” (Isaac Julien, Stan Douglas, and Chantal Akerman).

In what follows, I want to argue that the body of work of Harun Farocki, both as a filmmaker and as installation artist, can best be understood as exemplary for this crossover, insofar as his films have always functioned along some of the parameters just sketched as typical for the “post-avant-garde,” while his installations retain some of the essential features of filmmaking as an art as well as a craft. Thus, my title: “the future of art and work” points to how I think his films, along with his installations, are best understood. At the same time, the title deliberately eschews the conventional couplet “art and politics,” because I want to avoid the double temptation of defining art and politics around questions of “representation,” so central to film theory, or associating art with direct action or an interventionist agenda, which was so central to the art avant-gardes of the twentieth century, intent on shortening the distance between art and life. Such contexts were for Farocki — even during his agit-prop phase in the 1960s — rarely adequate, and they seem quite inappropriate for the twenty-first century, when “life” increasingly claims for itself the adjective “artificial,” and “art” needs to redefine itself as something other than the application of design to the business of living. Instead it may need to recover for itself something of the contingency, unpredictability, and

“blind chance” of life, or as in the case of Farocki, reconsider art’s own apparent opposite: “work,” as its own future. It means reframing the post-avant-garde of “the cinema in the museum” as the site of the contradictory labor of preservation and destruction, of nostalgic evocation asserting a transgressive obsolescence, and of the “critical” or self-reflexive stance obliged to “perform” self-tests of accountability and reference.¹

The Politics of “The Political”

Harun Farocki, who began making films in 1966, was born in 1944 of an Indian father and a German mother. He grew up in Hamburg but then moved to West Berlin, where he has lived ever since the early 1960s. Among the first students to enter the Berlin Film & Television Academy (DFFB), he was expelled, along with several others, in 1968 for activities judged subversive. Earning a living by making short features for television, Farocki established himself in the 1970s and 1980s as a leading political filmmaker, with a number of partly self-financed full-length works, such as *Zwischen den Kriegen* (Between Two Wars, 1978), *Etwas wird sichtbar* (Before Your Eyes — Vietnam, 1982), *Betrogen* (Betrayed, 1985) and *Wie man sieht* (As You See, 1986).² An incisive and accomplished writer in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht, as well as a friend and admirer of Heiner Müller and Peter Weiss, he revived the reputation of the journal *Filmkritik* during the years of his coeditorship from 1974 to 1984. While he was unaffiliated with any political party, his filmmaking and writing, which for him belong together as the recto and verso of each other, constitute one of the most consistent and consistently political stances taken by any artist in the Federal Republic.

More specifically, Farocki’s films are political along several axes and lines of force, the first being art and work: what unites them and what distinguishes them. A definition of *art* might be that it is a particular combination of hand and eye, of seeing and doing, of engaging the body in an act of self-realization through self-symbolization, which always also involves the possibility of self-loss (as the verso of the artist’s trajectory towards impersonality and “immortality”). The corresponding definition of *work* would be that it, too, is perhaps best seen as a particular combination of hand and eye, in an act of self-objectification, which always also involves the possibility of self-alienation, as it encounters the world in the form of an already existing fabric of institutions regulating different forms of constraint, power, and rationality, of which technology, industrialization, state bureaucracy, and capitalism are the fabric or *Fabrik* with which we have been most familiar over the past two-and-a-half centuries. The key indicator or metaphoric cluster of this conjuncture in Farocki’s films and installations is the centrality of the complex: hand and eye, hand and machine, eye and machine.

A second line of force encompasses art, aura, and the “loss of aura” (Walter Benjamin). Benjamin’s theories about the relation between art and work — and especially the idea that the disinterestedness of an art object is merely the memory of an object’s former usefulness — were developed under the double impact of French surrealism and Russian montage cinema. What ties art to work is secularization, in the process of which objects of religious cults became our first art “works.” Add to this industrialization and the gradual obsolescence of manual work, and it is the ironic or nostalgic evocation, re-creation, or celebration of crafts and skills that now furnishes the resources and materials of the artifacts we consider art. Such is the legacy of surrealism and Marcel Duchamp, of pop art and of conceptual art, whether in the form of *arte povera*, minimalism, or installation art. The “image” (the mechanically produced technical image) thus is best conceptualized as ready-made, an *objet trouvé*, rather than as a “representation” or likeness. It also highlights the new distribution of roles after the art world’s encounter with the moving image, whether as cinema, video, or installation: while “up-front” museums compete with architecture, interior design, and upscale shopping centers for display space and attention, their “back-ends” have become the storage spaces of obsolete technologies. As a consequence, the artist emerges either as rival to the lifestyle designer or as the guardian of once-prized skills and of artisanal techniques, materials, or tools.

Third, art and work are comparable activities of separating and joining, from handicrafts, such as weaving or the skill of a butcher when cleaving meat, to the assembly line and the electronic relays of the computer: in Farocki’s films (from which these examples are taken), one is confronted with acts of separating and joining, assembling and disassembling, knitting together and prying apart.³ The aesthetic equivalents of these are the techniques of montage and metaphor, of taking apart what seems to be self-evident, commonplace or “second nature,” but also of making connections where before there were none, or where the hidden connections are not normally visible, such as between prisons and shopping malls, or the steel industry and “independent” filmmaking. One could say that art today is anything that has undergone a change in place (or a time shift), and the presence of which in this place or at this moment constitutes an “event”: a rupture and a reassembly, but also a retrospective disclosure of a line of force, pointing to a possibility yet to be realized.

This separating and joining, too, is a political act par excellence. The public sphere, the *res publica*, is that space that brings together those who are normally separate, discrete, dispersed, and disparate. This is why *solidarity*, as a forging together of purposes and goals, and as a contract of responsibilities and interests, is such a fundamental requirement for any social bond and any political act; it brings into a common space those that are and know themselves to be different, in order to make common cause or to acknowledge their common humanity.

If the eye/hand cooperation, as well as their “division of labor” are so important for art and work, then the vision machines and the assembly line, the digital image (dispensing with the eye) and robotics (dispensing with the hand) threaten the very core of both. An archaeology of art and work in the twentieth century, with their peculiar asymmetry, would require one to retrace how art and work have been developing in apparently different directions, through the gap that has opened up between hand and eye. The mutual re-purposing and reinvention of grasp, touch, and vision, in response to the “civilization process” at one end of the dialectic and of “the machine” at the other, under the sign of leisure (sports, sex, and fitness) and “play” (hand/eye coordination in video games, the new functionality of the hand/eye combination in the mobile phone or the digital camera) might furnish a new prospect for the future of both work and art. Farocki seems more skeptical, perhaps because his question is more limited and more precise: how does this realignment of hand and eye position the filmmaker, as someone precisely working with his eyes and his hands: separating and joining, cutting and editing the physical movement of human beings and inanimate things, while laying bare the inner motion of thought and feeling, attentive to friction and resistance, distance and proximity, touch and vision?

Finally, because of this close but hidden connection between art and work, the primary motive of modern art — that of a reflexivity to the point of tautology and “narcissism” — cannot stop at the point of self-reference. According to Farocki, every act of self-reflexivity must contain a form of self-accountability and even self-implication. It is this laying oneself on the line, of “staking one’s life,” as he once wrote in an obituary for his friend Holger Meins, that the political nature of art — and especially film — manifests itself.⁴

What Is Cinema: Images of the World

Farocki came to international attention with his film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and Inscription of War) in 1988 and 1989, at the time of the most profound upheavals of the second part of the twentieth century, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since by then Farocki already had some forty-odd titles to his credit, *Bilder der Welt* should not have come as a surprise, since it merely confirmed how timely and prescient many of his films had been all along. As a meditation on the media and modern wars in the age of smart bombs and surgical strikes, *Bilder der Welt* established itself as *the* reference film for understanding the background to the new asymmetries of warfare as they emerged after the first Gulf War, by showing how contemporary “wars at a distance” have a long tradition in Western technologies of

imaging and communication. Equally pertinent to understanding the present was his insight that cameras and the cinematograph, by making the world visible to mechanical eyes, are continuing to transform not only warfare, space exploration, and civil engineering, but also civil society, public space, and the domestic sphere. So deeply has the photographic — and now digital — image shaped public memory and penetrated private experience that few events have occurred during the past hundred years that were not witnessed by and are not remembered through vision machines of one kind or another. Indeed, it is the camera's presence that now defines what counts as an event, what is deemed worthy to enter into history or memory. This ongoing shift between "private" and "public" is perhaps the single most important political process since the French Revolution separated the two, and the cinema, in no small measure, has been one of the chief historical engines in dislocating and realigning their boundaries.

In this perspective, the cinema's role as our culture's prime storytelling medium is almost secondary. Instead, the cinematic apparatus must be understood as a machine of the visible that is itself, appearances to the contrary, largely "invisible." Beginning with the popularity of the magic lantern — invisibly present, for instance, in the philosophy of René Descartes, one of the fathers of the Enlightenment and thus, as the French call it, *L'âge des lumières* (anticipating the names of the "inventors" of the cinema) — this optical way of manufacturing mechanical images of the world has entered the human mind to such an extent that, at least until the advent of the computer, Descartes' ocular pyramid has remained the most pervasive model for inscribing reality into consciousness. The camera (eye, lens, *Gestell*) is the symbolic form and *techné* of choice in the "age of the world-picture" (Heidegger), taking command and exerting control. And yet the same cinematic apparatus, imagined as an arrangement of distinctive parts that comprise not just the camera but also projection, a screen, an image, and a spectator, has also been seen as a prison cage: its peculiar logic of perception and its geometry of representation is present even when (especially when) camera and projector are absent. As is well known, this idea of projected representation as imprisonment can be traced back to Plato's parable of the cave, powerfully revived in Foucault's description of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which gives the *camera obscura* a genealogy that goes back to Greek philosophy, while providing it with a prosthetic afterlife that provisionally culminates in today's surveillance videos and body scans. It reminds us that the camera and the moving image have many histories, but only some of them belong to "the cinema," whose golden age as *the* art form of the second industrial revolution may come to be seen as only a relatively brief phase in a much larger overall life of imaging technologies and their vision machines.⁵

Earlier than most of his contemporaries, Farocki realized that industrial films, training videos, surveillance tapes, time and motion studies,

CAT scans in medical diagnosis, and computer-assisted design in architecture are increasingly claiming their place in visual culture. The fact that these “operational images” (Vilem Flusser) or “technical images” (Friedrich Kittler) have shadowed film history alongside the works of Fritz Lang, Orson Welles, Robert Bresson, or Jean-Luc Godard may come as a shock to cinephiles, but their insistent copresence has inspired some of the most acute reflections on the cinema in Farocki’s films. In *Ich glaubte, Gefangene zu sehen* (I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts, 2000) when he talks about airports, schools, and factories as belonging to the history of vision as surveillance, he may be charting a possible *post-history* of the cinema, but in *Wie man sieht* (1986) he had already traced the computer’s *prehistory* when pointing out how a fork in the road or a tributary stream joining a river had led to the founding of cities, asserting the principle of separating and joining as fundamental to human habitation, but also to the if/then, yes/no, branching-and-forking structure of computational processing and contemporary storytelling. *Wie man sieht* also shows how the Jacquard loom with its programmable sequence of colored threads “anticipated” television, and why the deployment of the Maxim machine gun at the battle of Ondurman was a necessary step in the “invention” of the Lumière cinematograph. In this sense, Farocki’s cinema is a metacinema: it exceeds the cinema “as we know it” by reflecting on the cinema “as we have known it,” asking once more the question, what is cinema? but also that other, even more difficult question, why is cinema?

Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist

Such double reflection and self-interrogation make the name “filmmaker” inadequate to describe Farocki’s *métier*: installation artist, media theorist, film historian, essayist, philosopher of the image, writer, and teacher are equally appropriate and equally insufficient. A film like *Etwas wird sichtbar* (1982) requires such an intense concentration of eye, ear, and mind that the viewer is constantly taken in and out of the image. Documenting the disintegration of a love affair under the pressure of political “consciousness raising” among the generation of ’68, this fiction film is as much a chamber piece for several voices as it is a photo essay on the war in Vietnam, mirrored in the perception of those too distant to participate and too close to remain unaffected. Its creation of distinct “spaces in time” even more than a sense of place or period is echoed in *Das doppelte Gesicht* (The Dual Face, 1984), an unbearably poignant film on Peter Lorre, using mostly still photographs taken of the actor by his Hollywood studio publicity department during Lorre’s years of exile in Southern California. While these three films — *Wie man sieht*, *Etwas wird sichtbar*, and *Das doppelte Gesicht* — indicate part of the spectrum of Farocki’s work, they also hint at the difficulties of classifying

it in terms of genre, style, or subject matter, making one hesitate as to where to locate Farocki in modern film culture, or indeed in the film history of (West) Germany. He could take his place in the long line of European auteurs, putting him in a genealogy that besides Robert Bresson includes Carl Theodore Dreyer, Jean Marie Straub, and Danièle Huillet. Farocki the writer of polemical reflections laced with sardonic wit and understated pathos is a modernist in the tradition of Walter Benjamin, an aphorist-essayist in the footsteps of Günther Anders, and a media theorist in dialogue with Vilem Flusser and Paul Virilio. His installation *Schnittstelle* (Interface, 1995) demonstrates a deep affinity with the Russian montage school centered on Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, but other films, such as *Nicht ohne Risiko* (Nothing Ventured, 2004) and *Die Schöpfer der Einkaufswelten* (The Creators of the Shopping Worlds, 2001) indicate that he can also situate himself quite precisely in the German documentary movement: for instance, combining Klaus Wildenhahn's observational cinema with Hartmut Bitomsky's politically astute analyses of industrial processes.⁶

The Essay-Film: Recording the Work of Hand/Eye/Machine

The sense that Farocki challenges many if not all traditional divisions and classifications has earned for his work another description: that of the “essay film,” associating Farocki with Chris Marker, late Godard, or the compilation films by Peter Forgacs and Gustav Deutsch. It is true that, like the work of these artists, Farocki's films incorporate “found footage”; they are discursive and they proceed by arguments derived from the images themselves rather than constructing a fictional narrative or illustrating with images a political or philosophical perspective on the world “out there.” He often uses voice-over commentary, whose *gestus* modulates between the patiently didactic, the rigorously analytical, and the searchingly forensic. But “essay film” is finally also no more than a label, perhaps in need of revision, especially in light of the crossover of film into the museum with which I began. If Farocki's films have been in a constant dialogue with images, with image making, they always also engage the institutions that produce and the owners that circulate (or suppress) these images, such as the film industry, the advertising business, television, the military, the government. This, too, is part of his cinema as metacinema, newly refigured in the museum, which while seemingly “outside” the institutional constraints just mentioned, nonetheless “communicates” with them in covert reciprocity. Echoing the post-'68 rhetoric of protest and confrontation he once wrote that his films were made against the cinema and against television. This seems to point forward to the “white cube” of the gallery space,

but also acknowledges the crucial fact that there is no space “outside” images and their institutional or political function from which to speak about images: not even — or especially not — the museum and the gallery. Yet his metacinema tries to operate without a metalanguage: when he made films for television that challenged the way that television makes films, Farocki said “the inside is the outside is the inside.” A good example is *Betrogen* (Betrayed, 1985), playing television soap opera off against the television thriller, in a game of move and countermove, with each revealing another layer of deceit or self-delusion, as if one genre were the “false bottom” of the other, in a contest of reality-conjurers. Or, put differently: just as a filmmaker is implicated in the machinery even as he attempts to extricate himself from it, so his images are part of the process of world-making; they do not merely record this process, nor can they distance themselves from it: television genres — even before the rise of reality TV — have been exemplary in this respect. At the same time, such world-making is also a world-losing. As Farocki once told me in an interview: alongside the satellites circling the globe taking pictures, and along with the hungry camera eyes of CNN, of National Geographic, or the History Channel, his cinema, too, contributes to “making [much of] the world superfluous.”⁷ In the dialectic of “original” and “copy,” the authentic and the cliché, the moving image valorizes itself by devaluing what it shows, regardless of whether the gesture is one of “description,” “preservation,” “redemption,” “disclosure,” or “exposure”: such may be the tragic knowledge of the post-avant-garde, deprived of the antagonistic-agonistic pathos of the avant-garde.

Farocki’s metacinema, despite not having a metalanguage, is envisaged as a form of *writing*, and to this extent, the label “essay film” does convey an important aspect of his work. Especially when one understands the word “essay” (with its etymological roots in the verb “to do”) to include Farocki’s “mode of production,” his “manu-facture,” his handwriting, his signature. A metaphor once used by Walter Benjamin, in which he referred to the storyteller’s indirect presence in the narrative as “the thumbprint of the potter on the clay vessel,” can be applied to Farocki’s essay films. Indeed, in several of Farocki’s films, the director’s hand frames an image in the film (most famously, in *Bilder der Welt* and *Schnittstelle*). Together with Jürgen Becker, Farocki also made a film called simply *Der Ausdruck der Hände* (The Expression of Hands, 1997). It celebrates the grace and delicacy of human hands as the instruments of touch, of caressing contact, as the medium of give and take. And, of course, it shows hands at work, whether as the surgical tools of pickpockets or handling materials and machines in the factory production process. Yet in these choreographed ballets of skilled fingers, powerful palms, and delicate tips there is a pervasive sense that all such celebration is already a requiem. Is not the first half of the twentieth century in retrospect also the brief but rapidly forgotten



Fig. 1. Vergleich über ein Drittes, film installation, still, 2007.
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history of the obsolescence of the hand in the productive processes? Its strength replaced by machines, while its guiding or steering functions are taken over by the eye, monitoring and controlling processes now carried out by computer-assisted machine tools, robot arms, and metal claws instead of wrists or fingers — at least in the Western world: women's hands on the assembly lines of Asian countries tell the same story in geopolitical slow-motion. An installation nominally dealing with manual brickmaking in Mumbai, Burkina Faso, and its machine counterparts in France and Germany underlines several of the asynchronicities and gaps, asymmetries and false parallels thrown up in the process (*Nebeneinander: Vergleich über ein Drittes*; *Contiguities: Comparison via a Third*, 2007).

Here a conception of manu-facture, of “hand-work,” and its historical place — at once avant-garde in art and obsolete in industry — poses itself for Farocki around the question of the kind of “work” filmmaking is, especially his own. Filmmaking (and this is indeed the third term/*das Dritte* that *Nebeneinander* implicitly invokes by staging it on the soundtrack but not in the image) might be the last kind of work deserving that name, serving as an allegory of so many other kinds of work no longer needed or valued

in contemporary society. When Farocki had situated himself, in *Es wird sichtbar*, between “working like a machine” and “working like an artist,” he qualified both as ultimately too easy: “It is not a question of doing either one or the other, but of joining the two.” However, while in 1981 such a statement still provided a critical commentary on “independent” filmmaking in West Germany, between a declining film industry and the emerging market of freelance artist-artisans working for television, the dilemma of hand/eye/machine has since become part of a reflection about the “whys and wherefores,” and the “means” and “ends” — and of course, the “end” of cinema, as foreshadowed and mirrored in the cinema’s beginning, when Edward Muybridge used chronophotography for time-and-motion studies in the new assembly-line factories.

Such a cinema-archeology of circularity as self-analysis opens up the special significance of a film Farocki made in 1995 for the 100th anniversary of the “birth of cinema”: *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* (Workers Leaving the Factory), his own film echoing (and repeating) Louis and Auguste Lumière’s *Les ouvriers et ouvrières sortant de l’usine* (Workers Leaving the Factory, 1895). The ironic subject (yet another “comparison via a [hidden] third term”) of this compilation film from both fictional and factual film material around the trope/site of the factory gate is the emblematic convergence of a particular technology, the cinematograph, with a particular site, the factory. A further irony is implied by the fact that, ever since these two made contact, collided, and combined, more and more workers have been “leaving the factory.” With the advent of the cinema, and paradoxically in no small measure because of it, the value of human productivity, along with the function of labor and creativity, have undergone decisive mutations. Immobilized as Western societies seem to be in the face of ever-longer queues of the unemployed outside, and ever more numerous computer terminals — techno-mutants of the cinematograph — inside the workplace, the home has become factory, and leisure becomes work: somewhere in these mirrored ambiguities and asymmetries, the cinema places the cut and at the same time, provides the link.

Farocki’s films and installations since the 1990s have thus increasingly focused on this question of “work”: not only as categories of the economic life, that is, how a society materially produces and ideologically reproduces the means of its survival. Even more critical is the future of work as the very condition of what it means to be (and remain) human. And here he notes (from the vantage point of the gallery as a privileged site of such critical introspection) the fatal role that the cinema itself might have played, when he speaks of the lineage that goes from early time-and-motion studies to the latest surveillance satellites: “While the time & motion studies of the Fordist factory presented a picture of abstract work, the pictures from the surveillance cameras yield a picture of abstract existence.”⁸ Once more, the specter of the cinema makes “the world superfluous.”



*Fig. 2. Vergleich über ein Drittes, film installation, still, 2007.
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***Verbund* and Network: The Poetics of Metaphor and the Politics of Metonymy**

What, then, is the function of the eye, which rendered the hand obsolete during the first half of the twentieth century, while it is itself being made redundant by the digital vision machines during the century's second half: machines that do not rely on optics, but generate "data" (from variations in temperature, electrical current, or atmospheric density) that computer algorithms convert into visualizations or graphic representations that we still tend to call "images"? The question is important, not only because so much of "life" seems to be disappearing into such "images," their suggestively colorful allure, as well as their post-photographic instrumental functionality. While film scholars have explored the dialectics of embodied and disembodied vision and worried over the troubling implications of "look" and "gaze," Farocki's films add another dimension: that of the machine eye, with its blind gaze, and the ruptures this engenders in the eye/I, subject/object relations implicit in the Cartesian optics alluded to earlier. It is therefore typical that so many of Farocki's films have the words "seeing"

or “eye” in the title (*Wie man sieht; Etwas wird sichtbar; Auge: Maschine; Ich glaubte Gefangene zu sehen*), because they alert one to these fatal paradoxes of vision and visuality, in respect of representation, visualization, and the seeing subject. A filmmaker’s look — encompassing (the hot subjectivity of) the artist’s vision and (the cold eye of) the machine look — is also a Medusa’s look: mortifying what it sees, making images transitive, turning them into objects, specimen, evidence.

Given this “fatality” of the cinema, when considered as “expanded” and including its scientific, military, industrial, and medical applications, what leverage does the “experimental” filmmaker have: avant-garde and therefore operating in all the liminal as well as boundary regions of his *métier*, but also relocated in the culturally still central space of the museum and thus “extra-territorial” as well as “marginal” with respect to the public sphere that used to be cinema? Against the nostalgia of preservation and redemption, or the utopia of revelation and disclosure, traditionally associated with the photographic image considered as “art,” Farocki practices the forensic look. Yet unlike, say, Michelangelo Antonioni in *Blow Up* (1966), whose photographer-protagonist penetrates deeper and deeper into the single image in order to mine it for evidence, Farocki joins and separates images, juxtaposes two images, expresses one image through another, or lines up a series of images, discovering significant patterns. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in *Bilder der Welt*, at the heart of which are two series of photographs from 1943/44; one set, taken from the air by American surveillance planes, captures pictures of Auschwitz, without seeing “Auschwitz”; the other series, taken by an SS officer “on the ground,” captures the selection process at a concentration camp ramp for his private photo album, without seemingly registering the unimaginable cruelty, or indeed the heartbreaking humanity looking at him, looking through the lens. These, then, are two kinds of “cold” look, yielding their multiple historical determinations (but also their ethical meanings) only in communication with one another. The tragedy lies in the gaps, the not-seen, which only the joining, the repetition, and the montage — whether through transfer, translation, or substitution⁹ — can record and thus preserve for its future “disclosure.” The “cold eye” hands over to the “hand” as instrument of montage, which in turn, opens up the sequence to an inner eye, no longer either seduced or confused by “vision”: Sergei Eisenstein adapted for another generation (of vision machines). In other words, inside the metaphoric act of joining, there often lies the hidden *tertium comparationis* (*Vergleich über ein Drittes*), which reveals itself only by the metonymic fact of separation via contiguity: the change of place and/or time of an object that earlier on, I proposed as a possible definition of “art.” Separation and joining thus generate the complex co-ordinates of a “poetics of metaphor” that must be considered the founding gesture of Farocki’s working method, as he himself explains it in

Schnittstelle. There, the various image clusters, in all their rebus-like duplicity (of metonymic misalignment and hidden correspondences) or enigmatic and emblematic simplicity (of metaphoric equivalence), are clearly identified as the basis for Farocki's politics as well as his aesthetics.

There are thus two kinds of networks repositioning the "cinema within the museum" in Farocki's oeuvre. One is "internal" and names the "poetics of metaphor" and "politics of metonymy" just described. Together, they cover what Farocki understands by the term "montage." The other is "external," and links the different institutions currently producing, promoting, or preserving the moving image: first of all, television, the cinema, the art world, archives, visual databases. But then also those other institutional users of the moving image, state bureaucracies and the military, in the areas of security and surveillance, or commerce and industry for training, testing, or control purposes. Each is dynamic, but also asymmetrical and marked by moments of uneven exchange and embedded power relations, often structured by a hidden term or an invisible absence. The external network, too, has a name for Farocki: *Verbund* — the strategic alliance of institutions or instances that may have different identities and even competing agendas but are nonetheless linked at the level of operational action or effects. Thus, the cinematic apparatus is such a *Verbund*, made up as it is of the distinct instances of camera, projection, screen, and spectators, but only functioning when these come together and are aligned with each other in a certain fixed formation. An early film such as *Zwischen den Kriegen* was built around the model of a *Verbund*: that between steel production and the coking plants of the Ruhr valley, joined together, in order to recycle otherwise wasted energy. This *Verbund* (as the synergy of competing but strategically aligned industries) serves in the film as a metaphor for the conspiratorial alliance between German heavy industry and the Nazi bureaucracy of death. But such is the logic of Farocki's thinking that the same term *Verbund* also serves as an allegory of the cinema, or rather, of the independent filmmaker in the culture industries. For the *Verbund* shows, as its negative imprint, the chain of self-exploitation and recycling in which the film director as freelancer, television subcontractor, and "independent author" is caught, under conditions of the German subsidy system as it was in the 1970s, but increasingly affecting all the "flexible" jobs and work situations of the "creative industries." One can see how easily (but also with how much self-irony) the move into gallery space and, more recently, his appointment as professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna could be fitted into the *Verbund* network as the conditions for being a (post-) avant-garde filmmaker-artist in the 21st century.

The dynamics of the "internal" network of correspondences, generated by metaphor, contiguity, and the "comparison via a third term" can perhaps best be studied in a film like *Leben — BRD* (How to Live in the FRG, 1990). The film consists of a series of vignettes, each featuring a

different group of people or locations, the site of an exercise session, a rehearsal, a training program, or a demonstration: schoolchildren are taught to cross a busy road safely, pensioners rehearse 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. Each vignette is itself cut into different segments, so that the film can return to them several times, often in order for the second appearance to retrospectively explain the first. But intercut into the cut-up segments are also scenes of mechanical tests: a metal weight falls rhythmically on an armchair to test the durability of the internal springs; car doors are mechanically opened and slammed shut; robots insert 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 brutalize the object world. The metaphor is evident, and if understood as an exact equivalence, it is highly tendentious; today, the film seems to say, people are nothing but objects that, in order to stay in the market place as commodified labor, have to be regularly and mechanically tested as to their utility, durability, and stress resistance. Because no commentary is offered and no verbal paraphrase either links the sequences to each other or compares the animate with the inanimate, viewers are given ample room for their own reflections. They may build up a troubling image of parallels but also notice differences between the groups, or they may go through a whole gamut of recognition *and* estrangement effects, as daily life before their eyes takes on the contours of a permanent fire drill, a coaching lesson, a therapy session, a job interview, and awareness training. Are these scenes dress rehearsals, sensibly taking out behavioral insurance cover against a risky and uncertain future, or do they confirm just the opposite: the foolishness of believing that life is a script or a game that can be learned by heart or “mastered” by rote? Thus, approaching the central 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 — one sees the film more as a series of Chinese boxes, one inside the other, and thus a melancholy meditation on the “test drive” as the human condition(al) in the age of “virtual reality.” Yet at first glance, little seems to connect the segments, except their reference to a common theme that turns out to be far too schematic; it is only afterwards that the visual-argumentative puzzle Farocki has constructed around the absence of commentary and the gaps in the series “falls into place.”

Rebus-images, Chinese boxes and picture puzzles invoke modernist *mise en abyme* and postmodern self-reference, at one level confirming just how tightly the subjects of Farocki’s films stand in a vice-versa relation to the cinematic apparatus in its widest sense (as *dispositif* of all manner of vision

machines), with the latter acting as a metaphor of the former as well as its substitute. Thus, *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* performs a *mise en abyme* on the different *dispositifs* that today tie together military reconnaissance and mimicry or camouflage, police work and portrait photography, make-up sessions and life-model classes, by investigating several moments of their historical conjuncture, around the hidden term of resistance to atomic power among Germany's Green Party; *Videogramme einer Revolution* mimics the apparatus of democracy at its *status nascendi*: the power vacuum as the paradoxical moment of legitimating democratic sovereignty, with the "people" of the revolutionary moment of rupture now "missing," except insofar as they appear in the seemingly antagonistic (but nonetheless mutually implicated) media devices of state television and private camcorders.

In his more recent works, notably installation pieces such as *Die Schöpfer der Einkaufswelten*, or the *Auge: Maschine* series, the bracketing metaphors become strikingly bold. Bringing together prisons and shopping malls seems intended to provoke thinking in quite a different way than, for instance, comparing First World War trenches producing corpses with Fordist assembly lines producing cars (as Farocki had done in *Zwischen den Kriegen*). Precisely because some of the analogies can no longer be fully visualized, as "existence" becomes "abstract" — such as when the surveillance video of a prison visiting hour is juxtaposed with a grainy image of shoppers pushing carts through supermarket aisles — the comparisons require deconstruction. The panopticon prison that he shows in the opening scenes of *Ich glaubte Gefangene zu sehen*, with its tight alignment of camera eye and gunsight 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 economies-of-scale industries that have emerged from the alliances (*Verbund*) struck between computer software firms, security specialists, and consumer service industries: a new "military-entertainment complex" that has long since supplemented the "military-industrial complex."

The Cinema and Control Society: Self-Surveillance or Self-Implication?

And where has this new complex taken Farocki? As we saw: in the first instance, into the gallery and the museum. Several parallel — or rather, parallax — tracks can now be identified. His commissioned installation pieces on the one hand confront the museum as the traditional space of auto-inspection and self-reflection with the self-reference and feedback loops of electronic vision machines engaged in surveillance and monitoring, as well

as manufacturing and “quality control.” The surprising analogies that emerge from such an aligned juxtaposition are polemical, ironic, and melancholy all at once. In one of the installations curated by Farocki under the title *Kino wie noch nie* (Cinema Like Never Before) he seems to compare the filmmaker-artist, the collector of visual tropes, with the programmer of algorithms, priming search engines for pattern recognition and sorting databases. Second, films such as *Die Umschulung* (The Indoctrination, 1994), *Der Auftritt* (The Appearance, 1996), *Die Bewerbung* (The Interview, 1997), *Nicht ohne Risiko* (2004), instructional videos, and simulation and training films indicate, however ominous it may seem, that job interviews and the science lab, advertising agencies and risk-assessment companies have become performative spaces on a par with the cinema and the theater, while the museum and the gallery as sites of contemplative display now compete with other sites of openly commercial display, such as shopping malls or luxury boutiques. Together they encompass the polarities, but also trace the contours of what Gilles Deleuze has called the “control society,” in which the difficult virtues of dialogue, dissent, and democracy are increasingly automated: they are making way for search-related advertising, for monitoring and data-mining: harbingers of compromise and consensus around the lowest common denominator: the convenience of the consumer.

This brings me to my last point: the self-reference of the museum as occasion for a new kind of accountability and self-implication for the filmmaker. The general trend towards automated self-regulation and complicated feedback systems in our social organization and our concepts of “artificial life,” but also in our avant-garde art, highlights the topicality of Farocki’s work. If Vietnam in the 1970s, Auschwitz in the 1980s, surveillance technologies and smart bombs in the 1990s, prison regimes, shopping malls, and supermarkets in the new century appear to follow the actuality of news broadcasts, the impression is deceptive and even misleading. Farocki’s contemporaneity goes beyond current affairs, to the heart of his politics, which is that of bearing witness to the present. Yet Farocki goes a step further: he takes up a subject only when it, too, can be presented as a *mise en abyme* of the world, mirrored in his own work: as a feedback system, in other words, but asymmetrical and asynchronous rather than closed and self-regulating. Such is the case with the two sets of photos at the centre of *Bilder der Welt*, or the back-and-forth movement between the writing desk and the editing table in *Schnittstelle*. Once again the installation, as a double movement combining correspondence and disjuncture, turn and return, appears as the implied reference point of an enterprise begun long before Farocki’s cinema entered the gallery.

An example of how these dimensions of *mise en abyme*, feedback loop, and self-monitoring existed in Farocki’s work from its beginning is demonstrated with exceptional simplicity and courage in his very first (surviving) film, *Nicht lösches Feuer* (Inextinguishable Fire) of 1968/69. The camera,

head on, frames Farocki himself in a static medium close-up, sitting by an empty table in an apparently equally bare room; the table could be a teacher's desk, a witness stand before an investigating magistrate, or the place where the police might take a statement from a suspect. In a monotone, he reads from the eye-witness report by a Vietnamese man of the methods used by the US military in their bombing raids. Finishing the report, Farocki now speaks into the camera, saying:

“How can we show you the deployment of napalm, and how the burns that it causes? If we show you pictures of the injuries caused by Napalm, you will 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.”

Then Farocki takes a cigarette from the ashtray. As the camera slowly tracks into a close-up, he extinguishes the cigarette 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 around 4,000 degrees Celsius.

The scene prefigures and also encapsulates the fundamental preoccupations of Farocki's filmmaking. It shows why his poetics of metaphor or resemblance is embedded in larger metonymies or hidden contiguities, which in turn imply a politics of (micro-)difference, resistance, and dissensus, capable at once of mimicking, criticizing, and responding to the tendencies towards self-replicating life-forms in society, while remaining fully engaged and implicated. In *Nicht löschesbares Feuer* the director is clearly taking sides with the Vietnamese people, but in a gesture of what might be called self-inflicted solidarity, in contrast to the self-proclaimed solidarity so typical of the student protest movement. Yet the scene's moral power derives from its openly acknowledged inadequacy and its radical incommensurability with the realities of the events to which it refers. Because of this incommensurability of scale and consequence between cigarette and Napalm bomb, the act makes the case for a poetics; precisely the poetics of metaphor that lets one image stand for another, when bringing the unimaginable “into the picture.” Farocki's self-mutilation in *Nicht löschesbares Feuer* is therefore an act of self-initiation into being an artist. Renouncing direct political activism, he stages a symbolic “action” that must be read as the very definition of the political in the symbolic language that is art, but whose ultimate “media-support” is the artist's own body. The “truth” his work conveys has thus nothing to do with the certainty of superior knowledge, as it so often is in art that wants to be political. On the contrary, Farocki's films have moral authority and aesthetic credibility only to the extent that the truth they contain cuts both ways: that it is directed also against the director himself. The reflecting mirror and the feedback loop must include the artist not as *self-replicator*, but as *self-implicator*. As one walks through Farocki's works — at once part of the world of movies, games, and entertainment, and worlds

apart from any of them — one realizes that he may be one of the few filmmakers today capable of countering the self-surveillance of the world as machine eye with moments that reinstate the eye and hand as instances of self-implication and solidarity. The true topicality and urgency of Farocki’s work may thus be nothing less than that it is an effort to rescue the cinema — and with it, the world — from its own superfluity, by reinventing “work” as event and encounter, and installation art as the condition of possibility of such an event and encounter.

Notes

¹ Parts of this essay were first presented as a talk given at the “Public Space with a Roof” artists’ collective in Amsterdam, June 2006, accompanied by a montage of clips from Farocki’s films, including *Wie man sieht*, *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, *Nicht löschesbares Feuer*, *Schnittstelle*, and *Das doppelte Gesicht*.

² A brief *curriculum vitae*, a full filmography, and bibliographical references can be found at Farocki’s own website, www.farocki-film.de.

³ The examples are all taken from *Wie man sieht*.

⁴ Harun Farocki, “Sein Leben einsetzen: Bilder von Holger Meins,” *Jungle World Supplement*, 23 Dec. 1998. In English: “Staking One’s Life,” in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2004), 83–94. Translated by Laurent Faasch-Ibrahim.

⁵ Such media archaeologies are beginning to be written by, among others, Erkki Huhtamo, *Virtuaalisuunden Arkeologia* (Helsinki: Rovaniemi, 1995); *The Archaeology of the Moving Image* (Helsinki: TV1, VHS, 1996); *Phantasmagoria* (Helsinki: BTJ Kirjastopalvelu, 2000); Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); and Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). See also Farocki and Wolfgang Ernst, “Towards an Archive of Visual Concepts,” in Elsaesser, *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight Lines*, 261–88.

⁶ A selection of Farocki’s writings in German and English has appeared in *Imprint: Writings = Nachdruck: Texte*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer et al. (New York: Lukas & Steinberg, 2001).

⁷ “‘Making the World Superfluous’: An Interview with Harun Farocki,” in Elsaesser, *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight Lines*, 177–92.

⁸ Harun Farocki, “Controlling Observation,” in Elsaesser, *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight Lines*, 293; originally in *Jungle World*, 8 Sept. 1999.

⁹ Among several essays exploring the complex layering of *Images of the World*, one can single out Kaja Silverman, “What Is a Camera?” *Discourse* 15 (Spring 1993): 3–56; and Nora M. Alter, “The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki’s *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*,” *New German Critique* 68 (Spring-Summer, 1996): 165–92.

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