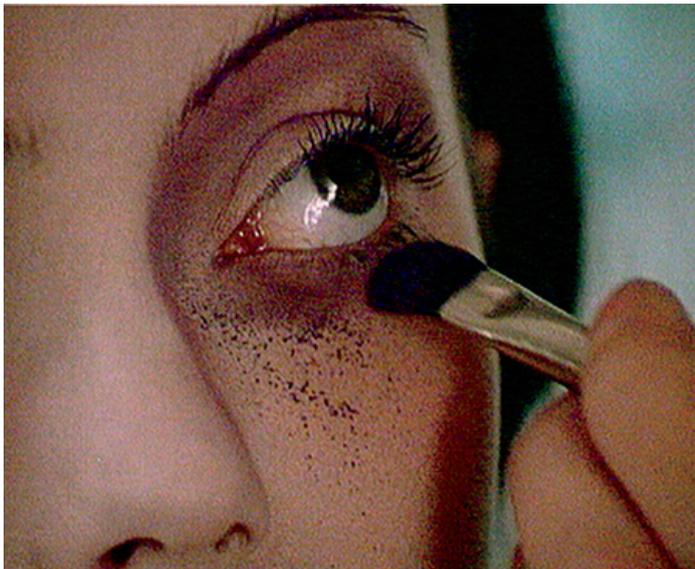


Eye Machines

D. N. RODOWICK ON THE ART OF HARUN FAROCKI

LONG BEFORE HIS DEATH this past summer at the age of seventy, Harun Farocki had come to occupy a unique place in the history of postwar cinema, his films irreconcilable with either the narrative or the documentary tradition. Among the greatest artists to have arisen from the New German Cinema of the 1960s and '70s, he remains, nonetheless, one of its least known. In hopes of casting light on Farocki's crucial and unremitting interrogation of the image and of the ethics of seeing, *Artforum* invited scholar D. N. Rodowick to reflect on this singular filmmaker's contribution to contemporary culture.



Harun Farocki, *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Images of the World and the Inscription of War)*, 1988, 16 mm, black-and-white and color, sound, 75 minutes. © Harun Farocki Filmproduktion.

IT WAS A WARM SUMMER NIGHT in Berlin when the unthinkable happened—we ran out of beer. The occasion was an informal dinner to introduce Harun Farocki and his wife, Antje Ehmann, to friends who run a gallery in the city. It is a testament to Farocki's generosity and grace, and to his belief that no significant moment should go unrecorded, that he allowed me to make a short film on the spot, *Harun, who only drinks beer, has a glass of wine* (2011). Inasmuch as history runs in rhythms that are as uneven as they are contingent and unpredictable, something Farocki also believed, how could we have known that he would be lost to us precisely three years later, on July 30, 2014?

HARUN FAROCKI was one of the most prolific and important artists to emerge from the loose grouping of postwar German filmmakers today known as the Oberhausen generation, after the 1962 manifesto that famously demanded—and inspired—a new form of cinema. That generation included original signatories to the manifesto, such as Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz, and would come to include the stars of the New German Cinema—Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Volker Schlöndorff, Margarethe von Trotta, and Wim Wenders. Farocki is uniquely yet uncertainly placed among these peers. He lived and worked in Berlin, for instance, rather than in Frankfurt, Hamburg, or Munich, as most West German filmmakers did. Moreover, the auteur cinema of fiction was never his ambition. He was instead committed to a restless engagement with political and formal experimentation that owed more to filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. In a career spanning almost fifty years, Farocki made more than one hundred works, in whatever genre or format, short or long, that fit his political and creative purposes, including video and gallery or museum installations. He was also a writer and critic of great talent and generosity, and he edited an important journal, *Filmkritik*, from 1974 to 1984.

From the mid-1960s on, Farocki observed, reported, critiqued, analyzed, and deconstructed, sometimes in his own voice and other times strategically deploying the voices of others. It is tempting to say that Farocki worked in the genre of the essay film, though that might be too small and vague a category to contain the inventive breadth of his moving-image works, nor can they be considered straightforwardly documentary in any restrictive sense. Each of his major works—and there are many—emerges as if in search of a new hybridity where fiction and nonfiction, the imaginary and the real, the invisible and the visible, and suppressed and conspicuous forces combine and recombine in always startling combinations. The simplest and truest thing one can say about Farocki's work is that it is the product of a life engaged in the critique of images by images. Indeed, Farocki was a master of building arguments from appropriated images and situations—from surveillance cameras, automated drones, aerial photography, computer displays, training sessions, and so forth—and then weaving them into his own footage to bring forward unseen and unexpected correspondences. *Leben—BRD* (How to Live in the German Federal Republic, 1990), for example, explores instruction as a means of social control by building its images from training simulations; *Ich glaubte Gefangene zu sehen* (I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts, 2000) combines surveillance footage from a prison with that of visitors to a shopping mall. *Videogramme einer Revolution* (Videograms of a Revolution, 1992), Farocki and Andrei Ujică's account of the fall of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu,

is a tour de force of this genre. In every one of Farocki's works, he asks us to pose again the question What is an image? and to reconsider how every image provokes both an intelligence and an ethics of seeing. These concerns are often reflected in his titles; for example, *Etwas wird sichtbar* (Before Your Eyes—Vietnam, 1982) or *Ein Bild* (An Image), a film from 1983 that documents and critiques all the phases of construction involved in creating the "natural" beauty of a centerfold model.

Perhaps the best way to account for the power and originality of Farocki's critical life in images is to return to three of his best-known works: *Nicht lösches Feuer* (Inextinguishable Fire, 1969), an ethical interrogation of Dow Chemical's production of napalm during the Vietnam War; *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and the Inscription of War, 1988), an essay on not seeing or acting on what is perfectly visible—i.e., the German death camps recorded by US aerial photography during World War II; and *Serious Games (I–IV)*, 2009–10, a four-part video installation examining ways in which the US military uses technologies of simulation and gaming.

Throughout his long and varied career, Farocki was attracted to locations where the expression of power/knowledge takes place without censorship or obvious camouflage—corporate headquarters, laboratories, factories, archives, military training sites—and whose banality and anonymity belies their social force. Farocki understood the paradox that power's operations are not hidden yet are also not visible. And in any case, visibility does not equal understanding or intelligibility: The documentation of sites where napalm was researched and manufactured does not in and of itself unveil the system of material and ideological structures that sustained the process. Such questions are raised in the opening of *Inextinguishable Fire*, where, in direct address, Farocki asks us, the viewers, How can I make visible what you do not wish to see? He knows that the sight of flesh burned by napalm will only make us close our eyes to the pictures, to the memory of the pictures, and then to the facts that sustain the process of manufactured destruction. Moreover, he knows it is not enough to report on that process; one must also present the structures of belief and self-justification that sustain it.

Farocki's creative imagination was often guided by the polyvalent concept of *Verbund*, which means "combination" in an ordinary constructive sense but also refers to corporate cartels as networks of dominance whose interconnecting and mutually reinforcing links are suppressed or hidden. *Combination* also suggests *montage* or *construction*, but of a special kind, through which truth may be expressed, though in a displaced relation to the untrue. In this manner, *Inextinguishable Fire* is organized through a process of repeating, varying, and reconnecting disjunct parts of the whole. The film presents "models" of understanding, each one incomplete and fragmentary in itself, yet which together assemble a new picture of capitalism's self-justifications for imperialism and destruction.



Harun Farocki, *Ein Bild* (An Image), 1983, 16 mm, color, sound, 25 minutes. © Harun Farocki Filmproduktion.

Inextinguishable Fire is not documentary but analytical: We are shown not the actual offices and laboratories of Dow Chemical but rather interpretive restagings and reenactments of cynical corporate reasoning. As important, the film presents corporate organizational strategies and ideologies as complexly intertwined discourses. There are two repeated camera movements in the second and third sections of the film that track back from a secretary in the Dow offices and then reframe on a window looking in on a conference room, the glass doubling the screen. In the first iteration, a manager informs a lead researcher that Dow has received a large order from the State Department. The researcher replies, "You know I don't approve of war, but since we started the war in Vietnam, I'll do anything within my power to end it quickly." This section is titled "Sticky Humanism" (*Der angeklebte Humanism u\$*). It binds the ideology of ending war by producing ever more destructive means for executing war to the stages of inventing and producing napalm. The second iteration inaugurates a section called "Intensified Division of Labor." Here, the manager speaks to the secretary, repeating and extending the earlier self-justifications, though this time adding, "The State Department has given us millions for the further development of napalm. Parts of the public, as well as some of our employees, don't understand this. A chemical corporation is like a set of building blocks. We let each worker have one block to work on. Then we put the blocks together to make whatever our clients request. Each employee is given a discrete task, the better to preserve secrecy." This statement reiterates a theme from the film's earlier sections, the ethical ironies of which are complex. A corporation is an entity. The individual employee need not share the ethical stance of the corporate body, but must only fulfill his or her isolated function within it. Discrete tasks are compartmentalized, the better to conceal the true nature of the whole. Corporations have their own forms of dissociative montage.

At the beginning of a section titled "Model 2," a placard states that scientists and researchers feel only like observers of the war because intensified division of labor obscures their contributions to the total process. Each section of the film concludes with a scene in which fictional scientists watch television-news images of napalm use in Vietnam, and in each repetition the characters seem to gain greater awareness of their individual responsibility. Yet this is not a conclusion, and *Inextinguishable Fire* gives its viewers no easy resting point but, rather, a series of facts and open questions to prod ethical self-examination. Many destructive products are also useful products; the resignation of one or a few contributing researchers will do nothing to stop the total process. Perhaps all one can do is follow out systematically the questions Who benefits, and who is harmed? The building blocks, Farocki insists, can be reassembled in many ways, based on different interpretive schemes. A vacuum cleaner can become a weapon, and a submachine gun a useful household gadget. Engineers, workers, students—we are all responsible. Perhaps our most urgent task is to restore the broken links in new ways.

In *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, Farocki pushed strategies of dissociative and recombinatory montage to new levels of complexity. The film takes as its primary theme the question of how the Allies could have remained blind to the existence of Nazi death camps despite massive documentation by aerial photography undertaken during American and British bombing raids. Indeed, this unwitting documentation of the camps remained dormant in archives until, inspired by the American television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978), two CIA analysts working on their own time recovered, analyzed, and labeled significant structures in the images. Within and across this major line of inquiry are woven other histories and their representations: Albrecht Meydenbauer's invention of scale-measurement photography; the replacement of skilled metal-press handwork by mass automation during World War II; French military-identification photographs of unveiled Algerian women; other forms of documentation of the camps, including Alfred Kantor's drawings, Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler's witnessing, and photos taken by SS officers. At first the links between these elements seem unclear. What do the invention of scale-measurement photography or the portraits of unveiled Algerian women have to do with documentation of the Shoah? These meditations are interrupted, then return recursively around other repeating motifs: the wave-channel laboratory in Hannover, Germany; a makeup session for a Dior model; a life-drawing class; an automated drawing machine; the creation of composite photos of faces; a Lufthansa flight simulator; analysts examining surveillance photos; robotic car assembly; a remote-controlled video camera traveling through a scale-model town; and various technologies of surveillance and automatic facial recognition.

Across this space of recursive dissociation and recombination, composed with all the complexity of a Bach fugue, points of attraction gradually form around key ideas—the replacement of hand and eye by automation and machine vision; the witnessing and recording of life at a human scale in tension with the inhuman perspectives of automated aerial photography and electronic surveillance and mapping. These ideas are less directly asserted than implied in patterns that emerge across the film's logic of repetition and variation. However, there are two "intruders" that disturb these series: the Dior model and the Large Wave Channel. Perhaps the Dior model is there to show how chemistry and techniques of the hand can work in tandem to artfully enhance a face—or to sculpt the eye into a thing to be seen or into an object of consumerist self-absorption rather than an active organ of vision. In contrast, the wave machine produces a technological simulation of nature, reproducing nature's forces (wave mechanics) in ways that become available to data recording, quantification, and mathematical modeling. This is how science approaches the task of presenting to perception and analysis the unseen world that surrounds us and through which we move—an ambient environment, or second nature, that is taken for granted. Perhaps, too, these images present an allegory of history that is tightly woven into the compositional logic of the film. The waves are cycles of forward movement that also return—always different yet always the same—in a play of forces entirely mediated by technology.

The laboratory experiments in wave mechanics thus become fitting bookends for a film whose larger theme concerns the ways in which visual technologies blind us to historical data. More is not always better. The history of the nonhuman vision of automated technologies of imagemaking and data collection by military and state surveillance apparatuses is marked by a peculiar form of tunnel vision that remains blind to significant, even threatening, historical information. Attentive readers of Farocki's film will understand that the many ironies of this data blindness are not restricted to the state's vision and data machines. Indeed, Farocki offers us nothing less than a new philosophy of the image. An image contains everywhere and on the surface all the information it will ever convey; nothing is suppressed or invisible. However, while every image presents a space of total visibility, every observer confronts the image from a perspective of limited intelligibility—wanted here is a better comprehension of how the intelligible is distinct from the sensible. The radical multiplication of images, documents, and data neither adds to nor subtracts from our (in)ability to derive sense from them. Images have no ethics; only interpretations of images do, and these are inherently incomplete, contested, and contradictory. Where is war inscribed in images? Everywhere.



Harun Farocki, *Serious Games I: Watson Is Down*, 2010, two-channel digital video, color, sound, 8 minutes, looped. © Harun Farocki Filmproduktion.

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Harun Farocki, *Serious Games I: Watson Is Down*, 2010, two-channel digital video, color, sound, 8 minutes, looped. © Harun Farocki Filmproduktion.

In *Inextinguishable Fire*, Farocki wants to bring the technological reproduction of mass destruction home—to America, to Germany, to the singular body synecdochally represented by an arm burned with a cigarette. In *Images of the World*, the ignored, overlooked, or misread documentation of the technology of genocide in World War II is brought into the present and made newly visible through its reinscription and analysis in film. In *Serious Games*, history catches up to the present: The interval that separates the planners of destruction from its execution has become only spatial, not temporal. But that spatial interval is marked more by the computer interface than by any geographical distance—and the digital interface is yet another image that cloaks, blinds, and wards off more than it reveals or makes intelligible on the ground.

Serious Games is a video installation that consists of four parts; except for *Serious Games II: Three Dead*, 2010, each projection includes two contiguous images. The material for this work was gathered from army training facilities at Twentynine Palms, California, and at a facility for helping returning soldiers recover from post-traumatic stress disorder by reliving their originating trauma in virtual-reality simulations. Indeed, the key question here is how to understand simulation as a newly central variant in Farocki's philosophy of the image.

That the four parts of *Serious Games* may be installed separately or in a variety of configurations suggests new strategies of spatial montage that divide perception across multiple screens combinable in various ways. Indeed, Farocki acknowledges that the apprehension of images via multiple screens or windows is our current perceptual default. Nevertheless, there is a logic to following *Serious Games'* video quartet in numerical sequence. *Serious Games I: Watson Is Down*, 2010, documents soldiers in a "virtual" training exercise guiding with keyboard and mouse a simulated armored vehicle through a topologically accurate re-creation of rural Afghanistan in a 3-D game space. The instructor introduces controlled contingency into this space in the form of traps and threats selected from a variety of menu options (IEDs, unexploded ordnance, enemy agents with explosive vests, etc.). *Three Dead* moves the action to the Marine Corps training grounds in Twentynine Palms—into a full-scale physical simulacrum of an Afghan village or a small town in Iraq, replete with three hundred "extras"; here, soldiers in full combat gear interact with "real" people. With their clean surfaces and geometrical lines, architecturally the town's structures look less like movie sets than like physical re-creations of digital models. Because the soldiers are more familiar with

digital terrain than with actual combat settings, perhaps the transition into the real must be softened by means of this curiously hybrid cityscape. However, the real never becomes actual in *Serious Games*. The uncontrollable and violent spaces of post-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq are held at a distance, outside the field of vision or experience, yet return forcefully in *Serious Games III: Immersion*, 2009, in another kind of (nonvisible) image: traumatic memory.

Considered together in whatever sequence, the four parts of *Serious Games* reveal fascinating similarities and differences in the treatment of space, image, and point of view. In fact, *Serious Games IV: A Sun with No Shadow*, 2010, functions as a summary of the whole, though it is given, again, as a fragmented image that condenses and focuses points of contrast and comparison across the three other parts. The game-space point of view in *Watson Is Down* is that of a detached observer who controls movements of the armored vehicle in digital space yet hovers visually above it as if attached to a fixed yet invisible guideline. This is less a singular or subjective point of view than an individual's point of insertion into a larger and more complex machinic arrangement in which the soldier is only one of many intersecting parts. *Three Dead* places the body into a physical place of war gaming. The camera's viewpoint is detached and observational, which brings forward the strange, simulacral qualities of staged action and constructed spaces. The focus of *Immersion* is not on the simulated world, but on the virtual space of traumatic memory.

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Immersion's psychologically injured soldiers wear head-mounted displays, whose ostensible function is to turn their perception inward in order to bring forward suppressed and damaging memories. In each case, the historical real, present or past, is not visible in the image. Yet in *Immersion* it is visualizable in the return of memory as disturbed actions on the body. Paradoxically, in the final sequence of the video, the event of the soldier's trauma is never presented in the digital world he experiences. We can access that event only through the voice in his recounting of it, and in the confused and unsettled movements of the simulacral space as he throws around his agitated digital gaze. Whether he is looking for or warding off the traumatic event is not clear. And the absence of the event is redoubled, for in the end Farocki reveals that we have all along been watching an actor simulating reactions to a simulation.

From photography to simulation, Farocki shows how the action space of the image has undergone a radical change. The automated-bombardment photographs of World War II aim to preserve a record of past destruction in a flood of singular images—snapshots of sequential time, like film—in which all the information that the image can ever reveal is fully present in it. Thus the photographic image's only claim to a future depends on the discovery of new kinds of intelligibility, which make legible information that must lie dormant until new frames of reference bring the picture's data forward. The transition from the photographic record to real-time 3-D digital modeling transforms and amplifies the stakes of the historical game. *Serious Games'* soldiers are training to interact with real spaces through their simulations. The multiple points of view in *Watson Is Down* reveal the computer-generated interface to be an environment of interactive control, wherein instructor and soldiers may be adversaries but the rules are fixed and determinable, as if to make the future predictable and manageable. However, whether these men and women in uniform are present as soldiers on the ground or absent as controllers of drones or other remote-controlled devices, unpredictable injury and death are constant risks—for them, for their targets, and for civilian populations. This is why the simulacrum creates an interactive space—war games on the screen or in actuality—where the imminent threat of death or injury is present everywhere, just around every fabricated corner or lying dormant in every pixel. Yet the simulacrum is also the manifestation of an impossible wish for total control. Programmers want to make every contingency predictable and manageable—another way of holding injury and death at a distance in or through a picture. The real, however, cannot be contained in an image. In the passage from *Games I* to *Games III*, the past has already disturbed the experience of time. While traumatic past time inhabits the body, virtually, at every moment, it cannot be returned to the present as a perceptible image, even a virtual one.

A Sun with No Shadow recombines elements of *Serious Games'* previous chapters to foreground the fact that the images created in preparation for war are similar to those used for evaluating and treating the effects of war. But these latter images are paradoxical. Unlike in the training games interfaces, which insist on real-time topographic accuracy, no shadows are cast in the digitally re-created sites summoned in the virtual-reality goggles of the PTSD patients. Obviously, less money is spent on treating soldiers than on training them.

If they are lucky, the soldiers will learn how to manage the real once they are unencumbered by these digital machines. We are no doubt far luckier. Harun Farocki has constructed other vision machines for us. And if we are willing to use them—to look not just at an image but in and through the networks of forces that produce, disconnect, and recombine images as we encounter them today—we have a fighting chance at experiencing new forms of ethical looking.

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