Preface to the English Edition

The German version of this book was published in early 2006, after several years of intensive study of the work of the directors who are its subject. I had come to know Harun Farocki’s work while an undergraduate in 1994, when Rembert Häuser showed some of Farocki’s films in the classes he taught at the German Department of Bonn University. I vividly recall the surprise and excitement that IMAGES OF THE WORLD AND THE INSCRIPTION OF WAR (1988) and AS YOU SEE (1986) elicited in me. These were films unlike any others I had seen, both in their intellectual curiosity and in the intimate dialogue with film history and media theory that they enacted and contributed to. Farocki’s work struck me as a mode of critical discourse that I had not known existed: elegant, complex, clearly informed by film history, not only well-grounded in cultural and visual theories but producing a genuine mode of theory in itself.

In the following years, I had the opportunity to watch more of Farocki’s films. A small retrospective at the Kunsthochschule für Medien (Academy of Media Arts) in Cologne in 1995 comprised WORKERS LEAVING THE FACTORY, which had just been completed, A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CONSUMER (1993), and some of the observational films Farocki had made since 1983. We, a handful of students from Bonn, had been looking forward to this event and were quite surprised to see that, except for one KHM student, we were the only attendees. The screenings gave an impression of the range of approaches that Farocki had pursued since 1966, when he started studying film as one of the first students at the Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB). It would be misleading to claim that Farocki’s work was unknown at the time, but it had certainly not yet received the attention it was to attract some years later, especially from the world of contemporary art. In 1998, when two important books on Farocki appeared in German, Thomas Elsaesser could still refer to him as “Germany’s best known unknown filmmaker.”

Even if my first encounter with Farocki took place only two decades ago, it is worth recalling that in the mid-90s the media environment was completely different. This was the last stage of the electronic era before the advent of the DVD, let alone websites like ubu.com or cinephile online-streaming portals. University screenings of Farocki’s work felt somewhat like conspiratorial gatherings; VHS tapes with copies made from copies circulated like contraband from hand to hand; third- or fourth-generation TV recordings (with either the WDR or 3sat logo in the upper right corner of the screen) marked by blurred images and muffled soundtracks; films
introduced in awkward prose by TV announcers in 1980s clothing—this was the way to encounter the work of Alexander Kluge, Jean Luc Godard, or, for that matter, Harun Farocki.

It must have been around 1999 when I went to see Farocki and Kaja Silverman read a chapter of their book “Speaking about Godard,” which had recently been translated into German, at Cologne University. The proximity (but, of course, also the differences) between Farocki and Godard seemed almost too obvious to me. Both directors had made the question of the image in its manifold guises their central concern. Both navigated in unmarked territory between fiction and documentary, using cinema and its tools as a genuine mode of research. Both took moving images seriously as agents of theory, and used film history as a treasure trove of material for thinking visually. Not least, they were tremendous film critics and writers who accompanied their films and TV programs with a corpus of highly original writings.

Farocki and Silverman’s book provided ample evidence to substantiate the assumption that Farocki and Godard made a good pair. I was therefore surprised to see that no one had yet undertaken a more detailed study comparing the two as filmmakers, authors, and theorists. Another felicitous coincidence helped me pursue the hints and hunches that were eventually to turn into this book. In 1998, my first university job brought me to Münster, a city not exactly famous for its film culture, even if the beginnings of the journal Filmkritik can be traced back to Walter Hagemann’s Institut für Publizistik (Department of Journalism), where Frieda Grafe and Enno Patalas had studied. These two were among the founders of the journal that Farocki would edit throughout the 1970s and early 1980s together with Hartmut Bitomsky, Peter Nau, Wolf-Eckhard Bühler, and others. The newly appointed director of the local Kunstverein, Susanne Gaensheimer, planned a show of Farocki’s installations, as his work had steadily attracted more and more attention since his contribution to documenta X, STILL LIFE (1997), and his participation in a group show at the Generali Foundation.1 Since she knew that I was familiar with some of Farocki’s work, she invited me to assist in editing a selection of his writing.2 In lieu of a catalogue, this book was to accompany a retrospective of Farocki’s films in the movie theater Schloßtheater, and an exhibition at the Westfälischer Kunstverein,

1 Dinge, die wir nicht verstehen / Things we don’t understand, curated by Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack, who were to direct documenta 12 in 2007, January 28 through April 16, 2000, Generali Foundation, Vienna. Farocki presented his second installation, I THOUGHT I WAS SEEING CONVICTS (2000), commissioned by the Generali Foundation.

exhibiting I THOUGHT I WAS SEEING CONVICTS (2000) and INTERFACE (1995),
the two installations that Farocki had completed at the time. To make
a selection of texts for the anthology, I started photocopying and avidly
reading Farocki’s early texts for film, compiled his numerous articles in
Filmkritik, and tried to get hold of the more apocryphal texts he had pub-
lished in various other media since the end of Filmkritik in 1984. We could
only include a small selection of Farocki’s immense output in the book, but
my interest in Farocki was sparked and has never ceased since. Moving to
Berlin in the spring of 2002 gave me access to his films and also allowed me
to get in touch with other people on whom Farocki had had an enormous
influence, be it as a teacher at film school, a witty and sharp author, or a
colleague or friend. In retrospect, it seems logical to me that in October
2002 I decided to abandon a previous dissertation project and turn to the
comparative study of Farocki and Godard that you now hold in your hands.

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Why go into a lengthy and personal elaboration of how this book came
into being? First of all, it is to situate this study historically. It was written
before Farocki’s well-deserved recognition in the art world really started
to be felt; it was also written before discussions about “artistic research,” a
genre that Farocki contributed to avant la lettre, took off at art schools and
in the academic public. Substantial work on Farocki was yet to come, and,
of course, both Farocki and Godard have themselves continued producing
new work at an astonishing pace. I am confident that pointing out these
circumstances does not make this study seem aged or anachronistic but
helps to contextualize its premises and arguments, and also accounts for
some of the deficits that I now see more clearly than when I wrote the book.
Apart from the personal embarrassment of re-reading a text that is ten
years old, there are—how could it be otherwise?—things that I miss from
today’s vantage point. Let me point out four aspects that could become the
subject of further thought.

For one thing, I regret not having written a chapter whose ruins must
exist somewhere in the vaults of my hard disk. It would have dealt with
the status of film history for Godard’s and Farocki’s respective take on
images. Farocki’s ambitious project of a “cinematographic thesaurus,” but

3 See Wolfgang Ernst, Harun Farocki, “Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts,” Harun
Farocki. Working on the Sightlines, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University
also numerous lesser-known analytical works for television dealing with individual films and his extensive work as a writer and film critic all show that cinema and its history was and remained an important gravitational center of his activities. WORKERS LEAVING THE FACTORY (1995), THE EXPRESSION OF HANDS (1997), and PRISON IMAGES (1999) are the most explicit contributions to an “archive of visual concepts,” but the project has had extensions in the installation version of WORKERS (WORKERS LEAVING THE FACTORY IN ELEVEN DECADES, 2006) as well as in later installations co-authored by Antje Ehmann.4 Here, as in many other works by Farocki, it is striking how sequences from film history interact with and reflect on contemporary “operational” images from surveillance cameras or pattern recognition software, and how the history, analysis, and theory of images combine and comment on each other.

In Godard’s work, the monumental HISTOIRE(§) DU CINÉMA (1988–1998) is the most obvious result of the director’s ongoing, almost obsessive preoccupation with cinema and film history. Both Godard and Farocki are thinkers whose working lives are inextricably linked to cinema and who evaluate this cultural technique by confronting it with contemporaneous images in an effort to create their own respective media archaeologies. In Godard’s case, this endeavor is indebted to André Malraux, Henri Langlois, and Walter Benjamin, while for Farocki, Aby Warburg and the German tradition of Begriffsgeschichte (history of concepts) are the more relevant models.5 So why did this chapter remain unwritten? As far as I recall, lack of time owing to a rigid deadline made me abandon it. But, to be honest, I also shied away from the task of having to come to terms with the intimidating HISTOIRE(§) DU CINÉMA—something that writers like Jonathan Rosenbaum, Frieda Grafe, Alexander Horwath, or Klaus Theweleit have achieved in their own intriguing ways.

Secondly, I regret that my self-inflicted preoccupation with theory and reflection made me neglect Farocki’s observational films. These might appear to be less complex at first glance but are just as fascinating and no less reflective, albeit in a subtler manner. Farocki himself has sometimes

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5 For a recent reconstruction of Godard’s (film-)historical project, see Michael Witt, Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013).
deplored the way critics and academics commented euphorically on *Images of the World, Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), or *Still Life*, but had next to nothing to say about works like *Indoctrination* (1987), *The Interview* (1997), or *Nothing Ventured* (2005), an offense I would have to plead guilty to as well. Today I think that Farocki’s indebtedness to “direct cinema,” about which he wrote in one of his last published texts, would make a rich subject of comparison with Godard’s various ruses of incorporating documentary techniques. Think of the manifold ways Godard confronts the cinematic fiction with ad hoc interviews inspired by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s cinéma vérité in his feature films of the mid-1960s, or think of his TV series *Six fois deux* (1976), in which the Lumière gesture of blunt registration is countered by sophisticated videographic techniques of writing on the surface of the image. A more detailed analysis could show how Farocki endows his sober observations of managers’ meetings, interview training sessions, or prenatal classes with a strong narrative coherence in montage that creates a genuine form of condensation and dry humor (most notably in *How to Live in the FRG*, 1990), while Godard manages to create an intense sense of contingency and presentness by injecting moments of surprise and contingency into a loose fictional texture.

If I were to re-write the book today, another chapter would probably try to tease out the educational forces in Godard and Farocki. It is obvious that the didactic, agit-prop thrust is most blatant in their Marxist and Maoist films of the immediate aftermath of 1968: Godard’s partnership with Jean-Pierre Gorin and the films of the Dziga Vertov Group on the one hand, Farocki’s “Lehrfilme zur politischen Ökonomie” (“Instructional Films in Political Economy”), made in collaboration with Hartmut Bitomsky, on the other. However, I would argue that a didactic undercurrent remains present throughout both directors’ careers. The pedagogical elements that Serge Daney found in Godard in 1976 may well be detected in Farocki’s children’s programs for television, his film-analytical essays, or the structure of the double projection that has much in common with the tradition of slide projection in art history. My intuition is that the didactic can be regarded

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as the remnant of a persistent political energy, even if the explicit activism has given way to a more detached attitude.  

Finally, it would certainly be illuminating to juxtapose the ways in which Farocki and Godard responded to the migration, during the past two decades, of moving image practices towards the museum and the gallery. Many who have come to know Farocki’s work in the last 15 years regard him as an installation artist rather than a filmmaker. And indeed, far from simply using the gallery as an additional outlet for moving images, Farocki used the possibilities that came with commissions for installation work to develop his own praxis of “soft montage” and build an almost encyclopedic inventory of how two images can relate to one another. For Godard, in turn, the museum has been present throughout his career, but only in 2006 was he given the opportunity to use a large museum space to display his vision (and dystopia) of cinema today. In the same year, Farocki coincidentally also faced the challenge to transform his ideas about cinema into an exhibition and think about the opportunities and difficulties that a presentation in a museum space entails. *Cinema like never before* (2006, co-curated by Farocki and Antje Ehmann) and Godard’s *Voyage(s) en utopie* thus simultaneously became two strong statements about the potentialities and limitations that moving images face once they have left the movie theater to become mobile and handy, quick and nomadic, accessible but faced with the constraints of site-specificity, liberated but potentially commodified.  

That I did not elaborate on these potential topics in this book can partly be explained by the simple fact that these developments still lay in the future. Yet they are also due to my decision to base the book’s structure on Farocki’s and Godard’s respective strategies to confront visual media such as painting and photography with the filmmaking (and editing) process. That there are so many other facets to be explored only confirms that Godard’s and Farocki’s work is as relevant (or more so) as it was ten years ago. There

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8 In his obituary for *Frieze* magazine, Thomas Elsaesser notes that he and Farocki shared a fascination with the films of the Institut für Film und Bild in Wissenschaft und Unterricht (FWU): educational 16-mm films that were used in classrooms from 1950 onwards. See Thomas Elsaesser, “Harun Farocki. Obituary,” *Frieze* online, http://frieze-magazin.de/archiv/features/harun-farocki/ (accessed August 16, 2014).

is much more to say about their elective affinities, and I would be happy if this book could become the starting point for a wider discussion.

Now that I am writing this preface, my deepest regret is that Harun Farocki is no longer here to share his immense knowledge, inventiveness, wit, integrity, and intelligence with us. His sudden and unexpected death in July 2014 turns the following pages into a document of sorrow and commemoration. I feel an enormous gratitude for having known him, and dedicate this book to his memory.

Berlin, August 2014