



# NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE

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Source: *New German Critique*, No. 68, Special Issue on Literature (Spring - Summer, 1996), pp. 165-192

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108669>

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# *The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's Images of the World and the Inscription of War*

Nora M. Alter

The essay's innermost formal law is heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which is orthodoxy's secret and objective aim to keep invisible

— Theodor Adorno<sup>1</sup>

Once more, but in a different sense, filmmaking has to go underground, disperse itself, make itself invisible. . . . Only by turning itself into "writing" in the largest possible sense can film preserve itself as [what Harun Farocki calls] "a form of intelligence."

— Thomas Elsaesser<sup>2</sup>

Just as weapons and armor developed in unison throughout history, so visibility and invisibility now began to evolve together, eventually producing *invisible weapons that make things visible*.

— Paul Virilio<sup>3</sup>

## *I. Introduction*

Harun Farocki's *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* [*Images of*

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1. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 23.

2. Thomas Elsaesser, "Working at the Margins: Two or Three Things not Known about Harun Farocki," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 50: 597 (October 1983): 269-70.

3. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (1984; New York: Verso, 1989) 71.

*the World and the Inscription of War*] (1988/89)<sup>4</sup> is an essay film that articulates, as its genre tends to do, the formal and aesthetic with the historical and political, in this case in the context of modern — increasingly postmodern — mass media, technoculture, and technowarfare. On the one hand *Bilder* is a specifically West German leftist response to events and trends of the 1980s; on the other it projects us both back to the perennial problem of the relation between “vision and visibility” and forward into an uncertain future dominated by technical developments — developments such as the digital image manipulation and synthesis recently dubbed “Scitex” and “the reconfigured eye”<sup>5</sup> — that render age-old questions about the nature of representation and truth as philosophically relevant as ever *and* as increasingly obsolete technologically. Located on shifting boundaries between the modern and the postmodern, *Bilder* thus addresses aesthetic and formal issues that are transhistorical (which is not to say ahistorical) in that its critique moves across time and changing historical conjunctures. It remains to be seen what the *specifically* political valence of this project is, how heterodox it might be, what its limitations are.

Farocki's essay film is a technically and ideologically overdetermined work that covers a lot of conceptual and historical ground in an hour and a quarter. It is an extended investigation into the nature of *vision* and *visibility* in relation to how modern technologies produce images and how we are to perceive and interpret them from a phenomenological point of view. I am taking “vision” to mean “sight as a physical operation” and “visibility” to mean “sight as a social fact.” This duality corresponds roughly to the ancient distinction between “nature and culture,” reread as “datum of vision and its discursive determinations.” As Hal Foster notes, however, both sets of distinction are relative: “vision is social and historical too, and visibility involves the body and the psyche.”<sup>6</sup> A third key term must be added here: the Heideggerian

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4. *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, dir. Harun Farocki, Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 16mm color, 75 minutes, 1988/89. The English voice-over has been transcribed with slight variations as Harun Farocki, “Commentary from *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*,” *Discourse* 15 (Spring 1993): 78-92.

5. See Brian Winston, ch. 2 “The Documentary, Scitex and Harry,” *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: BFI, 1995) and William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT, 1993).

6. As Foster also notes, “vision” and “visibility” are both interrelated and significantly separate terms. Hal Foster, preface, *Vision and Visibility*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay, 1988) ix.

category of *Umsicht* or visibility, which refers to the field of precognitive, prereflective “circumspection,” within which any viewer is always already inextricably imbricated.<sup>7</sup>

There are only two extensive analyses of *Bilder*. The first, by Thomas Keenan, relates it to Heideggerian visibility.<sup>8</sup> Converted into psychoanalytic terms, visibility may also be viewed as seeingness [*voyure*] — an apparently inaccessible category imagined to be anterior to the determining “split” between “gaze and look.”<sup>9</sup> In one of Lacan’s more succinct formulations, following Heidegger’s work and Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, “I see only from one point” (a look), “but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (the gaze) (72). Like visibility, seeingness is the never quite visible enabling condition of this radically unsutured split. It is this Lacanian framework that informs the second extensive analysis of *Bilder*, by Kaja Silverman.<sup>10</sup>

The field on which to interpret *Bilder* is currently occupied by Heidegger and Lacan. It is estranged from the dominant paradigm of German film studies: namely, an eclectic sociological and historical approach that might on first glance seem closer to Farocki’s own intellectual formation. My thesis is that to grasp *Bilder* — indeed any essay film — adequately, we need to subtend a fourth term to this discussion: *the political in/visible and in/audible* that moves stealthily beneath, within, and around vision, visuality, and visibility or seeingness.

Visibility, or seeingness, is the ontological precondition that anything *can* be seen, or that *anything*, can be revealed and/or concealed, can *be* visible and/or invisible. This includes any possible “image of the world” or “inscription of war.” Farocki’s *Bilder* deals with that issue albeit more

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7. See Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977) 116. For the original, see “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” *Holzwege* (1938; Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1972).

8. See Thomas Keenan, “Light Weapons,” *Documents* 1/2 (Fall/Winter 1992): 147-58.

9. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1973; New York: W. W. Norton, 1981) 82.

10. See Kaja Silverman, “What Is a Camera?, or: History in the Field of Vision,” *Discourse* 15 (Spring 1993): 3-56. Reprinted with minor changes as Kaja Silverman, ch. 4 “The Gaze,” *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

empirically than theoretically.<sup>11</sup> It interrogates specific photographic processes of image-making and the surrounding disciplines that make use of these images: fine art, engineering, architecture, artisanal and assembly-line production, city planning and urban renewal, military science and practice. Farocki's "world" resembles less Heidegger's (or Lacan's) than what Jameson calls "the geopolitical aesthetic" of the late capitalist world system, which is never perceivable as totality except allegorically.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, *Bilder* focuses on what I call "the political in/visible," additionally complicating the visual problematic by means of "the political in/audible." *Bilder*'s formal and political achievement *and* its limitation reside, I argue, in the tension between in/audibility and in/visibility — hence im/perceptibly.

The "in/visible" is captured in an enigmatic remark by Althusser:

what classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is *what it sees*; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is *what it does not lack*; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is *what it does not miss*. This oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but *the sight* itself.<sup>13</sup>

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11. As noted by Silverman, recent work of Jonathan Crary on what he calls "techniques of the observer" helps clarify aspects of Farocki's *Bilder*, as well as do Lacanian and Heideggerian approaches to it. Crary problematizes, by historicizing, not only ahistorical theories of the ways viewers and viewing are constructed but also contemporary "attempts to theorize vision and visibility [that] are wedded to models that emphasize a continuous and overarching Western visual tradition." Crary argues that "during the first decades of the nineteenth century a new kind of observer took shape in Europe radically different from the type of observer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," that this paradigm shift had much to do with technologies leading up to and including photography, and that "concepts of subjective vision, of the productivity of the observer, pervaded not only areas of art and literature but were present in philosophical, scientific, and technological discourses." A new viewing subject, an embodied vision, was produced. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT, 1990) 25, 6, and 9. Precisely such an embodied viewer is the subject and object of Farocki's film.

12. See Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992).

13. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (1965/68; London: NLB, 1970) 21. This remark also figures prominently in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), in his chapter entitled "Lacan, Althusser, and the Specular Subject of Ideology." But whereas Jay uses Althusser's text to buttress his thesis that "a plurality of scopic regimes" ought to replace his (problematic) claim that recent French thought has "denigrated" vision, my own inclination is to use Althusser's remark more simply as a salutary warning against our assuming that we *have* seen what we *think* we have seen. And I argue that this is Farocki's warning as well.

When Althusser speaks of “classical political economy” and its problem of seeing and not seeing what it faces, he means the determining but not fully representable role of labor power and class struggle in history. This perspective is somewhat applicable to Farocki’s essay film also as it figures the impact of the political economy on himself as an avant-garde, independent filmmaker and cultural worker on the left. Thus, even when *Bilder* draws links between “vision and politics,” we must expect that significant *economic* determinations may remain im/perceptible. All this is part of what Adorno called the constitutive *Vexierbild* or picture puzzle of political economy: namely, that workers are increasingly unable to perceive *that* they are workers.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, if “the political unconscious” is *unconscious*, and needs intervention “to lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts,”<sup>15</sup> then the political im/perceptible must exist in un/canny relationship to the limits of the human sensorium. In Adorno’s terms, “the *Vexierbild* is a good-natured reprise of the serious vexation perpetrated by every art work. Like art it hides something while at the same time showing it.”<sup>16</sup> What is perceptible in some respects remains simultaneously imperceptible in others, and this very im/perceptibility has specific political causes and consequences for production and reception. Farocki’s film shows that people can look without really seeing. Is this failure conscious or unconscious, natural or cultural, physical or psychological?

Finally, the essay film as practised by Farocki takes up the challenge of Adorno’s thesis that, in an age of the persistent and irreversible “methodological” reduction of reason to scientism and instrumentality, “in the realm of thought it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method.”<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically from an Adornoan perspective, Farocki expands “the realm of thought” within an audio-visual mass medium — film — by employing techniques of sub rosa persuasion.

## II. From Essay to Essay Film

The historical necessity for the essay film is commonly said to have

14. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974) 193-94.

15. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 20.

16. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedmann, trans. C. Lenhardt (1979; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 178.

17. Adorno, “The Essay as Form” 9.

been first seen in 1948 by Alexandre Astruc, who argued that the fate of the filmic avant-garde hung in the balance.<sup>18</sup> Actually, however, the Soviets had been making film essays for years, and German avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter had called in 1940 for a type of post-documentary filmmaking that would, in effect, broach the problem of the im/perceptible. By making “problems, thoughts, even ideas” visible, he sought “to render visible what is not visible.” He dubbed the resulting film genre “essay,” since “also in literature ‘essay’ means dealing with difficult themes in generally comprehensible form” — albeit, in surrealist Richter’s case, this desire for accessibility meant freeing film from “the depiction of external phenomena and the constraints of chronological sequence.”<sup>19</sup> Richter’s term has been adopted only comparatively recently (in discussions in the early 1980s of the work of Chris. Marker, a self-described “essayist”)<sup>20</sup>; generally essay films have maintained more balance between feature and documentary than Richter’s own practice implied.

Astruc, promoting his notion of *caméra-stylo* [camera-stylus], argued that filmmakers must:

break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language. . . . The cinema is now moving towards a form which is making it such a precise language that it will soon be possible to write ideas directly onto film<sup>21</sup>

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18. See Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La caméra stylo,” *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. Peter Graham (1968; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) 17-23. See further his *Du stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo* (Paris: L’Archipel, 1990).

19. Hans Richter, “Der Filmessay: Eine neue Art des Dokumentarfilms,” *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (1940; Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992) 197-98.

20. See Birgit Kämper, “*Sans Soleil* — ein Film erinnert sich selbst,” *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen* 33-59.

21. Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde” 18 and 19. The actual inscription of words on celluloid images raises the interesting epistemological question of whether we are to understand images or words as preexisting the other, or rather as bi-conditionally producing a new, third term — perhaps a “dialectical image” in the sense debated by Adorno and Benjamin. Astruc did not deal adequately with this question, nor have many essay films. On Benjamin’s and Adorno’s different understandings of the dialectical image, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991) esp. 209-15 and 219-22.



. . . in other words, the materialist inscription of words on images of the world. Actual inscription on celluloid became but one — overly literalizing — means of realizing Astruc's ideas but other forms of inscription became possible. Institutionally, the 1979 Hamburg declaration of German filmmakers provided a somewhat belated opening for the German essay film by calling for an end to the artificial separation of "the feature film from the documentary . . . films that reflect on the medium (in a practical way as experiments) from the narrative and commercial film."<sup>22</sup>

Today, the essay film is commonly described as a genre or medium of film production and consumption located in the interstices of "documentary versus feature," "narrative fiction versus historical record," "truth versus fantasy." Whatever defining secondary features the essay may have qua genre, a basic one remains that it is precisely *not* a genre, since it strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint. Like "heresy" in the Adornoan literary essay, the essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, is self-reflective and self-reflexive. It also questions the subject positions of the filmmaker and audience as well as the audiovisual medium itself — whether film, video, or digital-electronic.<sup>23</sup> The essay film is as international as it is interdisciplinary.<sup>24</sup>

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22. "The Hamburg Declaration," *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices*, ed. Eric Rentschler (1979; New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 4. Particularly important to the development of the German essay film was the West German journal *Filmkritik*, co-edited by Farocki, especially issues published in 1983-1984.

23. From its inception, film theorists and practitioners have followed the example of the written essay (dating back at least to Montaigne and Bacon and extending to De Sade, Leopardi, Nietzsche, Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, and Barthes), which entails resisting the temptation to situate the essay in stable generic terms. The essay has also been described as being not merely "between" other genres but even as their repressed *Urform*. See, e.g., Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (1986; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987). Because it is a genre that resists closure, tends to be non-linear in argumentation, and often openly personal, it has been perceived as particularly well-adapted to feminism. See *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993). In addition to the writings of Astruc, important German works on the subject include *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen*; and the special issue "Versuch über den Essayfilm," *Augenblick* 10 (1991).

24. In addition to Marker and Godard, its makers include Derek Jarman, Kidlat Tahimik, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, as well as, in the German-speaking world, Hartmut Bitomski, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge, Elfi Mikesch, Ulrike Ottinger, Rosa von Praunheim, Helke Sander, and Wim Wenders. I do not mean to imply that this is a homogeneous group. For example, Farocki and his group around the avant-garde journal *Filmkritik* explicitly took their distance, in theory and in practice, from Wenders, Herzog, and Kluge.



The essay film can be grasped as an audiovisual *performance* of theory and criticism executed within and by the filmic text, thus producing a productive and/or inhibiting resistance to scholarly discourse, since it appears already to have done the latter's work for it. Doubtless all films require us to resist becoming a mere *Sprachrohr* for the filmmaker's own position (even or especially when we are in ideological agreement), but this resistance becomes especially crucial with the essay film because — almost by definition — it offers the appearance of its own self-criticism, threatening to silence the critic's voice in advance. As a result, essay films, including Farocki's, demand particular techniques of "reading between the lines" to expose a political im/perception — a level of signification in excess of what the filmmaker intended. (In Farocki's film, this "reading" requires resistance to a theoretically informed and highly controlling/controlled female voice-over.) If, as Adorno noted of the written essay, "nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it,"<sup>25</sup> then the filmed essay shows and tells us that we can view and hear a feature film *as* a documentary, a documentary *as* a feature. So it is that, as "a form of intelligence" (Farocki's preferred term for the essay film), *Bilder* — particularly and specifically in its political aspect — asks to be actively co-produced by its audience.

### III. *Vision and Its Others*

*Bilder* appeared in 1988/89, on the eve of German reunification and the imagined end of the cold war. It was not Farocki's first essay film, rather a culmination of rich experiences as an independent filmmaker, writer, and activist. He was born in 1943 and trained as a filmmaker in Berlin — in a class attended also by Ulrike Meinhof. Many of his films (feature, documentary, and essay) problematize technologies of visual representation and reproduction,<sup>26</sup> generally exposing the view inculcated by mass media and contrasting them with a more independent coverage

25. Adorno, "The Essay as Form" 4.

26. His earlier films include the 1981 *Etwas wird sichtbar* [*Before Your Eyes: Vietnam*], which looks at how the Vietnam War was represented and spectacularized by the mass media, and the 1986 *Wie man sieht* [*As You See*], which stresses that the viewer must always read between the lines of images. More recent are the 1991 *Leben BRD* [*How to Live in the FRG*], a playful critique of self-help groups and the opposition they face, and a year later *Videograms einer Revolution* [*Videograms of a Revolution*], in which Farocki compares CNN media coverage of the Roumanian revolution to homevideos taken by Roumanians at the time of the upheaval.

of the same events.<sup>27</sup> Farocki's films thus address the differences and similarities between what might be called "visual public sphere" and "visual private sphere" — a type of filmmaking informed by both Benjamin's critique of "mechanical reproducibility" and critical theory's exposure of the totalitarian aspect of "enlightenment."

The material circumstances surrounding the production of Farocki's films are significantly different from those, say, of Wenders, Herzog, or other comparatively better-known and commercially successful filmmakers who are not working under extreme economic constraints. This difference explains something about Farocki's technique. For, as an independent avant-garde leftist working on the periphery of the German and European film-subsidy system, he has little choice but to recycle material that he has produced for his paying customers, including German industry as well as television (though some of his made-for-TV shows are not broadcast).<sup>28</sup> Financing his essay films by making traditional "industrial documentaries," he participates — critically — in what is called *Verbundsystem*, stating — not without irony — in a 1975 issue of *Filmkritik*:

Following the example of the steel industry . . . I try to create a *Verbund* with my work. The basic research for a project I finance with a radio broadcast, some of the books I use I review for the book programmes, and many of the things I notice during this kind of work end up in my television features. . . .<sup>29</sup>

. . . and eventually in his essay films. This mode of filmic production has important implications not merely for the material practice of filmmaking, i.e., the multiple economic determinations on him as cultural worker, but also for the im/perceptible political points made by specific films, perhaps most notably *Bilder*.

Viewed from that perspective, Farocki's film is structured not only

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27. Thomas Elsaesser provides a context for this problem of advocating an oppositional or counter-strategy (locating the critical object in symmetrical and binary paradigms). Thomas Elsaesser, "'It All Started with These Images' — Some Notes on Political Filmmaking after Brecht in Germany: Helke Sander and Harun Farocki," *Discourse* 7 (1985): 96.

28. See Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989) 82-83.

29. Harun Farocki, "Notwendige Abwechslung und Vielfalt," *Filmkritik* 224 (August 1975): 368-69; also cited in Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 82-83.

visually but “musically” in addition to the sound track, in the sense that each social practice depicted is associated with specific images that recur in more or less rhythmic fashion and thematic variation. For instance, at the beginning, in the middle, and near the end of *Bilder* appears the same sequence of a Hannover water-research laboratory. This reiterated sequence, which might seem unmotivated on its own, is integrated in the structure of the film as a whole. In fact, the film has remarkably few really unmotivated sequences — quite an achievement for a film montaged so extensively from ready-made, commissioned documentary images. And we will see that the Hannover sequence turns out to be especially significant.

The editing technique echoes Farocki’s thematic in the way that “technological vision” relates to “natural vision.” Do the latter compliment and/or resist one another?<sup>30</sup> Farocki is aware that the camera lens often gives us information that we normally do not see, *in spite and because* of its very visibility. One of the most striking examples in *Bilder* involves a 1944 Allied photograph of IG Farben in Poland where the death camp Auschwitz was *shown* and yet had not been *seen* until 1977 by the CIA.<sup>31</sup> To arrive at this image, Farocki takes us rhythmically through a complex montage of seemingly unrelated sequences: the work of Alfred Meydenbauer (the inventor of scale measurement by the use of photography); photographs taken by SS officers in Auschwitz; others taken in 1960 by French soldiers of unveiled Algerian women; drawings of the camp made by an inmate, Alfred Kantor; a Dior model being made up in Paris; an art school class; and relatively high-tech computer-generated images, automated industrial production lines, and flight simulators — all in addition to the aforementioned water-research laboratory in Hannover

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30. As Hitchcock used to insist, there is an irreducible difference between the circular field of the human and camera eye on the one hand, and the rectangle of the celluloid and screen frame on the other. “I Wish I Didn’t Have to Shoot the Picture: An Interview with Alfred Hitchcock,” *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. Albert J. LaValley (1966; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972) 22-27.

31. This photograph — or one out of the same series — is on display in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Actually, though Farocki does not mention it, there were several photographs of IG Farben/Auschwitz. “Allied photorecon aircraft made it to these targets less than two dozen times between 4 April 1944 and 14 January 1945 [and] half of those missions also coincidentally got cover of the death camps — a few frames in each of eighteen roles of film.” Roy Stanley, *World War II Photo Intelligence* (New York: Charles Scribener’s Sons, 1981) 346; also cited by Keenan, “Light Weapons” 149.

and the aerial photograph of IG Farben/Auschwitz.

*Bilder*'s imagetrack generally suggests that — whether scientific, military, forensic, or aesthetic — the historical purpose of photography has been not only to record and preserve, but to mislead, deceive, and even to destroy: that is, to aid yet also to obfuscate vision. In other words, to be in/visible. This thematic aspect of the film is itself problematic (intentionally or not) since film in general, and in particular *this* film, is subject to the same visual regime as photography. It, too, must deceive and obfuscate — at the level not only of sight but sound.

Farocki's narrative is spoken (ventriloquized) by a tonally "objective and neutral" female voice-over, in both the German and the English version. Why a woman's voice? Why is it often accompanied by the minimalist tinkling of a piano? One notes that often during the film a "fictional and subjective" narrative is superimposed upon the "documentary and objective" photographic facts. One question raised by *Bilder* as essay film is whether this "inscription" [*Inschrift*] is wholly under control in the re/presentation of women.

#### IV. Gender/ed Trouble

Three other sequences in addition to the photo of IG Farben/Auschwitz could be noted. In each case the photographed subjects/objects are women. The first sequence has drawn by far the most critical attention in analyses of the film.<sup>32</sup> It should be first looked at as a silent image, without accompanying female voice-over narration, then with it.

The voice-over:

The woman has arrived at Auschwitz; the camera captures her in movement. The photographer has his camera installed, and as the woman passes by he clicks the shutter — in the same way he would cast a glance at her in the street, because she is beautiful. The woman understands how to pose her face so as to catch the eye of the photographer, and how to look with a slight sideways glance. On a boulevard she would look in the same way just past a man casting his eye over her at a shop window, and with this sideways glance she seeks to displace herself into a world of boulevards, men, and shop windows.<sup>33</sup>

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32. At least it has drawn the detailed attention of Silverman and Keenan — the first, and to date only, extended treatments of *Bilder*. This same image, framed by Farocki's hands, also appears as the cover of the anthology *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), though neither Farocki nor *Bilder* is mentioned in the book.

33. Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt*" 86.



Silverman's gloss is worth citing at length:

This text is at first shocking in its imputation to the Jewish woman and her Nazi photographer of viewing relations which we associate with "normality" and which seem unthinkable within a context like Auschwitz. However, one of the primary functions of this sequence is to stress that although the male subject is at most a privileged "functionary" of the camera/gaze, the latter is defined as a masculine extension through a whole confluence of institutional, discursive, and representational determinations. At least within the West, the same determinants posit the female subject as the specular object par excellence. Given how overdetermined these relations are, there would seem to be no context — even one as given over to death as Auschwitz — within which they could not be somehow inscribed. . . . To object to the commentary for imputing meaning to these two photographs which was not available to the camera, and which cannot be historically documented, is to overlook another crucial feature of Bilder's interrogation of the visual field — its discourse upon the human look.<sup>34</sup>

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34. Silverman, "What Is a Camera?" 39, 42.

Thus Silverman returns to the constitutive Lacanian distinction between vision, visibility, and visibility, in this case between *camera/gaze* and *human look*. The human look may or may not resist that gaze in its struggle to extricate itself from the vertiginous levels of *méconnaissance* in the Imaginary — to negotiate the traps of socialization set in the Symbolic, with the limit imposed by the Real as that which, for Lacan, “resists symbolization absolutely.”<sup>35</sup> In order to explore the possibility of “the resistant look,” Silverman wants to suggest that the look of this one Jewish woman *does have political (gendered) value* when combined with the narrative voice which contributes an interpretation that, she admits, is not necessarily “in” the photograph. But rather than say anything more specific about this “resistant act,” its ethic, and its precise epistemological location (if not “in” the image, then is it “in” the voice-over, “in” us viewers, or somewhere else?), Silverman shifts theoretical and observational gears to suggest that Farocki’s film generally, and this image specifically signals a new tendency in her work (and *mutatis mutandis* the strict Lacanian model) from a primarily psychoanalytic problematic to its articulation with issues of cultural and historical difference.

It is striking that Keenan, in his article on *Bilder* with the intriguing title “Light Weapons,” independently reprints the same narrative voice-over segment as does Silverman. For Keenan, the key point is that the image and its commentary are immediately preceded by the click of a shutter, one of the few times in the film where, quite literally, “the light goes out in *Images of the World*”: the screen goes black. This emphasis on “the cut and the darkness that precedes it” is crucial for a neo-Heideggerian point of view, because the cut stands in for “the darkness against which an image, a photograph or a film, finds its possibility.” For it is here that such possibility is “brought into the event of the film itself.”<sup>36</sup> Keenan takes his conceptual point of departure from Heidegger’s thesis in the 1938 “The Age of the World Picture” that, contrary to public opinion, shadow is not merely the absence of light but rather

a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from

35. Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre I: Les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 80.

36. Keenan, “Light Weapons” 151.



representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed.<sup>37</sup>

The upshot, for Keenan, is not as abstract or apolitical as it may sound.

In effect, Keenan is doing for Heideggerian film analysis what Silverman is doing for Lacanian: both use *Bilder* to push their respective theoretical orientations into a more historical direction. For Keenan, the task is to redirect fundamental ontology into a crucial hermeneutic question posed by Farocki's film: "how does one *read* a blur" when, as in the case of the photo of IG Farben, nothing less than life and death of innocent people hangs in the balance.

Arguing that the "blur" (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) is what "denatures" an image, "rendering all its constituents 'suspicious,'"<sup>38</sup> leads Slavoj Žižek to provide a possible key to the political in/visible in Farocki's inscription of war:

The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up; we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity, but this very lack propels us to produce ever new "hidden meanings" . . . The oscillation between lack and surplus meaning constitutes the proper dimension of subjectivity. In other words, it is by means of the . . . spot that the observed picture is subjectivized: this paradoxical point undermines our position as "neutral," "objective" observer, pinning us to the observed object itself. This is the point at which the observer is already included, *inscribed* in the observed scene — in a way, it is the point from which the picture itself looks back at us. (91, my emphasis — NA)

All the photographs filmed by Farocki do indeed "look back at us," implicating us in them, as Benjamin or Lacan might say. And it should go without saying that one of the main determinations on the Allies' failure to see the horror of Auschwitz "in" the comparatively "natural," "familiar," and "idyllic" IG Farben was precisely *ideology*. Yet this point — which articulates some of the ways that the economic base is occluded by the superstructure — has all but dropped out of Silverman's or Keenan's work in a way that it may *not* have dropped out of the work of Farocki. For him, ideology appears in/visible in the tensions

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37. Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" 154; also partially cited by Keenan, "Light Weapons" 147.

38. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991) 91.



between vision, visuality, and visibility — and one might add, with Žižek, “subliminally anamorphic” or, with Adorno, “puzzled.”

Returning to the Allies’ failure to see Auschwitz’s camp, the practical consequence of *méconnaissance* was nothing less than *horrific* for millions. On the one hand Farocki might agree with Heidegger that to “get the picture” means “to be in the picture” [*im Bild sein*], and thus always already “inscribed” in images.<sup>39</sup> After all, Farocki’s narrator says as much in his film, as does its very title. On the other hand, however, it is rather less likely that Farocki would buy into the radically antihumanist impulsion of the Heideggerian project. In any case, I think Farocki may have had in mind something politically *specific* that is being overlooked by at least some Lacanian and Heideggerian approaches.

Of course, at stake is not a more *accurate* description, or “truth,” of the SS photograph of the Jewish woman, but rather the search for *alternative* and *more precise* narrative possibilities that may be otherwise occluded from sight. Keenan’s conclusion is at once just and insufficient:

Farocki seems to understand what it means for the camera to be part of the equipment of destruction, indeed for the destruction to be in a certain sense impossible without the camera. This is what he calls *aufklärung*: no bombing without reconnaissance, certainly, but also no annihilation without the record of what has been accomplished.<sup>40</sup>

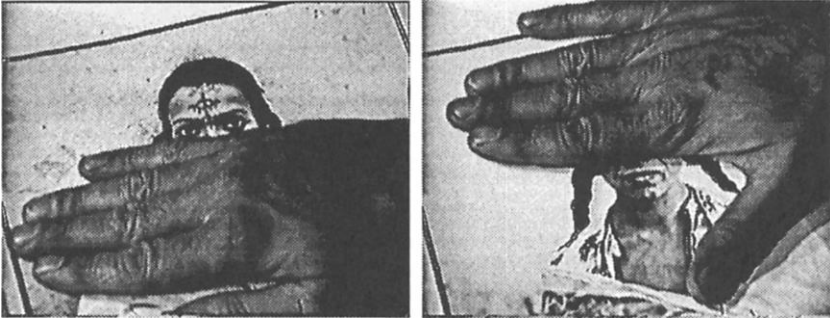
But what about *Farocki*’s film, to which this same theory presumably can *also* be applied? What exactly does it “destroy” and yet simultaneously “make visible”? What kind of “light weapon” might it be? And what might gender have to do with it?

The second sequence I want to analyze occurs early in the film, then is repeated several times. It is a series a photographs of unveiled Algerian

39. Cf. Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture” 129-30.

40. Keenan, “Light Weapons” 151. Certainly this is not a particularly original observation either on the part of Keenan or Farocki. See, e.g., the extensive treatment of this articulation of war and cinema in Virilio’s *War and Cinema*, which Keenan cites only in passing and Silverman not at all. Too, there is the infamous case of *Life* photographer Ron Haeberle, who asked that GIs hold their fire for an instant at My Lai, so that he could snap his picture of the victims before they were murdered. He was rewarded with a Pulitzer Prize. For this and similar incidents, see Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). A not dissimilar problematic has been recently addressed from a very different angle in Remy Belvaux’s pseudo-documentary *Man Bites Dog* (France, 1992), in which the film crew assigned to “document” the everyday life of a serial killer eventually “participates” in stealing money to finance the film and in raping a victim.

women taken in 1960 by a French soldier, Marc Garanger. Farocki films himself leafing through the photobook where they are collected. Sometimes his face is directly behind the book in which, changing POV, we see the face of one woman in particular, revealed and unveiled again by Farocki's hand.



The disembodied female voice-over asks

How to face a camera? The *horror* of being photographed for the first time. The year 1960 in Algeria: women are photographed for the first time. They are to be issued with identity cards. Faces which up till then had worn the veil. (my emphasis — NA)<sup>41</sup>

Then there is a third sequence, further towards the end, in which Farocki focuses on a female prisoner ostensibly “smiling” in a group of inmates walking, perhaps to their death.

The accompanying voice-over:

Among the shaven heads, a girl who *smiles*. In Auschwitz apart from death and work, there was a black market, there were *love stories* and resistance groups. (my emphasis — NA)<sup>42</sup>

Yet, just as the Algerian women do not *necessarily* “look horrified,” this woman does not *necessarily* “smile.” To “sentimentalize” these women in this way is really akin to “sentimentalizing” the death camps by stating — without further comment — that there were “love stories” there. Is Farocki here directly contradicting his earlier statement in *Bilder* that “the success of the TV series ‘Holocaust’ — which aims to

41. Farocki, “Commentary from *Bilder*” 80.

42. Farocki, “Commentary from *Bilder*” 90.



depict vividly suffering and dying . . . turns it into kitsch”<sup>43</sup> He seems at risk, in these three voice-overs involving women, of producing precisely such “kitsch,” of reproducing the problematic in/visibility he exposes in his account of the IG Farben/Auschwitz photographs. What is now at issue explicitly — and hence self-reflectively — is more engendered than is military surveillance. Still, why does Farocki include such a potentially “sentimental” narrative *and* ascribe it to a female voice? Perhaps he does so — or can be interpreted to do so — precisely to disrupt any assumption we might have that *we* know what these images mean.<sup>44</sup> By spotlighting the tension

43. Farocki, “Commentary from *Bilder*” 81.

44. This more or less un/decidable and im/perceptible effect is further enhanced by an ever-so-slight tinkling of classical European piano music in the background. Viewing Farocki’s treatment of the Algerian women, this musical sound track weaves its way in and out here, too, as if to recall not only the history of the cinema (i.e., silent films without audible verbal interpretation and/or misinterpretation) but also the subliminal hegemony of the — here aural — “West” over the — here visible — “Orient.” This would be an ironic reversal of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s remark, following Foucault, that in the West the power/knowledge effect resides primarily in the visual. Trinh T. Minh-ha, “The World as a Foreign Land,” *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 189.

between the visual and the audible, he makes alternative narratives — opposed narratives even — possible and perhaps necessary.

Keenan passes over the Algerian women in silence, whereas Silverman does view them but only to fold them into post-Lacanian theory of the look and gaze, specifically a rather homogenous “colonial gaze.” What gets short shrift, in both cases, is further political specificity. The photos in question were taken during the Algerian war (as Silverman also notes). In fact, the women (actually Berbers) were photographed by the military police because they are suspected criminals, or, more precisely, “terrorists” carrying bombs. Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 pseudo-documentary, *Battle of Algiers*,<sup>45</sup> had dealt sympathetically with a similar theme when showing Algerian women in the Casbah who disguise themselves as “Europeans” so that they may pass through French checkpoints to plant bombs in the “European city.” More than “Algerian,” however, the faces in Farocki’s film are primarily the face of the enemy, actual or potential: *fatales* beyond being *femmes*.<sup>46</sup> By editing, Farocki links these singularly *unhorrified* faces to present-day German police photographs of women suspects (in one particular instance, a composite photo bears an uncanny resemblance to Ulrike Meinhof), or men disguised as women, and then back again to the two photographs of women in Auschwitz. Whether “Jew,” “Algerian,” or “German,” these are all “enemies” to somebody. They are *also* all females, it is true. But primarily they raise the problem of facing an in/visible enemy in a world of violence and terror — though a world that has been historically and culturally en/gendered predominantly in and as a male sphere. At once female and hostile, the “inappropriate/d other” seems to be particularly dangerous when it surfaces not where one expects it, but where one does not. We also begin to grasp why the German police photograph of a woman is then computer-enhanced into a male face. It is almost as if the police, in addition to visualizing various possible disguises, morphs the suspected female “terrorist’s” face into a male’s in order better to identify it *as* the enemy other — traditionally a male military other. For, according to Son-tag and Virilio, to photograph is — potentially — to kill.

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45. *Battle of Algiers*, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, screenplay Franco Solinas, Algeria, France, and Italy, Igor Films, 1966. It had a huge impact when it appeared, and was censored in many countries.

46. For an important psychoanalytic approach to the *femme fatale* in cinema, see Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991).



However, it is women in Farocki's film — as in the actual Battle of Algiers and in the movie *Battle of Algiers* — who carried bombs. And women had done so earlier in Auschwitz, as Farocki tells us presently. The fact that the Algerian women are shown unveiled may be related to the veil's role as a major symbol of the pre- and postcolonial and/or Islamic oppression of women. But the veil also renders the wearer publicly invisible, in some cases safe, even as it makes her sexually mysterious, at least to some.<sup>47</sup> In that sense, it would seem that Farocki wanted to link the veil motif with another group of women terrorists — that of Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof — and so to protest against the relentless branding by the mass media of these women as

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47. For the classic work on the intricate dialectic between repressive and liberatory aspects of "native cultures" in the context of revolutionary situations generally and in Africa specifically, see the work of Frantz Fanon, including *The Wretched of the Earth*, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1978). On the ambivalent attraction to and fear of veiled women, see the ongoing work of Doane, beginning with "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *The Sexual Subject: A "Screen" Reader in Sexuality*, ed. John Caughie and Annette Kuhn (New York: Routledge, 1992) 227-43, and her *Femmes Fatales*.



“whores,” “lesbians,” “PLO-trained,” and so on.<sup>48</sup> Such an overdetermined layering of the enemy body in terms of a suspect “female” and “oriental” sexuality seems to cut across several cultures and times.<sup>49</sup> Today a similar problematic of veiling and unveiling emerges in the so-called *Vermummungsgesetz* — the prohibition of veils or masks in German demonstrations and, in France, schools. The spectre of *anyone*, perhaps *women* especially, as potential terrorists who might be called in/visible is haunting now for many people, male *and* female.

But there is still more about Farocki’s women. Three rhythmically inserted sequences show the same image of a series of handwritten numbers on a slip of paper. On the first two occasions, we glimpse what turn out to be false leads, linking the numbers with military reconnaissance or electronic image manipulation. The numbers flash on the screen without voice-over commentary, but the visual context locates them semantically, even if we do not yet see yet their precise historical meaning. Only near the very end of the film is this series of numbers explained *retroactively* (i.e., *after* we have begun to assimilate them in/visibly) by the female voice-over as

coded messages from Auschwitz prisoners who belonged to a resistance group. They set the date for an uprising. . . . With explosive devices made from powder that women had smuggled out from the Union Munitions factory, they set fire to the crematorium.<sup>50</sup>

Without these women, such terrorism and resistance would simply not have been possible. They did what the combined might of Allied bombers *could* not — or *would* not — accomplish.<sup>51</sup>

48. For a detailed investigation into representations and constructions of terrorism in German culture and cultural theory, see Matthew T. Grant, “Critical Intellectuals and the New Media: Bernward Vesper, Ulrike Meinhof, the Frankfurt School, and the Red Army Faction,” diss., Cornell University, 1993.

49. In literature the image of the Vietnamese woman as being simultaneously a prostitute and a terrorist is a common theme internationally. See my *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996).

50. Farocki, “Commentary from *Bilder*” 92. One of these women was Roza Robota, whose photograph in the Holocaust Memorial Museum is claims she was responsible for smuggling out the explosives that resulted in the 7 October, 1944 demolition of a small part of the Auschwitz crematorium. She was executed for her “crime” on 1 January, 1945.

51. This issue has by no means been settled; indeed, in the Holocaust Memorial Museum it is raised once again with the supporting evidence of letters by members of Jewish organizations addressed to British and U. S. Heads of State, pleading for the bombing of the camps and the train lines — the rejections of these demands is also displayed.

Thus it is that women are allowed access — into history and into Farocki's film — precisely because they are in/visible. But is this point problematized or is it reinforced by the female voice-over? Silverman's analysis in *The Acoustic Mirror* of the role of the female voice in feature films is helpful.<sup>52</sup> She calls for a critique of "the classic cinema's rigorous 'marriage' of voice to image," and analyzes the "ironic distance between the female voice and her filmic 'stand-in'" (168). On these grounds, the voice-over in *Bilder* would be "a voice 'apart,' in both senses of that word — a voice which asserts its independence from the classic system, and which is somehow a part of what it narrates" (131). As critics have pointed out, German male directors have often used a *male* voice-over to undermine female characters and women's issues.<sup>53</sup> For B. Ruby Rich, the male voice-over "takes on the guise of a meta-character, offered up unproblematically for audience identification, smoothing over the real contradictions of the film's form in order to displace attention upon false contradictions taken to represent impossible obstacles to political consciousness or action."<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, however, switching the gender of the voice-over does not *necessarily* solve the problem.<sup>55</sup> Our specific question is then whether the female voice-over in *Bilder* renders any more "acceptable" some of Farocki's seemingly hyperexploitative visual images. A naked black woman drawn mainly by men; a Dior model made up by a man; the photo of a woman "window shopping" in Auschwitz surely are no more palatable when a woman's voice-over does not itself critique what is seen and said.

Part of the problem in *Bilder* is that Farocki's audible woman is never made visible: she is literally disembodied *and* is ventriloquizing for a

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52. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988).

53. See, for example, the analysis of Alexander Kluge's mis/use of male voice-over in Miriam Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*," *New German Critique* 24/25 (Fall/Winter 1981/82): 36-56, where Hansen argues that the status of Kluge's male narrator is never radically questioned. See further, building on this argument, B. Ruby Rich's 1983 essay "She Says, He Says: The Power of the Narrator in Modernist Film Politics," *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions*, ed. Sandra Frieden et al., vol. 1 of *Gender and Representation in New German Cinema* (Providence: Berg, 1993) 143-61.

54. Rich, "She Says, He Says" 151.

55. Various male directors other than Farocki use — wittingly or not — a female voice-over to deflect possible criticism expressing feminist perspectives. Indeed, this has become something of a trend in recent documentaries, exemplified by the English version of Ray Müller's *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1993).



Farocki whose hands, at least, *are* visible in the film. It seems that the problematic of the political in/visible-cum-in/audible is not wholly under Farocki's conscious control, but rather is part of his own political unconscious. One also notes that the accompanying soft piano music acts in tandem with this voice more as a suture than rupture: a way of *seaming* the movie together in terms of its *seeming* gendered content or *semes*. As in a Hollywood feature film, the non-diegetic music in *Bilder* signals moments of special significance, producing an "acoustic mirror": in this case, replication of audio-visual, acutely en/gendered "montage."

Gender aside, montage plays a key role in *Bilder*. When Keenan asserts that "It is not a film of montage, of cutting or sequencing,"<sup>56</sup> he limits his interest to the Heideggerian tension between contingent existential images "in the world" (commonly representable and represented) and the more properly ontological image "of the World" (in the strictest sense eluding all representation and representability). Likewise, Silverman, with her primary focus on the Lacanian gaze, has little motivation to consider *Bilder* in terms of editing. Yet Farocki states quite unambiguously, in an interview with Silverman, that the basic difference between Soviet and American film lies in the treatment of montage:

Montage for the Soviets meant the juxtaposition of ideas. For the Americans it meant instead the juxtaposition of narrative components. . . . Soviet montage is very out of fashion these days. Only advertisements and political films use it.<sup>57</sup>

Farocki's own essay film as "a form of intelligence" might then be expected to follow, in its use of montage, not only the example of explicitly leftist films (especially Eisenstein's "intellectual montage") but also the most powerful medium of consumer capitalism: that is, advertizing, the supreme power of which "in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them."<sup>58</sup> But, if Farocki's "neo-Soviet" use of montage helps account for his film's "intelligence," then what *exactly* are its in/visible and in/audible counter-cultural politics?

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56. Keenan, "Light Weapons" 147.

57. Harun Farocki and Kaja Silverman, "To Love to Work and to Work to Love — A Conversation about *Passion*," *Discourse* 15 (Spring 1993): 63.

58. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; New York: Continuum, 1972) 167.

### V. Political In/Visibility, In/Audibility

This final question about *Bilder* is articulated by one of the many leit-motifs Farocki incorporates into his film: the series of images of camouflage and concealment that evoke the coexistence of two in/compatible worlds, one visible, the other invisible. This problematic jibes easily with the film's explicit discourse on what is visible and what escapes detection. Thus the Allies failed, within the regime of *visibility*, to see at the level of *visuality* precisely what they had photographed at the level of *vision*: namely, the death camp of Auschwitz in the immediate vicinity of IG Farben. Or: veils conceal the identities of Algerian women from the male gaze; European women wear make-up to beautify their appearance for the same gaze; buildings and landscapes are camouflaged during wartime in order to avoid destruction; and so on. Yet this entire discursive level is really only *thematic*. In a film centered so much on concealment and disguise, we also ought to ask ourselves what Farocki himself is hiding. What is *his* camouflaged political text? It is well-known in political rhetoric that, if one *talks about* the existence of hidden esoteric meanings, then a good possibility exists that one is putting one's money where one's mouth is, that one is not merely constat-ing but also *performing* an act of political im/perceptibility.<sup>59</sup>

Farocki is a political filmmaker with a history of situationist activism,<sup>60</sup> and *Bilder* both conceals and reveals a strong censure of present-day Germany — a censure directed not merely against its Nazi past, and against the Allies' irresponsible inaction, but also against postwar development. Hints can be perceived in the remark by the narrator that "after the war the IG Farben company took another name, as some SS men also did."<sup>61</sup> This is what classical rhetorics called "sigetics," the argument from silence. What are these other names, and why does Farocki fail to mention them? One reason may be pragmatic. Working under considerable financial constraints, Farocki uses parts of other projects<sup>62</sup> — film clips

59. See, e.g., Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988).

60. See Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 82.

61. Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder*" 87.

62. When Farocki intercuts *Bilder* with the long sequence of this woman being "made up" (in all senses) and also, in effect, being disguised, his female voice-over comments: "women paint themselves to be beautiful" — even though a man is clearly doing the work. Also see Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder*" 88. There are other possible interpretations. For example, it can be read as an allusion to a scene in Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* when Algerian militants make themselves up as Europeans and then plant bombs.

from technological films or documentaries — to finance his essay films, including in *Bilder* the clip of the Dior model being made up. Farocki's own text thus owes its carefully sequenced, montage to all these literally manufactured images. To name what IG Farben has turned into — a rather small "secret" — might be disingenuous, counterproductive, even economically suicidal for films of the *Verbundsystem* heritage.

But there is more, of course. Farocki's own reference to advertizing montage, dialectically related to Soviet film practice, signalled already a more general strategy.<sup>63</sup> Surely he is aware that in contemporary neo-capitalism, technology and industry have so pervaded the public sphere that it is virtually impossible to avoid them — and their im/perceptibility. As Jameson has pointed out, what in modernist times counted as self-reflection and auto-referentiality tends to become today, in the postmodern condition, the way in which "culture acts out its own commodification."<sup>64</sup> *Bilder*, too, acts out cultural commodification, but it also works to subvert it, much as Adorno had claimed the role of the written essay to be. When Farocki's viewers are told that IG Farben now flies under another name, they are invited to find out what that name is, if they don't know it already; or, if they do, to wonder why this ostensibly public knowledge is not named or nameable here. Actually, three major companies have evolved out of IG Farben: Bayer, Hoechst, and, most interesting, BASF — for the last produces the kind of videotape on which one can view and hear *Bilder*. These names, an anthropologist might say, are the "public secret" that lies at the basis of all social mimesis: in/audible and in/visible.<sup>65</sup> Farocki's film is thus itself an act of understated — im/perceptible

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63. We might also be reminded in this same regard of the 1929 dictum of Dziga Vertov: "Kino-eye is the documentary cinematic decoding of both the visible world and that which is invisible to the naked eye." Dziga Vertov, "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. and intro. by Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 87.

64. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* 5.

65. See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) esp. 83-86. Taussig argues that "the 'origins' of mimesis lie in art and politics and not in survival," and that mimesis in effect is the "nature" that cultures use to produce second nature so as to maintain various types of social control, including by means of public secrets and various forms of aesthetic semblance. For Adorno, "under the essay's gaze second nature recognizes itself as first nature," in part because "the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to be a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance." See Adorno, "The Essay as Form" 5 and 20. I argue that the essay film as practised by Farocki attempts to continue this properly enlightenment tradition by bringing it up to technocultural speed, whatever the limitations may be.

— resistance, since as he himself puts it in a recent essay, in the face of the increasingly global “development in production techniques,” which “excludes me and shuts me out,” “my only means of defense is to make films on this topic. I make films about the industrialization of thought.”<sup>66</sup>

Which returns us once again to the question what the *explicit* political message of this essay film might be, and to its final warning as “documentary,” arguably located in the penultimate image sequence of the film. Rhetorically speaking, this is an effective location for such a message, since the beginning or end would be too obvious. Commentators on texts produced under censorship, such as Leo Strauss, theorize that most explicit political messages are concealed rarely at the more easily visible positions but rather somewhere nearby. Farocki’s female voice-over sends the following message:

In 1983, as the number of atomic weapons in the Federal Republic of Germany was to be increased again, Günter Anders recalled the failure to bomb Auschwitz and demanded: the reality must begin: “The reality must begin. That means: the blockading of all entrances to the murder installations which permanently persist must be equally persistent. Let us destroy the possibility of access to these weapons.” To the atomic weapons.<sup>67</sup>

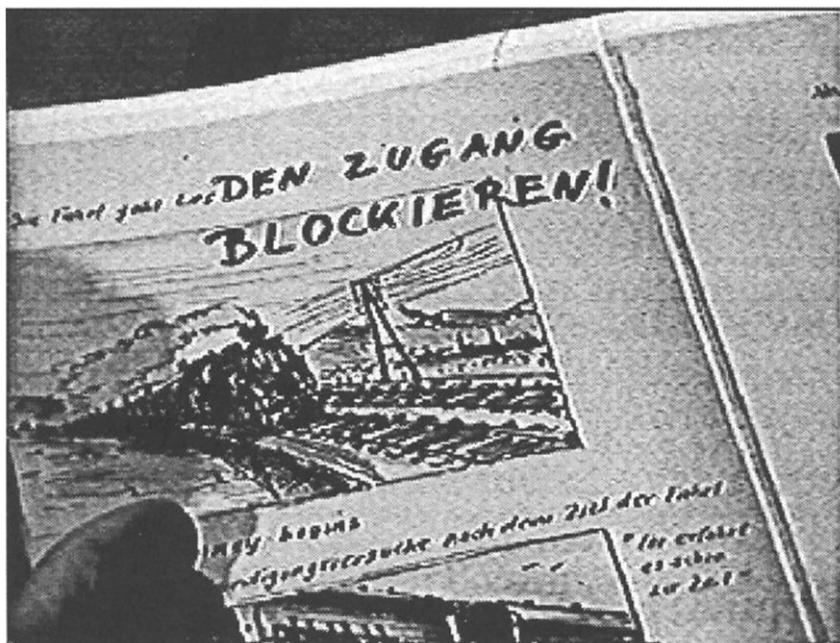
This is also part of Farocki’s own message. But, let me stress, it is not only thematically but also *formally* and *aesthetically* concealed in a code, almost exactly like the numbers used by the Auschwitz resistance group.<sup>68</sup> It, too, calls for the destruction of train lines, this time the tracks leading to

66. Harun Farocki, “The Industrialization of Thought,” *Discourse* 15 (Spring 1993): 77.

67. Farocki, “Commentary from *Bilder*” 92.

68. See Harun Farocki, “Reality Would Have to Begin,” trans. Marek Wieczorek, Thomas Keenan, and Thomas Y. Levin, *Documents* 1/2 (Fall/Winter 1992): 136–46. First published as “Die Wirklichkeit hätte zu beginnen,” *Fotovision: Projekt Photographie nach 150 Jahren*, ed. Bernd Busch, Udo Liebelt, and Werner Oeder (Hannover: Sprengle Museum, 1988). This text, written about the same time as Farocki made *Bilder*, contains much of the basic narrative text of his film. Farocki starts it off with a quotation from Anders (“reality would have to begin”), and then immediately offers the following commentary, which is later dropped from the film version: “Nuclear weapons stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany arrive by ship in Bremerhaven where they are put on trains, whose departure time and destination are kept secret. About a week before departure, Army aircraft fly the entire length of the route and photograph it. This status report is repeated half an hour before the train is to pass, and the most recent set of images is compared with the first set. Through their juxtaposition one can discern whether any significant changes have occurred in the interim. If, for example, a construction vehicle has recently been parked along the tracks, the police will drive to or fly over the spot to investigate whether it is providing camouflage for saboteurs. Whether such sabotage has been attempted is not made public” (136).

the atomic weapons placed by the Allies in Germany, especially by the United States (the country co-responsible for *not* bombing the death camps). In fact, in an earlier article by Farocki in the journal *Documents*, in which part of this just-cited *Bilder* text is contained, he says as much. But, in this essay film, this political message is at once made most explicit and most in/audible and in/visible when Harun Farocki shows his own hand literally *inscribing* (à la Astruc), with a crayon or pen, his political message onto the drawing made by inmate Alfred Kantor of a locomotive bringing prisoners to their death in Auschwitz.



Farocki shows himself writing two times, albeit at an angle that renders it harder to discern: “Block the Access Routes!” This is the first version of what might be called “political anamorphosis” in *Bilder*, and it is not entirely fortuitous that Farocki depicts his inscription at an angle — making it somewhat harder to see yet still visible. In that sense, the essay film, *Bilder der Welt*, is itself the “inscription of war,” *Inschrift des Krieges*, alluded to in its title: a more or less concealed, more or less im/perceptible handbook about how to combat superior nuclear might, much as *Battle of Algiers* was viewed as a handbook for waging underground urban war.

To be precise, Farocki's film proposes a double war of position and manoeuvre. Tactically and immediately: Blockade the trains! The second form of warfare *in and as* essay film is more strategic and long-term. It involves a subliminal anamorphosis that is independent of perspective: The images showing the use of hydro power, in opposition to nuclear power. This is the underlying reason for the otherwise inexplicably recurrent and redundant image of the Hannover water-research laboratory with its accompanying female voice-over. If Farocki believes that labs such as the Hannover plant, given enough financial and public support, will come up with alternatives to nuclear energy, this is a remarkable acknowledgment of science and technology in a film — ostensibly — critical of vision and visibility, images and inscriptions. With regard to most of the other companies for whom Farocki must make industrial documentaries, he is employing the *Verbundsystem* against itself, attempting to accomplish, with an eye on the military-industrial complex of capitalism, what the Situationists might have called its *détournement*, Brecht its *Umfunktionierung*.<sup>69</sup> Not far away, I conclude, is the im/perceptible affirmation of direct action up to and including what others would call "terrorist."

On a more general note, articulating film theory to a historically (and especially politico-economically) specific paradigm, and to its roots in the essay as defined by Adorno, we can thus supplement (not replace) the viewing/listening formations represented by a type of Lacanian psychoanalysis, a type of Heideggerian philosophy, and by Farocki himself. As for the latter, paradoxically, his attempt to use subliminal anamorphosis *contradicts* the "enlightenment" aspect of his project, which demands complete disclosure. Much of his ultimate political strategy thus remains obscure. When Elsaesser noted in 1983 of Farocki's work that "film as a form of intelligence is Farocki's own guerrilla war,"<sup>70</sup> he declined to make any more explicit or specific the form such warfare might take, either in Farocki's work or more generally in cinematic practice, criticism, and theory. Other critics have followed suit.

Filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha is especially attuned to the aesthetic, economic, and historical as well as to the (sexual) political. She writes in 1990 about documentaries as one might write about an effective essay film:

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69. On Brecht and Farocki as different but also related types of political artist, see Elsaesser, "'It All Started with These Images'."

70. Elsaesser, "Working at the Margins" 270.



A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction. It does not work to conceal or exclude what is normalized as “non-factual,” for it understands the mutual dependence of realism and “artificiality” in the process of filmmaking. It recognizes the necessity of composing (on) life in living it or making it. Documentary reduced to a mere vehicle of facts may be used to advocate a cause, but it does not constitute one in itself. . . . Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and, when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather empties it, decentralizes it.<sup>71</sup>

The dual task of criticism, I believe, is on the one hand to resist *overly* “stabilizing” the meaning of an essay film like Harun Farocki’s *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, to “reduce” it to its advocacy. But on the other hand it is equally important to resist the *over* “decentralization” of (possible) political messages that could thus become ineffective — and in *that* sense im/perceptible. In spite and because of its multi-layered and self-reflective quality, I think this essay film, at least, can produce a comparatively decidable political message.

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71. Trinh, “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,” *When the Moon Waxes Red* 41.