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LOST IN NARRATION: TRANSPARENT STORYTELLER AND MOBILE SPECTATOR IN EARLY HARUN FAROCKI

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ABSTRACT

In this article my aim is to suggest the move from the discussions regarding the immobile gaze in terms of film theory and editing towards the discussion on wandering or mobile spectator enabled by the mobility of filmic means such as narration and camera. I claim that mobility of the viewer is not necessarily a corporeal condition, but a political and emancipatory potential arising from a certain aspect of film attributes that allow for spectator's engagement with what is being seen on the screen. I will look for at least four sets of what I consider prerequisites for the emancipatory engagement of the spectator. I focus on specific case studies of Harun Farocki's films: mobility of the gaze, visibility of narrative agency, visibility of film language and the visibility of the spectator himself.

I claim that the procedures described in this analysis can nullify Baudryan view of film as a product of the ideological effects of cinematograph as manipulative apparatus. Hence, standard model of film theory described by Bordwell and Burch in form of IMR is not applicable to Farocki's model. Instead of the image as a final product, Farocki is constantly presenting the viewer the whole procedure of the production (apparatus, narration, camera and the work needed to produce an image). In doing so, he does not render reality banal, but positions it as a starting point for viewers' intellectual emancipation.

KEY WORDS

CLASSIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

How can we describe spectators and their relation to the film image without being forced to succumb to individual analysis of individual storylines? One of the grounding concepts that considered subjectivity of characters on screen as well as those in front of it is focalization. I am referring to the theories of Mieke Bal and consequently Saša Vojković. Vojković claims that focalisation makes us "perceive the events a certain way" [1; p.26]. Even further, she claims that it "conditions identification not only with the characters on the screen, but also with the worldview" [1; p.26]. Identification is a process of importance not only for psychoanalysis, but also for cognitive film studies. Thomas Elsaesser in the book *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind* aims at understanding the condition of spectator in film: "the spectator, understood as the instance that the text addresses, as well as the locus of the text's intelligibility, emerged as the producer of both meaning and subjectivity" [2; p.10]. In the short historic account of narration in film, he points to the Metz's adaptation of Benveniste's enunciation theory towards psychoanalysis and Baudry's theory of ideological effects of the cinematographic apparatus. In doing so, he was able to suggest that every visual representation "implies a subject" [2; p.10]. In other words, every act of telling a story (including editing) is inseparable from the analysis of subjectivity. Although my research is not interested in psychoanalytical account of subject-theories, separating film processes such as editing or single-shot cinema from the spectator theory cannot hope to account for all the possibilities of political agency in film.

The focal point of my analysis will be a case study of two films by German director and theorist Harun Farocki. His films rely on the form of film essay in which the author aims at "preserving thought process", as described by Laura Rascaroli [3]. The subject in such film can be difficult to detect or describe. For example, Edward Brannigan defined subjectivity in relation to narration as a "specific instance or level of narration where telling is attributed to a character in the narrative and received by us as if we were in the situation of the character" [4; p.73]. The reach of his theory is constrained by the framework inside which he was working. Vojković critiques his approach: "Brannigan defines focalization based on character's point of view, and contrasts it with not-viewing, or the absence of focalization by which it seems that the film is narrating itself [...]. The spectator has the primary role in this process [...]" [1; p.44]. My analysis will aim at framing the subject theory in cases in which there is no clear narrator, or when the subject of the film seems to be missing.

In the chapter *The Mobilized and Virtual Gaze in Modernity: Flaneur/Flaneuse* Anne Frieberg analysed the relation between the spectator's immobilization by the early visual instruments such as diorama and the immobilization of the contemporary spectator. She claims that the spectator can be described by the epistemes of surveillance in Foucauldian fashion (Bentham's Panopticon). In her account, power and knowledge are dependent on the gaze and on the power that can be exerted by that which is shown and surveilled [5]. Today, the question seems to be not so much related to the so called "vision machine" [6] and its techno-deterministic and eschatological critique[1]. What seems important today – besides the economic and political critique of the so called "surveillance capitalism" – is the subjectivity of the spectator in front of the (moving) image. Friedberg recognizes that Foucault's "panoptic model emphasizes the subjective effects of imagined scrutiny and 'permanent visibility' on the *observed,* but does not explore the subjectivity of the *observer*" [5; p.399]. Nevertheless, when she discusses the gaze produced by the prefilmic apparatus such as *diorama* or *panorama*, she remains in the paradigm of the immobile viewer, whose immobility is a prerequisite for its epistemic position as the one who is able to see (usually more than is naturally possible – for example, panoramic shots). Although she provides an

important reading of the immobilization (corporeal and mental) as a means of control, my research looks at ways in which the viewer can become a mobile agent. Such proposal sees him or her not as a flaneur, aimless wanderer though the landscape of hypertrophied visual culture, but as a political and emancipated agent looking for clues in the images.

In this article my aim is to suggest the move from the discussions regarding the immobile gaze in terms of film theory and editing towards the discussion on wandering or mobile spectator enabled by the mobility of filmic means such as narration and camera. I claim that mobility of the viewer is not necessarily a corporeal condition, but a political and emancipatory potential arises from certain film attributes that allow for spectator's engagement with what is being seen on screen. I will look for at least four sets of what I consider prerequisites for the emancipatory engagement of the spectator in my specific case studies[1]: mobility of the gaze, visibility of narrative agency, visibility of film language and the visibility of the spectator himself.

THE TRANSPARENT NARRATOR

For the explanation of emancipatory engagement of the spectator, the transparency of the narrator in film seeks clarifying. I argue that German cineaste Harun Farocki in his films (especially early works) sketched a pedagogical form of visual culture that relates directly to the viewer/audience of his films. The act of storytelling he employs in his films I call "transparent narrating", leaning on the two-fold meaning of the word. The transparent narrator at the same time indicates the *visible* agent in the film text (storyteller visible for the viewers) and at the same time *invisible* force in film, allowing the spectators to see through the narrator, deconstructing film language themselves. The perceived dichotomy in the meaning I claim as complementary in establishing the role of the viewer as participatory in the filmic text. I will explain on specific case studies.

EMANCIPATED AND MOBILE VIEWER

On the other hand, what is the form of emancipated agent I envision when speaking about the productive look? Jacques Rancière developed a theory of participatory role of the spectator in contrast to the simplistic model of active and passive audience participation, based on a Brechtian model. He understands visuality as the process and dialectics of looking, and aesthetics as a field that needs to take into account the spectator as active interpreter, a subject that translates signs into his own cultural codes. For him, therefore, intellectual emancipation [8]:

> "Begins with challenging oppositions between active and passive, appearance and reality, viewing and knowing. Cinema, precisely because it is not an established language, because it escapes any systematic order of knowledge, as the living art of the democratic age, particularly lends itself to the method of emancipation: looking always also means acting."

In his book *The Emancipated Spectator* [9] he furthers the concept of emancipation which he started developing in an earlier study *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* [10]. In the earlier work, he claimed that the hierarchy between the scholar and his pupil is established reciprocally on the lines of a scholar that knows and explains that knowledge precisely because the pupil is *de jure* the one that yet needs to learn. Building on the proposed emancipation of the pupil, in *The Emancipated Spectator* he discusses the role of the spectator, drawing parallels with the pupils' position. Being a spectator is traditionally seen as something bad, Rancière claims: "First, viewing is the opposite of knowing [...] Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be

a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" [9: p.2]. In what way do the passive obtain their agency? He answers: "There is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place […] What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place, and at any time" [9; p.48]. Dissensus, as opposed to consensus is not something to be discarded. Every situation can be opened, interpreted and discussed. In other words, "emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting […]. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place" [9; p.13].

I contend that Rancière's discussion on emancipation can be used as a methodological tool in analysing films that feature no clear narratorial authority. Multivocality and the dissensus that occur while looking at the "incomplete" images can produce the political and emancipatory subjectivity that does not correspond to Baudry's fears of film being by nature (and technology) a manipulative apparatus as famously described in his essay *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus* [11].

Let us take for example films that do not belong to documentary film or film-essays. Even fiction film *Shirin* (2008) directed by famous Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami uses the transparency of the narrator to negate the supposed ideological effects by the "manipulative nature" of film. In the aesthetic sense, the film is almost a direct visual representation of Baudry's clash between the spectator and film screen, mediated by the camera/apparatus. Without any diegetic information, the film starts with shots of faces in a movie theatre *en face*, looking at film we as spectators are unable to see. During the whole course of film, we as spectators of the first level (extradiegetic) are prohibited from seeing what the characters (diegetic spectators) in the film see (movie on a screen). At work is a prohibition of representation and identification: extradiegetic spectators are unable to see the film's story with which the diegetic spectators are identifying, thus being unable to complete the identification process with the characters in the film.
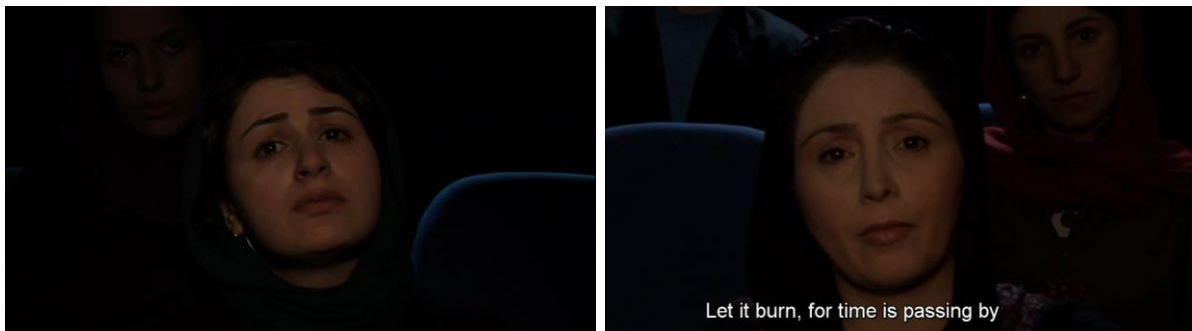

Figure 1. Shirin (Kiarostami, 2008).

Baudry's fears of spectator's identification with ideological effects of the apparatus stem from psychoanalytical theory that should not be omitted. Nevertheless, his reading cannot account for the process of non-identification with the characters on the screen,. The Reason for this is that we lack the context or the narrator explaining the reactions we are witnessing (laughter, sorrow, boredom etc.) Therefore, we are not traditional spectators: what the extradiegetic spectator spectates is not the film itself, but the process of character identification in film within film, on the metatextual level. By doing so we become aware of our own traditional immobility as spectators because we cannot seem to "move" enough to see what the narrator in film is creating. In Rancière's terms, Kiarostami is deriding the division between viewing and knowing, thus challenging our perceived passivity as spectators. In *The Emancipated Spectator* his critique of that perceived passivity extends

even to television: "What we see above all in the news on our TV screens are the faces of the rulers, experts and journalists who comment on the images, who tell us what they show and what should we make of them" [9; p.96]. Antidote to that form of narration Rancière finds in the so called "pensive image" which *Shirin* mirrors: an image which not only extends duration of the scene, omits clear narratorial presence, but also delays firm conclusions on what is represented on the screen, calling for a productive dissensus.

MOBILE CAMERA

In the previous section I introduced and analysed the process of a "provoked" spectator in situations when the narrator is not clearly present, and when a viewer cannot clearly interpret/identify with the moving image on the screen. I offered a reading of emancipated spectator reading Rancière as a means of empowering the spectator in the fiction film by seeing through the film language. The spectator is mobilizing his agency instead of narratorial diegetic agency. Although I will offer further arguments for this position, for now I would like to turn to the second level of mobilisation, that of the camera. Expanding on what Seymour Chatman names the "wandering camera" in Michelangelo Antonioni's films, Kenneth Johnson calls to attention "those moments when the camera as a narrating entity wanders on its own, detached from supporting the story through a character's point of view. […] This camera movement calls attention to itself as an 'independent presence', independent of its conventional function in cinematic discourse" [12; p.49].

Johnson claims that although such film procedures are not a dominant force in film style in the west, they nevertheless reveal a transition from one level of narration to another. He suggests that such free camera movements reveal "traces of authorial activity" [12; p.49], or more precisely, the author as enunciator in the film: "What we witness with wandering camera is a momentary shift in emphasis from the story as something understood to be already complete, to the story in the process of being created" [12; p.50]. If the narrative is understood to be a history of events in a discourse, wandering camera then seems as an instance of underlining that process, or the creation of that story as it is displayed. In other words, the gaze is detached from the main character and at the same time detached from the spectator and his expected diegetic immersion, in favour of revelation of the narrator itself. André Gaudreault in his study *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema* [13] postulated the invention of contemporary film as a result of two separate language systems. Film language, he writes is the product both of the invention of a procedure (the camera that creates the shots) and the development of the process (the assembling and editing of different shots, with the idea of creating a single entity, a film).

In other words, Gaudrealt differentiates between narration and monstration. Gaudreault claims that early film (broadly between 1900 and 1915) contained a tension between two forms of spectatorship: exhibition of spectatorship and the diegetic absorption. The first is based on monstration – an early film style of showing, and not telling, while the latter is closer to today's film, in which the role of the image is to explain (narrate) to the viewer what is being shown. As the first films did not employ montage but were created in a single shot, there was not any means of employing fabula and syuzhet. He calls those procedures micro-narratives (communication by each shot). The higher level of narration is generated from the micro-narrative (diegetic absorption) and is enabled by montage as a means of narrating the story by editing single shots into a continuous stream of shots that become scenes. The key to understanding Gaudreault's dichotomy is not to focus only on technical description of early film development. His framework puts the spectator in the centre of examining. If the film style (what Burch would call IMR [14]) aims to unify film elements such as editing and acting. It does that in order to create the effect of unobtrusive film spectatorship. But on a

micro-narrative level of monstration, the viewer of a *tableau* is aware of his own position in front of the image. The space between the image and its viewer it thus larger on the level of "showing" than on the level of "telling". The mobility of the camera here at first seems like it immobilizes the viewer. In the next section I aim to show the way Harun Farocki in his early work builds upon monstration and narration to create the wandering camera and the mobile spectator as agents of productive and emancipatory reading of documentary images.

FAROCKI'S MOBILITY OF THE GAZE

Harun Farocki is a German cineaste whose work ranges from documentary, experimental and fiction film, multimedia art to new media theory and practice. His oeuvre culturally is related to New German Cinema and the directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders, directors who worked in the sixties and the seventies of 20th century. Building on socio-critical topics attributed to the wave, Farocki's films and installations spanned throughout decades. Counting more than 120 works he featured themes ranging from documentary films on prison systems and surveillance, shopping malls and consumer culture, factory culture, revolutions etc. Up until his death in 2014 he was researching digital culture and its relation to the culture of war. His films are mostly connected with "relations between film techniques as instruments of social seeing" [15; p.275]. Farocki is systematic in his questioning of the camera's objectivity. As Brecht and Godard he believed that to be involved in a documentary film does not entail objectivity. He denaturalizes the filmic image, shows errors during the shooting, makes visible the technical stitches needed to make a film, employs and revokes montage, mocks narration and yet again, places the narrator as a centrepiece of a film. In short, his role is at the same time opposite and similar to Grierson's idea by which he sees a documentary as an engaged film striving towards good propaganda more than aesthetics. Farocki on the contrary sees film as both, albeit different from Grierson: as propaganda (in presenting the codes of film visible to the spectators instead of concealing them) and as aesthetics (in making seen what is usually hidden in plain sight for the spectator).

Building on Rancière's argumentation of emancipated spectator, I claim that Farocki's documentary films and film essays are not designed to educate the viewer at any cost. On the contrary, the idea is first to displace the position of the spectator from the passive viewer to the active archaeologist of filmic meaning. Secondly, the intention is to encourage distrust of the image, or as Thomas Elsaessser puts it, Farocki "more explicitly than almost any other filmmaker began to examine the complex reality of images and the subject positions they implied" [16]. For example, his film *Between Two Wars* (*Zwischen Zwei Kriegen*, 1978) is a compilation film: a mix of found footage or simply technical scenes showing industrial production in a factory. Those shots are contrasted with fictionalized narrative of protagonists pondering the nature of production and consumerism, as well as the relation between Marxism and capitalism. The industrialization of Germany between two (world) wars is not only seen in relation to technology (industrial development). Using film language and distinct narrative style, Farocki engages in the dialogue with the spectator, describing the cold "technical image" as more than just an image of a machine. In the 55th minute of the film, Farocki makes himself visible as the narrator of his film in which the images he displays are not his by creation, but by montage:

> "When one has no money for cars, gunfights, nice clothes ... When one has no
> funds for films, that allow the film-time, the life of the film, to allow themselves
> to elapse, then one has to put one's strength into the intelligence of the link
> between individual elements. The assembly of ideas. The assembly of ideas."

The assembly, or montage of ideas which the film uses to question the relation between the man and the machine Farocki relates to film language, juxtaposing two forms of representation: documentary archive footage and fictional narrative. By showing us the form of industrial production in the time of war, he also makes visible the form of industrial production of film on one level and a narrative on the other. Elucidating film as an industry of speech, editing, politics, he makes possible the intertextual and emancipatory engagement with what is seen. For Farocki, the role of the film is one of constant production: not one that subjugates its viewer, but the production of emancipatory dialogue with what is seen on the screen (the spectators seeing moving images being produced in situ), and what is made visible (the enunciator in dialogue with the spectators). Therefore, he is framing the film as a technical (micro-narrative for Gaudreault) and linguistic (macro-narrative for Gaudreault) medium aimed to demythologize itself before the viewer.

Treating film language as capable of showing (and therefore producing) the spectators on the one side and narrative agents on the other is one of his most important additions in film art and theory. In his first notable film from 1969 *The Inextinguishable Fire* (*Nicht löschbares Feuer*), the author himself is shown to the spectator, sitting behind the table and reading the film script out loud. In technocratic language, he is reading the chemical report on the effects on napalm.

Figure 2. The Inextinguishable Fire (*Nicht löschbares Feuer*, Farocki, 1969).

The duration of the report he is reading is approximately three minutes: it consists of an account of the survivor of the napalm bombing Thai Bihn Dahn during the Vietnam war. Farocki is performing the act of narration in front of the spectators, nullifying his position as a traditionally hidden omnipotent agent of the story. In other words, if for Ranicère emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, Farocki challenges that opposition precisely by showing the process of film being made. Farocki turns to us, the audience, and asks: "How can we show you the injuries caused by napalm? If we show you pictures of napalm burns, you'll close your eyes. First, you'll close your eyes to the images. Then you'll close your eyes to the memory. Then you'll close your eyes to the facts. Then you'll close your eyes to the entire context." Although the entirety of the film is about napalm, most of it consists of a documentary technical image – workers, engineers and PR experts seen developing more efficient napalm. "Acting" therefore for Farocki first means exposing the artificiality of film by rejecting the representative nature of its language. We cannot see the fire of napalm, nor its victims. As spectators, all we can see is what precedes the representation (factory production), and what comes after it (witness accounts). Framing us as powerless and immobile spectators Farocki challenges his position as narrator who can represent our position as passive viewers as well.

VISIBILITY OF THE SPECTATOR

Can a spectator engage with the mediated image? David Montero claims that Farocki produces a counterimage with his work. Choosing not to be a hidden storyteller for the image, he is exposing the lack of description and the lack of narrative authority, offering himself as a collateral damage of the film's inability to provide "truthful" representation[3]. By counterimage, Montero asserts that usual representational practices "might reinforce the distance between the suffering victim and the viewer. Farocki's gesture, on the contrary, aims to annihilate such distance, inviting us to escape the repetitive loop that ultimately deactivates these images so that they can be reassessed critically" [17; p.106]. In other words, by offering himself as a visible and powerless enunciator, he is positioning himself at the same time on the level of the spectator. Considering both Montero and Rancière, Farocki's film essays communicate the following: where film narration ends, the dialogue commences. In other words, where the main enunciator is rendered incapable of speaking in place of the agency he is made to represent, the spectator becomes involved in the creation of the story. By making clear that every representation is always also a narrative, his aim is not to render it useless or obsolete, but to make narration a visible process of constructing a story as well as constructing a spectator by means of storytelling. By denigrating both the representational power of the image, as well as the epistemological high-ground of the enunciator, Farocki questions the process of communication described by the Shannon-Weaver model of communication [18]. Moving himself closer to Stuart Hall's idea of negotiated audience, Farocki refuses, in linguistic terms, the position of enunciator in favour of interlocutor [19].

In some of his other works, like *Videograms of a Revolution* (*Videogramme einer Revolution* 1992), the narrator is not positioned above the characters on screen or the spectators in front of it. On the contrary, Farocki's narrator sometimes knows less than the image itself, bringing the already mentioned dissensus in the foreplay. Being able to look at images productively for him means to be placed as constitutive to the process of representation. One of the lines in *The Inextinguishable Fire* (*Nicht löschbares Feuer,* 1969) delineates that: "When the napalms starts burning, it is already too late to start extinguishing it. You need to fight napalm there where it is produced: in the factories". The sentence echoes the very structure of the film. By combining montage-film and documentary style single shot aesthetics, he produces a twofold formulation of political and social dispositif of the Vietnam War. Farocki is not concerned with the visual effects of the war, but the structure of its production. Both on the level of content and form, Farocki thematizes war without ever showing it, and seldomly by mentioning it. By saying that the napalm is fought against in the factories, he is not taking away the power of filmic image and its narrator. On the contrary, he goes one step further in underlining the strength of film in showing the production of the image, the narrator and the film language to the spectator. He thus involves the viewer in the process of production, inviting him to the "factory" itself.

Although Farocki is not a stranger to using complex editing techniques as well as scripted and narrated scenes, he often uses those techniques to produce the dialectics of images and not to conceal the traces of their production. *The Inextinguishable Fire* on the level of content displays industrial distancing from the effects of production (napalm victims). On the structural level, this distancing is produced by alienating it from the ideal viewer. I claim that the procedures described in this analysis can nullify Baudryan view of film as a product of the ideological effects of cinematograph as manipulative apparatus. Hence, standard model of film theory described by Bordwell and Burch [14] in form of IMR is not applicable to Farocki's model. Instead of the image as a final product, Farocki is constantly presenting the viewer the whole procedure of the production (apparatus, narration, camera and the work needed to produce an image). In doing so, he does not render reality banal, but positions it as a starting point for the intellectual emancipation of the viewers.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental position of a narrator in analysed films is one of transparency, meaning both the visibility and invisibility of the narratorial authority. Farocki's films show us their strength not through the closedness of their stories, but by their incompleteness or openess. My aim was to provide the theoretical argumentation for the notion of emancipated spectator as one that can be thought of as an agent invited to include itself in the filmic text as a constitutive part of the image. Moving images, visible film processes, disputing editing techniques as well as transparent narrators in Farocki's films (but not limited to him) serve as a warning that politically emancipated film needs its viewer and his engagement. In the contemporary social and technological challenges we face in terms of industrialisation of vision, Farocki serves as a reminder that every image needs its viewer and interpreter, but also, that every spectator needs to doubt the image seen. The productive look is able to challenge the manipulative ideologies of fake news and populist agendas. It is not the one that nostalgically calls for the "analogue times" of dominant and hegemonic media production, but the one that thrives precisely in the visual abundance today, ready to inspect, dissect, argue and denigrate the authorial figures that once stood as the sole producers of our visual everyday culture.

REMARKS

[1]Even the most contemporary discussions on surveillance today (Shoshana Zuboff [7]) look at the apparatus as a consequence of economic and political relations in society, and not as a consequence of the "machine ideology". In other words, if we live in a completely visible world, it is not because of the technological advancement per se, but because of the development of neoliberal corporative economies that are allowed not only to trace our very lives, but to monetize our existence through the choices we make or are forced to make.

[2]At the same time, those are the limits of this specific analysis. Although I aim to provide methodologically pervasive argument regarding the political potential of film image, universalist account would only limit the scope of this analysis, which is relying on case to case studies, having in mind various cultural factors between them.

[3]At one point in film Farocki extinguishes a cigarette on his arm as a metaphor for napalm burns.

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