

[SELECTED BY]

HARUN FAROCKI INSTITUT

HARUN FAROCKI: WHAT IS AN IMAGE?

— Cis Bierinckx

A woman asks, “How can we talk about something we do not understand?” The man says, “Just by talking about something one has not understood, one begins to understand.” (scene from *ERZÄHLEN*, 1975)

Harun Farocki was once called the most renowned unknown filmmaker in Germany. The most important would have been more appropriate here. From his ‘Lehrfilme’, which he realised as a student during the turbulent period of May ‘68 (some of which together with Hartmut Bitomsky), to his later essay films, television productions, documentaries and film installations, always underlying his work is an intellectual discourse on image, film, war, capitalism and socio-political aspects. His thinking was strongly rooted in Marxist ideology and Bertolt Brecht’s theory of alienation. As a filmmaker, he greatly admired the political attitudes, theories and aesthetics of film innovators such as Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. He was a master in editing and was, as a filmmaker and teacher, greatly fascinated with the way in which filmmakers combine or juxtapose film images. Farocki’s work disturbs and confronts, analyses, gives new meanings to existing images and poses critical questions about (image) history, power and society. His contention is that, as a spectator/consumer of images, one cannot simply exclude oneself from what one sees, because one becomes an accessory through the act of watching. In the same way that he wonders what his position as an artist should be in relation

to reality, he believes that it is up to us, the viewer, to adopt a political and engaged attitude towards the images that are irrevocably imprinted on our eyes.

“C’est le film qui pense” (It is the film that thinks) once said Jean-Luc Godard, about whom Farocki, together with Kaja Silverman, wrote the significant book *Von Godard sprechen* (Speaking about Godard). Through detailed analysis of archival images, associative montage and his razor-sharp view on the origins of images and the institutions that produce and distribute them, Farocki creates a ‘thinking-cinema’ that creates an emotional movement and prompts reflection. Whether dealing with the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, building developers, the final of a World Cup football match (Farocki was a fervent football fan), imperialism, capitalism, colonialism, a supermarket, video games, the relationship between man and machine, photography, cinema, labour, industrial progress or the development of hypertechnology for the army and the police, Farocki is always engaged in exposing a thought or unravelling the signs of our time. His films can best be described as experimental, discursive, cinematographic arguments that run counter to the stale aesthetics of standard

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narrative fiction and documentaries. In essence, Farocki seeks to change our habitual viewing modes and stimulate alertness in dealing with, and thinking about, images. To some extent he reminds me of the photographer Thomas in Antonioni's landmark film *Blow Up*. In the film, the blow-up of a photo triggers fear and elicits individual confusion. Unlike the protagonist in Antonioni's story, Farocki succeeds in revealing and uncovering facts through reasoning. Coincidentally, the above-mentioned film by the Italian master takes place at a time when young people all over the world participated in the search for a life without dogmas and authority structures. A world in motion.

It was at this time of international protest that Farocki and 17 other students were banned from the Berliner Film Academy because of their provocative, rebellious activism. However, this did not prevent him from challenging the establishment with (performative) guerrilla cinema and adopting a radical filmic stance. War and images of war are recurring themes throughout the fascinating oeuvre of the German filmmaker. The Harun Farocki Institut zooms in on this theme through the selective programme it has put together upon the request of KRIEG. Their presentation is a concise outline of the way in which Farocki developed his film oeuvre, from agit prop cinema, fiction, documentary, essay-cinema, television work to a personal, contemplative, documentary 'direct cinema' (not to be confused with the American 'direct cinema' of Robert Lincoln Drew, Richard Leacock, Albert Maysles, and others), a cinematic approach that is also to a large extent used in his later video installations.

The Vietnam War and American imperialism are common threads in several early films. In the iconic film *Nicht Löschbares Feuer* (1969) he puts out a burning cigarette on his arm as a defying protest against the destructive use of napalm. In addition to the criticism of the American army and their use of napalm in Vietnam, the film also points out the responsibility of each individual. As an employee, student or engineer, every person is part of an economic and social system. The film demands from its audience a constant reflection on the effects of its own actions, and a calling into question of role relations: "Who benefits, and whom does it

harm?" The collectively realised *Ohne Titel oder: Nixon kommt nach Berlin* (1969) is a parody on Nixon's visit to Bonn and Berlin that same year. Through the visit, Germany endorsed its alliance with the brand new American president. An actor wearing a paper shopping bag depicting Nixon's face over his head ceremoniously greets the invisible bystanders from an open limousine. Farocki combines the film footage with text inserts, photos of genocide and unrest in Chicago, Angola, Caracas, Leopoldville, Saigon and concludes with shots of the Berlin riot police standing at the ready to dispel a protest action. With the slogan "imperialism is the main enemy of mankind" he denounces Nixon's international policy. At the same time, this pamphlet can be seen as a cinematic predecessor of Facebook calling for a protest rally in Berlin. He literally and figuratively exposes the police in the pseudo-protest movement instruction film *Anleitung, Polizisten den Helm abzureißen* (1969), which was also produced collectively. Using repetitions and arrows scratched into the celluloid, he creates an instant provocation in the form of an instruction as to how best to take out a police officer.

Screen tests for the films *Etwas wird sichtbar* (ca. 1980) and "Ronny und Harun spielen Theater" (1982) both form a prologue to the final version of *Etwas wird sichtbar*, which premiered in 1982 during the Berlinale. In this film, characters Robert and Anne share a fascination for war photographs from Vietnam, Angola and the Spanish civil war. Throughout their story, Farocki explores the impact Vietnamese war images had on the minds of left-wing youngsters and reflects on concepts of resistance. The screen tests and rehearsal shots from the first film already show Farocki's minimalist approach and the way in which he fully blends image theory and narrative into a whole. The second film is a live performance trailer for *Etwas wird sichtbar*. Even this small piece of theatre by Ronny Tanner and the filmmaker not only functions as an announcement, but is a pure statement.

Bilderkrieg (1987) is a kind of preliminary study for one of his most important films, *Bilder Der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (1988). The common thread throughout this work are WWII aerial photographs made by the U.S. Army. Since the photographs

were made to examine an industrial estate in Auschwitz, the Allies overlooked the nearby concentration camp in the pictures. It was not until years later that the CIA noticed this unforgivable blind spot blunder. This essayistic film is an exploration into the way in which the production of images, war and industry are related to each other. This work, aside from being a report on the development of imaging methods used by the army and police, is also a very precise reflection on the reading and interpretation of such photographs. In *Erkennen und Verfolgen* (2003), Farocki reveals how sophisticated war technology affects everyday life. Since the Gulf War in 1991, warfare and war reporting have become hyper-technical matters, in which real and computer-generated images can no longer be distinguished. Using military-industrial images and training materials, Farocki depicts the development of guided missile systems, which will eventually replace human vision with automated tracking systems. At the same time, he reveals how these technologies are being integrated into a society that is increasingly monitored.

In all his films, Harun Farocki encourages his audience to develop, as he himself does, an objectively uncompromising and critical perspective on visual subjectivity and the unique potency and power of technology and imagery that seek to manipulate human activity.

Cis Bierinckx, November 2019.

Translation: Michael Meert

In 1976, the filmmaker and writer **Harun Farocki** envisioned an institution that 'we can also organize' as 'an assembly of working people, not from an abstract understanding but from the contact points of their work'. The Harun Farocki Institut, founded in September 2015 as a non-profit organisation, seeks to realise Farocki's proposal in the shape of a platform for researching his visual and discursive practice and supporting new projects that engage with the past, present and the future of image cultures.

SPECIAL EVENT

03.12 (7 pm): conversation with **Elsa de Seynes**, the coordinator at HaFI, moderated by **Ingel Vaikla**, followed by a public discussion and drinks.

WALL PROJECTION *(the loop starts every 50 min)*

Ohne Titel oder: Nixon kommt nach Berlin

(Untitled or: Nixon comes to Berlin)

1969, 3'14", 16 mm, b/w, digitised, German original version

Anleitung, Polizisten den Helm abzureißen

(Instructions on how to Pull off Police Helmets)

1969, 1'41", 16mm, b/w, digitised, German original version

Screen tests for the film *Etwas wird sichtbar*

(Before your Eyes – Vietnam)

approx. 1980, 15'48", 16 mm, reversal film, b/w, digitised, German with English subtitles

Film documenting the reenactment of a scene from *Etwas wird sichtbar*

(Before Your Eyes – Vietnam)

labelled "Ronny und Harun spielen Theater" ("Ronny and Harun Act Up") 1982, 6'23", 16 mm, reversal film, colour, digitised, German with English subtitles

Unused film material shot for the film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*

(Images of the World and the Inscription of War), labelled "Bilder/ Geschichte" ("Images/History") approx. 1987, 20'50", reversal film, colour, digitised, German original version

TV SCREENING

Bilderkrieg

(Images-War)

1987, 44'16", colour, digitised, German with English subtitles