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‘Text-Praxis’ and Modes of Production: Harun Farocki’s Collected Writing Between 1964 and 2000

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Books: Tom Holert and Volker Pantenburg (eds.), Harun Farocki – *Schriften Band 3, 4 and 6* (Köln: Walther König, 2018-2021)

Warranting two retrospectives in 2017, and an ever-growing community of scholars and critics, the German filmmaker and video artist Harun Farocki has over the past two decades become a household name in essay film, documentary and art film practices in Germany and abroad. A self-proclaimed “outsider” of the New German cinema during its prime, Farocki pursued a distinct Brechtian, political and reflexive filmmaking across more than 100 films and video installations over five decades. Although close to the political filmmaking of his much-admired contemporaries Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub and Jean-Luc Godard, Farocki also left his mark on contemporary artists and filmmakers, such as Christian Petzold – with whom he later collaborated – Jill Godmilow, Hito Steyerl and Trevor Paglen. Through his work on machine vision and operational images, Farocki further inspired studies on the histories and impact of media technology, which is now slowly evolving into its own field of study.¹

Since Farocki’s death in 2014, the Harun Farocki Institut has worked to regroup his prolific body of writing in German with the publishing house Walther König and the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), leading to the publication of numerous, affordable booklets comprising short texts by, on, and related to, Farocki.² These include Farocki’s autobiography *Harun Farocki: Zehn, zwanzig, dreissig, vierzig / Harun Farocki: Ten, Twenty, Thirty, Forty* (2017) as well as a new German release of *Speaking about Godard* (1998), written with the feminist

film scholar Kaja Silverman. Among these efforts, the editors and long-term analysts of Farocki's filmmaking Volker Pantenburg and Tom Holert have collected his "scattered texts" in a comprehensive series of previously-published, or openly-circulated texts written between 1964 and 2000.³ Here Farocki's letters, reflections, manifestos, teaching notes, columns, film reviews, production material and essays come together chronologically across three separate volumes; *Meine Nächte mit den Linken: Texte 1964–1975 / My Nights with the Left: Texts 1964–1975* (2018), *Ich habe genug!: Texte 1976–1985 / I've Had Enough!: Texts 1976–1985* (2019) and *Unregelmäßig, nicht regellos: Texte 1986–2000 / Irregular, not without Rules: Texts 1986–2000* (2021).

The broad divisions signal practical evolutions in Farocki's writing habits. The first phase covers his early critical writing in the 1968 student movement and during his time in television in the 1970s. The second contains his regular film criticism for *Filmkritik* and material on his first major films *Between Two Wars* (1978) and *Before your Eyes Vietnam* (1982). The third comprises his texts written between 1986 and 2000, which comment more directly on his films and include his most well-known articles, as Farocki gradually reached a wider audience in the 1990s.

The collection distinguishes itself through its extraordinary breadth of materials, encompassing thirty-six years of text production. Until now, Farocki's written output has been dispersed across various publications with the exception of *Harun Farocki: Nachdruck / Imprint* (2001), which focused on translating a handful of now popular texts, such as "Dog from the Freeway" (1982), "Reality would have to Begin" (1988), "Risking his Life: Images of Holger Meins" (1998) and "Controlling Observation" (1999), into English.⁴ While the German collection's completist ambition and linear, sequential structure might overwhelm even Farocki's most avid

fan, the strength of its compilation resides in its impressive breadth of scope. At the outset, it reveals the eclectic range of Farocki's interests; from the film *auteurs* and theorists of his times, the impact of television and new computer imaging systems, to cybernetics, Bertolt Brecht and shopping malls. All of these matters are to be found in Farocki's remarkably wide-ranging writings – centred, first and foremost, around the moving image and film production. The inherent historicity of Holert and Pantenburg's efforts at contextualising Farocki's writings uncovers these various influences whilst tracing his professional trajectory and often exposing the economic reality underlying his principled career "working at the margins" of the cultural industry.⁵ In this manner, the editors bring to light the singular political mode of production with which Farocki wrote, and find a generative point of contact with his filmmaking.

In the first volume *My Nights with the Left*, the title of Pantenburg's epilogue "The Work of Authorship" encapsulates Farocki's early writings as a cultural critic for West Berlin's newspapers to finance his independence having left home at a young age. Compelled by a personal and political urge towards self-determination and his passion for culture, he approached many different subjects in his first short reviews and articles, where cinema was only one of many interests alongside the theory of Roland Barthes, the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and a car mortuary. For this period, Pantenburg carefully draws out the fundamental principles of self-reflection with which Farocki views and treats cultural objects through writing. Borrowing from Kaja Silverman's description of Godard – greatly admired by Farocki – as an "author-recipient", Pantenburg explains how Farocki preserves the "fracture lines and stages of processing" with which he adapts material on the page, deliberately foregrounding his practice based on the threefold consolidation of "reading, perceiving, learning."⁶ By focusing on Farocki's autodidactic, (self-)reflective and interdisciplinary

method, Pantenburg convincingly advances a lucid perspective through which Farocki's writing and filmmaking come to share an elemental artistic praxis.

In fine detail, recourse to personal notes and conversations with Farocki's contemporaries, Pantenburg's extensive, biographical contextualisation of these articles brings nuance to this, still barely known, early period of Farocki's filmmaking, which has until now been dominated, or even overshadowed, by his involvement in the 1968 student movement.⁷ Next to Farocki's bold and provocative calls for political agitation through film in the cinephile film magazines *Filmkritik* and *film*, Pantenburg incorporates Farocki's retrospective thoughts on May '68, such as "When I was 22" (circa 1976), explaining how Farocki's close friendship with Christian Semler, a key figure in the student movement, overly impressed him as a young student at the *Deutsche Film- und Fernseherschule Berlin* (dffb) and dictated their collaborative article "Hoffmann yes – Antonioni no" (1965). Pantenburg also uncovers interesting anecdotes in elaborate footnotes, which demonstrate the intricacies of Farocki's various activities at the time: for example, Farocki's attempts at playwriting in a script entitled "Hundred Days of the Big Apple" (circa 1964), or his evaluation by the esteemed German film critic Enno Palatas. With such attention to what might seem like trivia, Pantenburg traces Farocki's singular path within the general social unrest and artistic collectivism during these tumultuous years without losing sight of the political principles of independence, artistic freedom and Marxist values that would characterise Farocki throughout his career.

Aside from Farocki's experiment with Ampex video technology in *Ohne Titel oder: ein Wanderkino für Technologen / Untitled or: a Traveling Cinema for Technologists* (1968), Farocki's early student activist films are markedly absent from his writing in this period. Instead, Pantenburg takes the opportunity to address the lesser-known histories of Farocki's

unfinished projects like the eight reels of Super 8 film Farocki shot in South America in 1967 or the Marxist collaborative project AUVICO with Hartmut Bitomsky – aborted presumably under the demands of an increasingly profit-driven television industry. Pantenburg’s research on the television channel WDR effectively feeds into his precise history of Farocki’s move towards television, picking up early traces of recurring subjects in Farocki’s *oeuvre* along the way, such as Roland Barthes and the motive of the cutting table.⁸ In this volume’s obscure catalogue, Farocki’s critical articles on television in the 1970s and his writing on the video experiment *Traveling Cinema for Technologists*, however, stand out, suggesting that the influence of TV and video on his approach to cinema and filmmaking still remains largely understated.

Comprising texts from 1976 onwards, the second volume *I’ve Had Enough!* focuses on Farocki’s contributions to the film magazine *Filmkritik* where he became an integral part of the editorial team in 1974. Pantenburg’s knowledge of the history of this cinephile magazine – still fairly unknown to anglophone scholarship – bears on his appreciation for these texts and sheds light on Farocki’s critical approach and idiosyncratic style, which is oftentimes difficult to grasp without context.⁹ Through archival research and conversations with former writers, he discloses *Filmkritik*’s collective political project and ardent pursuit of intellectual freedom in cultural journalism, unwilling to cater to the cultural industry. Here Farocki and the magazine’s community of critics eschew being topical and, instead, focus on principle. As the former *Filmkritik* writer Susanne Röckel summarises: “No clichés, no scene jargon, no culture journalist jargon. Accurate wording. [...] Very great freedom in terms of content.”¹⁰ By maintaining the focus on modes of production from the previous volume, Pantenburg manages to find a common thread in a specific code of practice, a “Text-Praxis”, explaining Farocki’s own contributions and editorial choices as well as the “bizarreness of this weird magazine” and

its “act of resistance in thought”, to use Farocki’s own words.¹¹ Headlined by Farocki’s rave against a stereotypical cinema culture “I’ve had enough!” from 1985, closing the volume’s extensive list of 107 titles, the second volume tells the story of an enthusiastic defiance against intellectual rigidity, while taking note of the serious financial precarity Farocki experienced during this time, which led him to abandon his mission with the magazine in 1983.

Farocki’s style as a film critic, which has not been re-evaluated since the first edited collection on Farocki’s work *Der Ärger mit den Bildern / The Trouble with Images* (1998), almost retreats behind the intricacies of *Filmkritik*’s history. But a concise summary of his approach to film analysis and criticism would probably do injustice to his polarising style, associative method and tendency for self-mockery. As Pantenburg explains, “Farocki invents scenes, thinks up entire interviews (such as with Truffaut) instead of conducting them, and heads straight for inconspicuous details.”¹² Indeed, Farocki’s reviews are opinionated, noticeable when he begins a review of Franco Zeffirelli’s *Endless Love* (1981) with “[a] love story – but love cannot be seen” or describes Eduardo de Gregorios’s *La Memoire courte* (1979) as “[n]o filmic intelligence and a lot of diligence”.¹³ Despite this, Farocki’s refusal to impose ponderous ambiguities, abstractions or platitudes on films is genuine and refreshing where he often demonstrates a specific point by simply describing scenes from his singular perspective as in his review of Charles Laughton’s *The Night of the Hunter* where he illustrates – “one of the most beautiful images from the picture book of film history” – Shelley Winter drifting underwater with the sentence: “Her long hair floats around her, algae want to embrace her.”¹⁴ Such methods occasionally generate insightful and, crucially, funny observations. In his reading of Godard’s *Passion* (1982), Farocki – quite ambivalent about the charisma of Isabelle Huppert, Hanna Schygulla and Michel Piccoli in the film – borrows a famous line from Comte de Lautréamont’s *The Songs of Maldoror* (1868/9) and comically remarks: “There are also

three instances in the film where the characters meet, like a sewing machine and an umbrella on the dissection table.”¹⁵

Next to the tremendous material from *Filmkritik*, Farocki’s writing for *Between Two Wars* and *Before your Eyes Vietnam* could easily be overlooked. But its production material and a full *Filmkritik* dossier offer Pantenburg a glimpse into the elusive lines between Farocki’s writing and filmmaking and the discrepancies between the written concepts and the actual films.¹⁶ In relation to Farocki’s filmmaking, Pantenburg also unveils here many core influences from this period; such as his engagement with the economist Alfred Sohn-Rethel, early discussions on surveillance images and interest in the codes and tropes of cinema in “Shot / Countershot” (1981). The second volume similarly incorporates several little-known documents. For example, Farocki’s teaching notes exhibit the virtually unknown pedagogy underlying his seminars at the dffb, having inspired his mentee Petzold and other Berlin school filmmakers. Additionally, “This is the saddest story ever” (1976) and “Hello Mr Roßmann” (1983) attest to Farocki’s admiration and friendship with Huillet and Straub. Although generally absent from these collections, Farocki’s correspondences and exchanges with other theorists, intellectuals and filmmakers could easily fill yet another publication.¹⁷

The last volume (to date) compiles articles between 1986 and 2000 including some of his most discussed texts, at a time when Farocki began to elicit serious consideration from critics and scholars across the globe with the release of *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges / Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988), Kaja Silverman’s dossier in *Discourse* in 1993, and his move into the gallery space in 1995 with the installation *Schnittstelle / Interface* (1995). While Farocki wrote less vigorously in these years, his output became more directly related to his films in essays or commentaries commissioned for screenings or exhibitions. Here Holert

meticulously describes the evolution of Farocki's concern with the technological history and paradigm shifts in the production of images reflected in his interests and encounters during that time – interacting with Vilém Flusser, Jean Baudrillard or Friedrich Kittler – and brings useful insights and clarity into an already established debate in Farocki's scholarship. He also manages to bring together previous insights into constructive observations on Farocki's writing career. For example, he remarks how the collapse of socialist regimes recalibrated Farocki's political awareness and his post-1968 generation, noting how his renewed engagement with the photographic image springs from an underlying fascination with the mediation of history in culture:

For Farocki, reading the traces of historical upheavals in the documents of culture, which – with Walter Benjamin – are also always barbaric ones, has long been one of his central projects. In the years between 1985 and 1989 in particular, the photographic image became the most important object of this hermeneutic interest.¹⁸

Holert's attention to Farocki's analytical commitment to forms of perception and visual interpretation identifies a connotative essayism in Farocki's writing indicating a thinking in “nodal points”, borrowed from Farocki's reading of Flusser, and skilfully connects the third volume to its predecessors and their focus on textual praxis.¹⁹

While the last volume contains fewer texts (and thus surprises), it compiles the core material to some of Farocki's best known films: *As You See* (1986), *How to Live in the FRG* (1990), his collaboration with Andrei Ujică *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) and *Interface* (1995). However, a few lesser-known texts such as “How Film sees?” (1990), “The Worldimage” (1992) or “Encyclopaedia Harun Farocki” (1998) attest to Farocki's sustained reflection on images and image-making in this period with perceptive and memorable comments such as “[w]e [documentary filmmakers] make films with the light of others” or, commenting on technical images, “[s]oon images no longer want to depict, but to model.”²⁰

In addition, the collection has invested a lot of care into the framing of the texts with images from Farocki's personal life and his films as well as cover pictures of *Filmkritik*, photographs from his productions, scans of his letters and film stills from Godard's *Passion* or Peter Nestler's *Spain!* (1973). The volumes also stay true to the original presentation of the texts by including diagrams or drawings published with the articles and keeping Farocki's occasionally peculiar arrangement of text, sometimes writing in bold or elsewhere without capitals, sometimes publishing big blocks of text, then lists of short statements like a manifesto. The editors' attention to detail and recourse to Farocki's biography, moreover, complement their detailed histories with countless intriguing, comical anecdotes; for example – a personal favourite – the time Farocki invited the critics of his film *Between Two Wars* to (meta-)criticise their reviews.²¹

Overall, Pantenburg and Holert remain sensitive to the fact that Farocki practiced writing and filmmaking as a complementary, unfinished project and maintain this energy in the books by avoiding restricting, overarching categorisations and, instead, openly signal omissions, confusions and gaps in the archive.²² Because of the publications' restraint, where only evident misprints were "tacitly corrected", research on the yet unknown parts of Farocki's work is left to others. Hopefully, more texts will also be translated for the anglophone world where his 1968 activism, his TV critique and the broader history of his engagement with visual technologies could bring new insight into Farocki's influential status as a reader and theorist of images.²³ Nonetheless, with this collection, the Harun Farocki Institut equips any German-speaking researcher with elaborate, solid detail and rigorously outlined material, presented in a way that is as honest, open and unreserved as Farocki himself. Luckily, "[m]ore volumes will follow."²⁴

Notes

¹ For relevant scholarship, see: Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk ed., *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict* (Manchester: MUP, 2017); and Jussi Parikka, *Operational Images* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2023 [forthcoming]). Current research projects dedicated to Farocki's operational images include Parikka's and Tomáš Dvořák's international project "Operational Images and Visual Culture: Media Archaeological Investigations", started in 2019, and Laliv Melamed's project "Optiken der Opazität: Das kulturelle Leben der operativen Bilder" at "Konfigurationen des Films" in Frankfurt-am-Main.

² In this respect, the Harun Farocki Institut also has a comprehensive online archive listing Harun Farocki's texts and an extensive bibliography of his scholarship: <https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/>.

³ Volker Pantenburg's and Holger Glinka's editorial note in *Harun Farocki - Ich habe genug!: Texte 1976–1985, Band 4* (Köln: Walther König, 2019), p. 467. All translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ See Susanne Gaensheimer, and Nicolaus Schafhausen, *Harun Farocki – Nachdruck / Imprint: Texte / Writings* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg; Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2001). Most notably Harun Farocki's writing was published in edited collections on his work such as, in German, Ulrich Kriest, and Rolf Aurich (ed.), *Der Ärger mit den Bildern: die Filme von Harun Farocki* (Konstanz: UVK Medien, 1998); and, in English, Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), 'Working at the Margins: Film as Form of Intelligence,' in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004).

⁵ Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), 'Working at the Margins: Film as Form of Intelligence,' in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), pp. 95–107.

⁶ Volker Pantenburg (ed.), 'Die Arbeit der Autorschaft: Zu Harun Farockis frühen Texten,' in *Harun Farocki - Meine Nächte mit den Linken: Texte 1964–1975, Band 3* (Köln: Walther König, 2018), p. 255.

⁷ Volker Pantenburg's afterword and five of these early texts were published recently in *Grey Room* vol. 79 (Spring 2020): <https://direct.mit.edu/grey/issue/number/79>.

⁸ See Volker Pantenburg (ed.), "TV essay Dossier, I: The Case of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR)," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* vol. 14, no. 1 (2018).

⁹ See, for example, Volker Pantenburg's Kracauer Lecture in 2018 entitled "FILMKRITIK, 1975 to 1984: A Partisan Film Journal between Cinema and Television": <https://www.kracauerlectures.de/en/winter-2017-2018/volker-pantenburg>.

¹⁰ Volker Pantenburg (ed.), 'Film-Praxis und Text-Praxis: Harun Farocki und die Filmkritik,' in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 455.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 463.

¹³ Harun Farocki, 'Eduardo de Gregorio: *La Mémoire courte*,' in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 367; and 'Endlose Liebe,' in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 336.

¹⁴ Harun Farocki, 'Charles Laughton: *The Night of the Hunter*,' in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 362.

¹⁵ Harun Farocki, 'Godard, *Passion*,' in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 416.

¹⁶ Pantenburg (ed.), 'Film-Praxis und Text-Praxis,' p. 460.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Harun Farocki, 'Das ist die allertraurigste Geschichte' in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 32; and 'Guten Tage, Herr Roßmann,' in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 425–428.

¹⁸ Tom Holert (ed.), 'Analyse ohne Zerstörung: Harun Farockis Wege und Umwege der 1980er- und 1990er- Jahre,' in *Harun Farocki - Unregelmäßig, nicht regellos: Texte 1986–2000, Band 5* (Köln: Walther König, 2019), p. 319.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Harun Farocki, 'Enzyklopädie Harun Farocki,' in *Unregelmäßig, nicht regellos*, p. 272; and "Weltbild," in *Unregelmäßig, nicht regellos*, p. 203.

²¹ Pantenburg (ed.), 'Film-Praxis und Text-Praxis,' pp. 459–460.

²² Note in this respect, for example, Tom Holert's footnote for his opening quotation from a Farocki letter adding to the reference the commentary: "The context in which this letter was written and should

be read has yet to be determined.”; or, in his filmmaking, Erika Balsom’s article on Farocki’s unfinished project *Moving Bodies* in Erika Balsom, ‘Moving Bodies: Captured Life in the late Works of Harun Farocki,’ *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2019): 358–377.

²³ Pantenburg’s and Glinka’s editorial note in *Ich habe genug!*, p. 467.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

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