

# Harun Farocki: On the History of Labor

Document  
Material  
Commentary

## Conceptual Doubts

Harun Farocki's *On the History of Labor* Project

I.

Apart from his existing films for cinema and television as well as radio broadcasts and installations, Harun Farocki conceived numerous films that for one reason or another could not be realized. *On the History of Labor* is one such unrealized film. Or more precisely: it is a film that evolved so much during its production phase that the shape of the original concept is barely recognizable in what came out of it—namely the film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988). Detailed, albeit incomplete, documentation on the project can be found in the filmmaker's estate, including filmed but unused footage.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to SFB editors Jürgen Tomm and Bernd Schauer in October 1985, Farocki outlined his idea for making a film about a worker at Daimler-Benz, Jochen Sonn, a "critic of mass production." As a second, potentially related project, the filmmaker mentions a "history of machine tools and the lathe operator's profession," which he envisions telling through the collections of science museums. In the same letter, Farocki also shared his plan to make a film with and about Georg K. Glaser.<sup>2</sup>

In the following months, Farocki merged the project ideas that had still been separate in the letter; on April 21, with the title *On the History of Labor*, he applied for funding from the Filmbüro Nordrhein-Westfalen e.V. with the exposé reproduced in this issue. The potential crew consisted of Ingo Kratisch (camera), Manfred Blank (sound), and Ulrich Ströhle (assistant, production and recording manager). In a later letter, Ronny Tanner (camera assistant) and Karlheinz Wegmann (without a specific function) are listed as additional crew members. Hinting at the precarious economic conditions of cultural production, Farocki explains: "I calculated the budget of this film on the basis of a life in corner pubs and with a VW bus, and I did not exactly value my working hours either."<sup>3</sup> At the end of August 1986, 130,000 DM in funding was

1 In particular, a folder in the archive of the Harun Farocki Institut, with the spine inscription "1985 + 1986: Socially useful products / Images-Hist." contains illuminating information on the development of the project. Cited below as "Project Folder 1985/86." A second folder labeled "Research / Small Articles / Images-History" contains literature from the research process; Farocki's list included in this folder is printed in this issue.

2 Harun Farocki, "Letter to Jürgen Tomm and Bernd Schauer of October 18, 1985." Source: Harun Farocki GbR.

3 Harun Farocki, "Note on the Team and Calculation of *On the History of Labor*, February 26, 1986." Project Folder 1985/86.

approved. Together with the personal funds of the producer (Farocki) as well as reserves and provisions, the total budget amounted to 166,338.15 DM.<sup>4</sup>

In June 1986, several weeks before the funding was secured, Farocki's film *As You See* had its world premiere. As the existing documents indicate, *On the History of Labor* would have been that film's follow-up project. A list of twenty-five "destinations of the research trip" proves the close ties with the previous film; some of the locations and thematic concerns are linked directly to issues that figure prominently in *As You See*.<sup>5</sup> Farocki continues to be interested in the successive automation and replacement of manual labor. His list also represents the prehistory of the computer in the punched card control of the loom with specific locations: "Nerve impulses for controlling prostheses and other devices—University of Bielefeld"; "Krefeld / Mönchengladbach textile museum—punched card control of textile machines"; "Telechiric devices—nuclear research, Jülich or Karlsruhe"; "Telechiric devices (= mechanical hands with analog remote control)—manufacturer, Düsseldorf." Reacting to the logic of the federal funding structure, Farocki adds: "The connection to the state of North Rhine-Westphalia is given since many of the filming locations are in this state: businesses, museums, archives. Also, it doesn't take much to deduce that a film about the history of labor has a lot to do with NRW."

Other potential research and filming locations in the listing already anticipate *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, which focuses on processes for measuring and automating the senses—especially the sense of sight—in addition to analyzing the movement of water. Farocki planned to visit the simulator "Susan" at the University of Applied Sciences in Hamburg and noted: "navigation bridge simulating currents and water movements." At the University of Bochum, he wanted to learn about the field of "Artificial Intelligence—problems of image recognition."

At least two more interests of vital importance are present in the list of research locations: On the one hand—as is evident from the project's title—Farocki wanted to inspect a number of factory archives (e.g. Krupp, Ford) and historical collections of tools. In the same vein, he planned to visit the department of "Historical Work Machines" in the Deutsches Museum in Munich, as well as institutes for work ethnography in Münster and

4 Düsseldorf District President, "Letter to Harun Farocki [sic], Subject: 'Cultural film funding in the State of North Rhine-Westphalia,'" here: "Project funding for the measure *On the History of Labor*, August 29, 1986." Project Folder 1985/86.

5 Apart from plans of *On the History of Labor*, Project Folder 1985/86 also contains accounts of *As You See*, whose working title was *Socially Useful Products*.

Osnabrück. Finally, trips to visit the three protagonists included in the project proposal—the metalworker Jochen Sonn in Pforzheim, the philosopher and media theorist Vilém Flusser in the South of France, and the writer and blacksmith Georg K. Glaser in his Paris workshop—are also included.

Farocki submitted the list of research locations on October 5, 1986. His letter to the “Treuarbeit” in Düsseldorf—an auditing and management consultancy established in 1922 (merged with PricewaterhouseCoopers in the 1990s) responsible for the project’s accounting—suggests that there were differences concerning the payment periods of the funding money: “The issue with the audit office may be difficult, but it is also important to produce an intellectually responsible film and to act according to one’s own insights. In television, you usually have to get something done within a given shooting time, but here, the funding would be in vain if we had to act in the same way. Within the given financial framework, I must have the freedom to make the film as it seems right to me. I ask you to support me in this direction.”<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the upcoming steps, Farocki notes: “I plan to spend about fifteen days researching, starting on October 18, 1986.” Two weeks for twenty-five different research locations and various subject areas—that sounds like an extremely ambitious and tight schedule. All the more so since the radius of relevant topics had considerably expanded since the project treatment from April. In the initial draft with its concentration on the machining process of “turning”—the rotational movement and its initially manual, then mechanical implementations—the focus was on a clearly defined cultural technique within the vast field of labor which was to be linked to the positions of Flusser, Glaser, and the metalworker Sonn. In just a few months, the interests around the areas of “work” and “image” had spread much more widely. No doubt, that with such far-reaching intellectual movements, “enough surprising and therefore informative image-image or word-image or word-word relationships” could be established, as the project description promises. At the same time, however, the centrifugal forces of the different interests are considerable.

## II.

It seems that Farocki’s project came to a standstill at the end of 1986 and the project could not be carried out as planned (and applied for). Since the Filmbüro NRW required that it be informed about the state of affairs every

<sup>6</sup> Harun Farocki, “Letter to the ‘Treuarbeit’ Düsseldorf, c/o Mrs. Miesen, of October 5, 1986.” Project Folder 1985/86.

two months, Farocki wrote a short report in fourteen key points at the beginning of 1987. An indication that the question of *images* had become as central to the project as the question of *work* is the fact that Farocki now proposed the shorter working title *Images/History*: image and history coexist on equal terms. At first glance, this modification is done for the pragmatic reason “to make the title fit on the clapper,” but in the same breath, Farocki adds: “it is about the history of the image and the history of work.” Among the work already done are research trips to London (Imperial War Museum, Science Museum, London Central Library), Harzburg-Lüneburg, and Cologne-Ruhr, as well as test shoots on video. According to Farocki, two initial shooting days also took place in December. However, the plan to shoot a much larger portion (about one-third of the film) in December could not be realized. “I was delayed: a family death. Obstacles such as: certain experimental arrangements are currently not set up. Conceptual doubts.” The extent of the doubts indicated here can only be speculated about. Despite the difficulties, Farocki’s intention remained firm: “I want to make the film this year and with the available means. As long as I can improve it by thinking, preparing, or postponing, I want to do so.”

From this point on, the trajectory of the project *On the History of Labor* (aka *Images/History*) is hard to fathom. The project folder in the archives of the Harun Farocki Institut ends with a letter from Farocki in which he asks the funding agency to extend the funding period to the fiscal year 1987 and to postpone the deadline of the final account.

## III.

While Farocki did not complete a film entitled *On the History of Labor*, the contents and themes of the project migrated into other works, shorter and longer, of this period.<sup>7</sup> With Vilém Flusser, the short WDR program *Catch Phrases – Catch Images* (1986), an impromptu media theoretical analysis of the current *Bild* newspaper title page in the form of a café conversation, had already been finished before the project began. Farocki also reviewed Flusser’s books on “technical images,” which had been published

<sup>7</sup> In any case, various films by Farocki—before and after this project—are paradigmatic contributions to the “History of Labor”. This applies to the Marxist educational films on political economy at the beginning of the 1970s as well as *Between Two Wars* (1978) and *Industry and Photography* (1979). It applies equally to *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995); the project *Labor in a Single Shot* (2011–14, with Antje Ehmann); and the many observational films devoted to labor in courses, training programs, and job-application exercises.

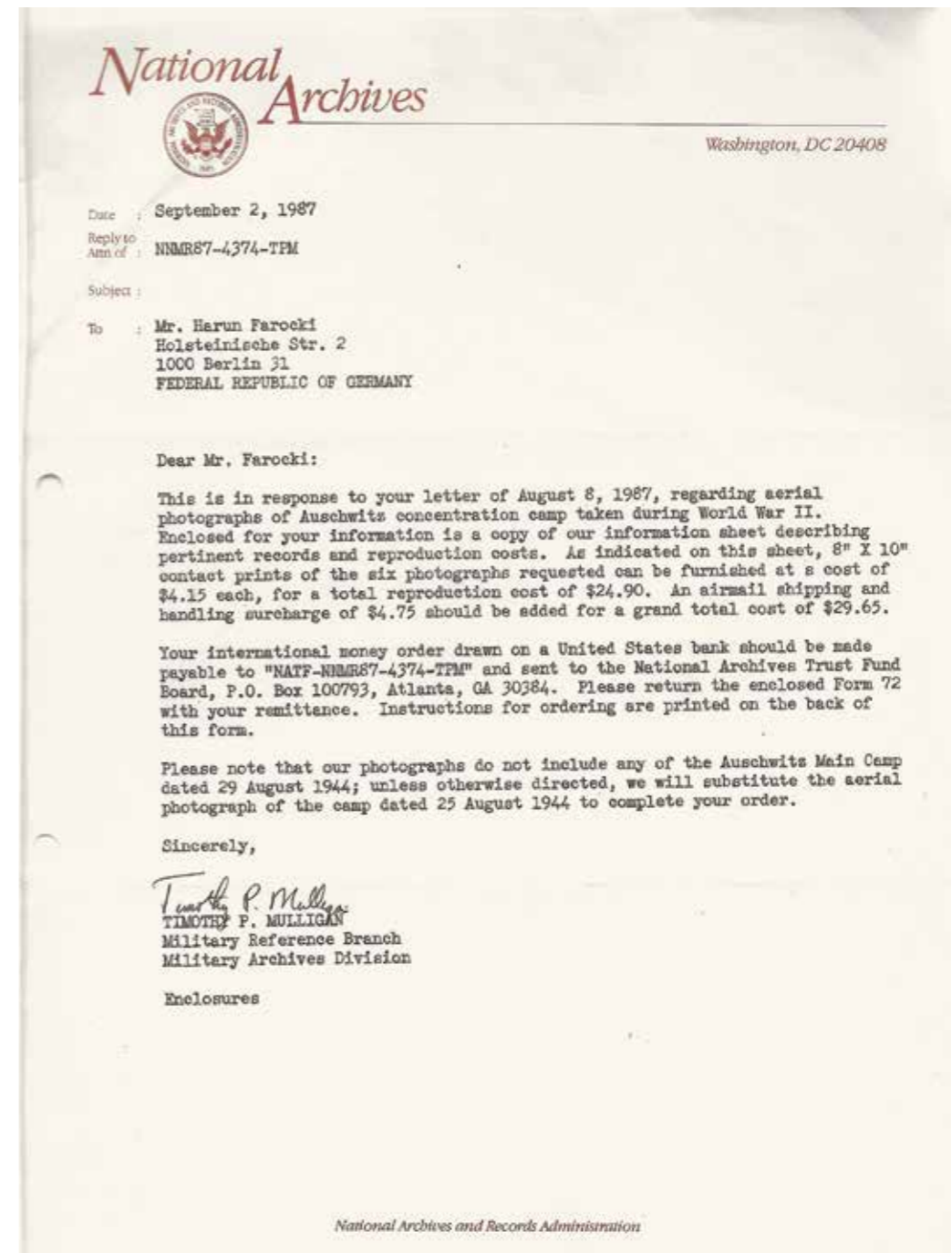
in German.<sup>8</sup> In 1988, the director finished the portrait *Georg K. Glaser. Writer and Smith* for SWF (commissioning editor: Ebbo Demant). A crucial factor in the reorientation of Farocki's project, as the correspondence from 1986 and 1987 suggests, is that the subject of aerial reconnaissance and, more generally, the military use of image technologies increasingly demanded more attention. In addition to the earlier shift from the general theme of work to the specific work of images, there is now a discernible transition from seeing to measuring as well. Developments in automation and mechanization would no longer be examined solely in the sector of manual labor, but now in that of machine vision as well. In December 1986, Farocki corresponded with the Fraunhofer Institute for Production Systems and Design Facilities about possibly filming sensor systems; in February 1987, the journalist Andreas Orth provided a list of film footage about military aerial reconnaissance technology in the USA. Michael Trabitzsch, Farocki's most trusted researcher at the time, was in contact with various institutions working in the field of visual military technology.

Finally, in September 1987, the filmmaker received an important letter from the National Archives in Washington, DC: "Dear Mr. Farocki: This is in response to your letter of August 8, 1987, regarding aerial photographs of Auschwitz concentration camp taken during World War II. Enclosed for your information is a copy of our information sheet describing pertinent records and reproduction costs. As indicated on this sheet, 8" x 10" contact prints of the six photographs requested can be furnished at a cost of \$4.15 each, for a total reproduction cost of \$24.90. An airmail shipping and handling surcharge of \$4.75 should be added for a grand total cost of \$29.65... Please note that our photographs do not include any of the Auschwitz Main Camp dated 29 August 1944; unless otherwise directed, we will substitute the aerial photograph of the camp dated 25 August 1944 to complete your order."<sup>9</sup>

The aerial photographs from summer 1944, which were requested and made available by the archive for just under 30 dollars, become the most important conceptual and pictorial center of Farocki's project. *Images/History* thus became *Images-War* (1987), the forty-five-minute WDR film, which

8 *Catch Phrases – Catch Images: A conversation with Vilém Flusser*, FRG 1986. The conversation was shot on November 25, 1985, as the date of the analyzed *Bild* newspaper indicates. See Harun Farocki, "Das Universum ist leer. Zu Vilém Flussers Philosophie der technischen Bilder," in: *Falter*, no. 12 (1986), p. 40. The Cologne-based magazine *Zelluloid* reprinted the article in 1987.

9 National Archives, Washington, DC, "Letter to Harun Farocki of September 2, 1987." Source: Harun Farocki GbR.





“It was not until 1977 that two employees of the CIA went through the archives to find and evaluate the photographs of Auschwitz. It was not until thirty-three years later that the following words were inscribed. The Nazis did not notice that someone had photographed their crimes. And the Americans did not notice that they had photographed the Nazis. The victims also noticed nothing. Notes as written into a book of God.” (from: *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*)

„Erst 1977 gingen zwei Angestellte der CIA daran, die Luftaufnahmen von Auschwitz im Archiv zu suchen und auszuwerten. Erst 33 Jahre später wurden die Wörter eingeschrieben. Die Nazis haben nicht gemerkt, daß man ihre Verbrechen fotografierte, und die Amerikaner haben nicht gemerkt, daß sie sie fotografierten. Auch die Opfer merkten nichts. Aufzeichnung wie in ein Buch Gottes.“ (aus: *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*)

Farocki subsequently expanded and reworked into *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*.<sup>10</sup> Without mentioning the project title, Farocki describes this shift in his autobiographical text “Written Trailers” (2009), writing that the funding from North Rhine-Westphalia and the commitment of the WDR had put him in the “very rare position of having funds for a project whose specific mode had not yet been settled. I also had a lot of freedom in the choice of subject matter.”<sup>11</sup> A short text by Günter Anders encountered during his research impressed Farocki and left a mark on the film, but it was above all the aerial photographs of Auschwitz that, like a strong magnet, reoriented the project. “That images from the camps had been taken unknowingly and that they could only be read after decades—that is a strong metaphor. So strong that for a long time it was very hard for me to find space for other things.”<sup>12</sup>

Comparing the treatment of *On the History of Labor* with the two films into which the project evolved, only a few explicit traces can be found. Nevertheless, at least one segment about the lathe and the cultural technique of “turning” resurfaces in *Images of the World*. The six-minute sequence begins with computer-aided image recognition during the assembly of body parts in automobile production. The camera, integrated into the working robot, films individual components of a car door. The computer then compares the position and location with a template and confirms the correct assembly of the parts. In *On the History of Labor*, the metalworker Jochen S. would have talked about such instances of “the transition from production to mechanization.”<sup>13</sup>

The sequence from the car factory is followed by shots—photographs and film footage—from a metal presser’s workshop that is about to be liquidated. One last time, the now obsolete craft is demonstrated, showing us how a hollow form is driven out of a piece of metal on a lathe. The rotational movement is a central force both in the workbench itself and in the transmission belts driving the machine. The use of this short piece from *On the History of Labor* allows us to describe the montage logic of *Images of the World*, which is akin to playing with dominoes. From the body parts made from sheet steel, we move on to an earlier stage of metal processing; in the metal spinning, we also witness the step from the manual processing of a single

10 Unfortunately, the production files for *Images-War* have not been preserved in the WDR’s archives in Cologne.

11 Harun Farocki: “Written Trailers,” trans. Michael Turnbull, in Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (eds), *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, London: Koenig Books 2009, pp. 220–41, here p. 226.

12 Farocki, “Written Trailers,” *ibid.*

13 Harun Farocki, “Application for film funding: *On the History of Labor*,” (1986), typescript, p. 1. Project Folder 1985/86.

piece to the reproduction technique. In one breath, we move from technologies of machine vision and pattern recognition to the history of labor. Then, the voice-over says: “For sixty years the metal press Grasmé and Co. produced bowls, vases, cooking pots, thimbles, lighting appliances, and other rounded and hollow semi-finished products for industrial customers.”<sup>14</sup>

The step back from civilian production to the military context follows surprisingly quickly, when manual pressing is replaced by machine vision: “In World War II the largest metal sheets were pressed: for searchlights to show up aircraft in the sky. The aircraft, for their part, threw light bombs, like a lightning flash, to illuminate the earth for a photo.”<sup>15</sup>

The integration of these issues from the concept of “turning” into *Images of the World* demonstrates how intimately this film, as well as *As You See*, intertwine the two broad thematic issues of “work” and “image.” The automation and computerization of manual labor and the mechanization of vision meet in the reality depicted as well as in the montage of the voice-over, even if the focus of the argument has now shifted to questions of the image. The large metal sheets produced on the lathes in the press shop, which acted like flash reflectors for the military photographers in the airplanes, form a relay between the “history of labor” and the machine-based military gaze of the camera that photographed Auschwitz without realizing it.

#### IV.

Among the footage Farocki shot in the context of the *On the History of Labor* project there are also twenty minutes labeled *Images/History*. In addition to the working title, the box specifies: “Muster/R5/AntikenMuseum” (Dailies/R5/Antiquities Museum).

We see a group of children who, guided by an adult—probably a museum educator—are exploring two statues, one in bronze and the other in marble. The footage is set inside the Collection of Classical Antiquities of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin Charlottenburg. One of the children in the center is a blind girl who touches the torso, arms, legs, and feet of the statues with her hands and tells the other children (and at the same time us, the spectators) about the materiality and nature of the forms.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Harun Farocki, “Commentary from *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*,” *Discourse*, vol. 15, no. 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 78–92, here p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>16</sup> The material was viewed at the editing table in May 2018 and digitized by the Harun Farocki Institut in October 2019. One of the statues is the “Bronzestatue eines jungen Mannes, *Jüngling von Salamis*,” Staatliche Museen Berlin, Collection of Classical Antiquities, registration number SK1.

As indicated by the labeling and the context of the film rolls, the footage belongs to the *On the History of Labor* project, but it did not make it into *Images of the World*. One can only speculate about the reasons for this. Various aspects of the sequence are remarkable. First, it is important to note how it highlights a different sense than sight: everything we see is about touching and feeling. As varied as the material in *Images of the World* is in historical and systematic terms, almost every sequence in the film is (or can be) related to technologies of sight and their inherent affinity with those of measuring. From Albrecht Dürer and the laws of linear perspective in the sixteenth century, through the invention of photography and the development of scale-measurement in the nineteenth century, to pattern recognition in industrial production processes and civil or military simulation techniques, the film sketches a history of seeing and the gradually increasing distance between the seeing subject and the seen object. While in Dürer’s perspectival drawing *Man Drawing a Lute* (1525), the three components of the depicted object, the perspectival grid as medium, and the draughtsman, still fit into a small chamber (and on a woodcut), the remote control of bombs in World War II, in contrast, already followed the logic of drones. Seeing and the object of sight are radically dissociated from the trigger and image production. Distance, disembodiment, and mechanization go hand in hand.

The sequence shot in the Collection of Classical Antiquities establishes a counter-image. We are confronted with the opposite of vision—blindness—and thus at the same time with the sense of touch, which is based on proximity since touching cannot be separated from the subject and his or her physicality. Another subject of Vilém Flusser’s theory—not the “technical image,” but the gesture—is imminent. Farocki takes up this thread again in *The Expression of Hands* (1997) and *Transmission* (2007), spinning it further in other directions.

Moreover, while children are the protagonists here, the discourse of visuality in *Images of the World* remains locked within the adult (and male-dominated) milieu of science, informatics, and the military. Here, women consistently appear as the objects of the gaze (in nude drawings, by facial composites, or in photographs by the photographer Marc Garanger in Algeria), rather than as active subjects. Touching as a counter-model to seeing, thus, is presented by actors who potentially operate as antagonists of the technocrats and forensic scientists in police and military laboratories.

There are various reasons why Farocki ended up not using the material in *Images of the World*. The production history of *On the History of Labor* and *Images/History* suggests, above all, that the direction of the film changed so radically that there was no longer a conclusive place for the sequence.

V.

Farocki begins his Filmbüro NRW funding application with the sentence: “My film is an essay film combining the history of a machine technology with the thinking of three contemporary philosophers.” At the end of the treatment, he returns to the term and explains: “I want to make an essay film. An essay is the unity of scientific and literary expression.” In 1975, conceiving the film *On Narration* (co-directed by Ingemo Engström), Farocki had already characterized essays in similar terms.<sup>17</sup> In 1986/87, in the context of *As You See* and *Images-War*, Farocki’s explicit interest in the potential of this artistic form is particularly pronounced. Correspondence from this period documents planning for an event with film screenings and lectures on the essay film.<sup>18</sup> On behalf of an “essay-film initiative,” he contacted Erika Gregor to inquire about the possibility of a publication in the “Kinemathek” series.<sup>19</sup> He received a negative answer from Frieda Grafe, whom he presumably asked for a contribution: “I’m out of ideas.”<sup>20</sup> The two-day “Films That Think in Images” event took place on March 28 and 29, 1987, at the Academy of the Arts in West Berlin. It brought together presentations by Karsten Witte and Rudi Thiessen and panelists from *Filmkritik* including Ulrich Gregor and Wim Wenders. Other critics who had been active in the final decade of the periodical (which had to cease publication in 1984), including Marion Lange, Manfred Blank, Hartmut Bitomsky, and Jörg Becker, as well as Harun Farocki, gave lectures on films by Marguerite Duras, Danièle Huillet/Jean-Marie Straub, Johan van der Keuken, and Anne-Marie Miéville/Jean-Luc Godard. Behind the scenes, solutions for dealing with the *Filmkritik*’s severe debts were sought.

Farocki’s interest in the essay was not motivated by the genre’s prestigious cultural and literary tradition. Instead, he was curious about the epistemic possibilities that result from the montage of images and the dialectical leaps between images and words—the intertwining of science and art. Later he used the terms “film sketch” or “project film” to describe the open, porous texture at which he aimed.

17 Farocki’s definition of “essai” in the proposal for *On Narration* is “a term from written literature, unity of science and art, unity of social and individual knowledge.”

18 The program for the “Films That Think in Images” event and an accompanying short text by Farocki are documented in Christa Blümlinger and Harun Farocki, *The ABCs of the Essay Film* (HaFI 006), Berlin: Harun Farocki Institut with Motto Books, 2017. Farocki’s lecture on Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville’s *Ici et ailleurs* was published as *Harun Farocki: On Ici et ailleurs* (HaFI 008), Berlin: Harun Farocki Institut with Motto Books, 2018.

19 Harun Farocki, “Letter to Erika Gregor of October 5, 1986.” Source: Harun Farocki GbR.

20 Frieda Grafe, “Letter to Harun Farocki of July 28, 1986.” See online in the “Showcase” section on the website of the Harun Farocki Institut, July 2020 (<https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/de/2020/07/16/juli-2020-ein-brief-von-frieda-grafe/>).

The filmmaker’s experiment with the essayistic form in *As You See* had demonstrated how the protagonists, who had still been central in the treatment for *On the History of Labor*, became dispensable. The arguments, thoughts, and connections no longer had to be translated into dialogues for actors and actresses as in *Between Two Wars* (1978) or *Before your Eyes – Vietnam* (1982). Nor did they have to be articulated in conversation with thinkers like Peter Weiss, Vilém Flusser, or Georg K. Glaser. In *As You See*, Farocki had discovered that books and texts could also be protagonists. “I found a way in which I could make texts become an issue without the detour of an action.”<sup>21</sup>

In the treatment for *On the History of Labor*, the consequence of this insight had yet to be drawn. Only between spring 1986 and fall 1988, while *On the History of Labor* was gradually turning into *Images/History* and finally into *Images-War* and *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, Farocki decided to take the concept seriously: Flusser, Glaser, and the metalworker Jochen Sonn leave the scene as filmed persons. Instead, their books, texts, and thoughts (and those of Günter Anders, Hannah Arendt, and many others) become the main characters.

“Essay”—this can also mean to depart from an original plan and to take a different path instead.

Volker Pantenburg, for the Harun Farocki Institut  
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21 Farocki, “Written Trailers,” p. 225.