

Cinema and Re/Production: An Interview With Harun Farocki and Jill Godmilow (1998)

This interview with Harun Farocki and Jill Godmilow was conducted by Jennifer Horne and Jonathan Kahana. The questions were posed and answered by email and fax; none of the participants were ever in the same place at the same time. (Farocki responded from Berlin, where he lives and works; Godmilow, who teaches at the University of Notre Dame, responded from New York City). This seemed appropriate, given the feeling of spatial and temporal dislocation that pervades *Inextinguishable Fire*, Farocki's 1969 film about the research and development of napalm, and Godmilow's 1998 remake, *What Farocki Taught*. These films served as the basis of our discussion. We asked both filmmakers to tell us something about the historical and cultural context of these two films: we wanted to know how politics shaped their aesthetics, and vice versa.

(Harun Farocki's responses were translated by Anne Bilek.)

Q: Tell us about the context you were working in when you made *Inextinguishable Fire*.

Farocki: In 1968 I along with seventeen others left the Film Academy. We had constantly protested against many things there. Not only that but my daughter had just been born. Thus I had to grow up: make films that weren't simply exercises and with which I would also earn money. In our circles at that time solidarity meant a lot and it was almost a crime if the impetus for a film came from a single person. Probably for this reason I sought out an area in which no one other than me worked. "Agitation of technical expertise." I appointed myself Propaganda Minister for Engineers.

Q: *Inextinguishable Fire* is about the American production of the deadly chemical weapon napalm. Why did you choose napalm rather than the other weapons being used in the war in Vietnam?

Farocki: Auschwitz has become the symbol for all concentration camps because there so many types of camps were collected into one and because there were survivors from there who could tell their stories. In the Vietnam war there were naturally many terrible weapons. The herbicides which had poisoned the water didn't show their effects until after a few years. Napalm is a pre-modern weapon; napalm stirs the imagination because it reminds us of the times in which cruelty was a fact of life, of the times in which wars still had a ritual and magical aspect.

Q: How was *Inextinguishable Fire* was received on its initial release?

Farocki: In Fall of 1969 I showed the film at a festival in Mannheim. There were indeed some criticisms of the technical quality of the film but otherwise the reaction was positive. Even when a newspaper would write that I would achieve nothing with the film, nevertheless, it was put forth as a possibility that one could achieve something with a film. Even, that the desire ("das Anliegen") of the film may be justifiable. The film was shown several times on television and I received much encouragement, especially from people who had up until then found the student movement to be nonsense. Recently at a presentation it occurred to me that Hiroshima and Vietnam were mentioned but not

Auschwitz. I tend to think that the monstrous war of the USA in Vietnam not only shocked but also unburdened us (the Germans). "We are not the only barbarians."

The film and television industry in Germany had at that time recognized that this film was different than what they themselves made. This recognition, however, was thus expressed that such films were not allowed and there should not be such films. In addition, many of those in the political movement were devotees of Socialist Realism and found my punk aesthetic unbearable. I believe that the ugliness of the pictures which were taken with a 10.5mm lens had let loose more horror than the burning of a dead rat [a shot which appears a number of times in *Inextinguishable Fire*].

Q: Jill Godmilow, to the extent that the topic of *What Farocki Taught* is the Vietnam War, why remake a film about Vietnam now? Why not a film about other, more recent wars? Or other, more contemporary weapons?

Godmilow: If you don't want to make any more Vietnams, you have to understand how Vietnam was made – actually, and materially. Farocki's film has a big piece of that knowledge to offer. He shows you how that war was made, in the laboratories of Dow Chemical and how it was that people then participated, and by extension, how people still do today. Inside the structure of labor relationships at the research corporations of America is one good place to look for the Vietnam war, and by projection, a good place to look for the production of other garbage we live with today.

Q: *What Farocki Taught* doesn't follow the most typical approach to the remake. Why remake a film without significantly changing or updating it?

Godmilow: The idea was to "show" Farocki's film itself. The precision of it, its exact, deadly, logical structure – which is the largest meaning making system in the film. To add to it or change it would not have been to the point. It was that simple... I wanted to get attention to what he had done, and to the plain fact that we should have been able to see it back then and learn from it. Structures of distribution made it hard then, and even harder today.

I should add that it was also an opportunity to extend certain art/theory questions about the original and the copy, the real and the fake (how they are the same or not, how the two are valued differently) into non-fiction cinema, a practice that takes authenticity and actuality for its pedigree.

In that way, I never set out to make a film about wars, or weapons. I saw a film in 1991 that I wished I had seen many years before. I saw a film, Farocki's *Inextinguishable Fire*, that was very provocative, in terms of non-fiction strategies, a film that both successfully circumvented, and simultaneously marked out all of the classical documentary dilemmas and some solutions, a film that had something useful to offer its audience and other filmmakers. I wanted to show it to everybody, because I felt that, in this country at least, what is called the left-liberal documentary is unexamined and out of touch. But it was impossible to start showing Farocki's film in 1991. There are no prints of it anymore but one, and anyway, no one would go to see a black-and-white film from 1969 about an old war by someone they had never heard of. So I remade Farocki's film, copied it exactly, thinking that maybe this

somewhat outlandish, perhaps obscene gesture of replication would bring some attention to it. So it's accurate to say that I set out to make a film about filmmaking, Farocki's.

Q: Dow Corning is a company fresh in the minds of many women as the producer of silicone breast implants. Did you consider broadening Farocki's critique to incorporate, so to speak, bodies of women? Is the end of *Inextinguishable Fire*, where we are presented with the potential coalition of the (male) factory workers and the (male) students, a place where the question of gender in oppositional politics might have been added to the film?

Godmilow: Yes, for a second I thought about doing things like that, but just for a second. I think there was a defensive, slightly self-conscious moment when it seemed I had to make this film more "mine", by adding a particular feminist perspective, or updating it, or some such thing. Finally I shook off the compulsion and decided that my film-job was to re-make his film, exactly. That's what I was doing – and speaking a lot through that gesture, speaking something about film history by producing a perfect replica of an antique object but leaving it, hopefully, an intact and complete artifact, but also a new, useful and available object. Because of this, critics sometimes refer to my film as "homage". Certainly it can be seen that way, but that wasn't the point.

Secondly, Farocki's film was not about "getting Dow", as many American anti-war documentaries were. Dow itself, that nasty corporation in Midland, Michigan, simply "stands in" – just as the actors "stand in" – for any/every research corporation. Moving on to breast implants was not the point. The point was to understand the structures of capitalism that produce both napalm and breast implants, as well as useful building materials and useful pesticides.

However, I did update it a little; not in the replica of Farocki's film, but in the epilogue. The concept of the "military-industrial establishment" as the generator of all corporate evil had to be revised, since so much has changed since 1969. In the full-tilt transnational corporate mode we are in today (where Disney fashions its films ideologically, not just for American and European audiences, but for audiences in Asia, Africa and everywhere else where there is a theater, a television system or a VCR) one has to identify other sites of production. In fact, I chose to identify a site of consumption – the huge discount stores like K-Mart and Best Buy – to point out the place where we all participate in the production cycle. The poisons, and the wasted labor that produce them, are dispersed now, and available to everybody.

Q: The images we see on the television screens when the Dow employees watch the news have the appearance of stock footage; they're scratched, spliced, and otherwise marked as "used." At the same time, this is the only actuality footage in *Inextinguishable Fire*, and perhaps the only "documentary" reference to the Vietnam War. How does this footage work in terms of the reality effect of the film?

Farocki: That was really the founding idea of my film: in the evenings there are pictures on TV which have the taste of the real and the true. We don't understand, however, how we consume these pictures. Our own life, our own experience, doesn't appear to be presentable to us.

Godmilow: Farocki's use of that series of nineteen very short shots of newsreel footage is one of the things I like most in his film. First, it was bold and brave of him to dare to include actuality footage in a film whose whole premise is that you can't understand napalm – that is, take it in with all its weight and meaning – by looking at newsreel footage from the war. In his film, Farocki says directly to the audience, if I show it to you, you'll be horrified and look away. This is perhaps a little coy, a trick. At least, I disagree with Farocki here. In war newsreel, you can only find excitement: the pornography of war, the horror-show. Audiences don't turn away from it or feel any guilt; rather, we seem programmed to enjoy that kind of horror by other kinds of experiences in the cinema.

But when Farocki uses Vietnam newsreel material, he doesn't produce pornography. He does something extraordinary, draining the shots of excitement by running this very formal sequence of newsreel shots that seem to mark off the progression of daily destruction. First there are two shots of generals walking around; then a shot of a jeep passing by; there is an explosion and fire; there are naked trees; there are children praying; a bomber swoops down on some village; helicopters land; peasants flee; two quick shots of napalm burns, then suddenly you're looking at the shot of the burned rat again, and the tweezers are tugging at the scar. Farocki is connecting the dots. The shots are the dots: taking the napalm burns back to the lab and to the people who discovered that a polystyrene developed for rubber shoe soles was the perfect ingredient to get napalm to stick to human skin. The sequence is also a formal review or prod, to remember "how we watched the war, night after night, on television", not to reproduce that experience but to remind us of our experience watching it. Farocki shows the same sequence twice in the film. Then there's the great irony of the Dow scientists needing to watch TV to study the results of their work "in the field", that is, in the rice paddies of Vietnam. That's how the two newsreel sequences are rationalized in the film. The blond chemist has said earlier, "Well, what works in the laboratory won't necessarily work in the field". Then she's watching the news on the television to see if it does.

I made a mistake in *What Farocki Taught* which I now regret. I had asked Farocki if somehow the cut newsreel sequence had survived the intervening twenty-nine years. No, they had not. So I had to reproduce the sequence as perfectly as I could by going through maybe thirty or forty videotape documentaries about Vietnam, looking for matching shots. (I found all but one: the two children crossing themselves, which I faked with the children of a friend, a Chinese restaurant owner in South Bend, Indiana). Some of the shots I found were in color and some in black and white (the war years were the period of transition). I converted all the color shots to black and white on an AVID, to make them consistent with each other. I should have done the reverse, "painted" in the black-and-white shots, because now, as a series of black-and-white newsreel shots on a television in a color film, they are marked too much as historical, made archival by their difference from the rest of the color film. In *Inextinguishable Fire* they exist in time concurrently with the rest of the black-and-white film. In my film, they end up being too much about "that-war-then", and don't sit well enough in the present tense of the film's diegetic plane.

Q: So *Inextinguishable Fire* and *What Farocki Taught* should not necessarily be classified as documentary films?

Farocki: At [the time I made the film] I found documentaries very suspicious. Because Marxism teaches us that history's laws of effect are invisible, that what is evident is untrue, (in any case, the truth must reveal itself in revolution, kind of the way it is with God). For this reason I wanted above all else to portray the construction of thought or ideas the way a photo-montage does. Today I'm more interested in less obvious constructions.

Godmilow: The word documentary is problematic for me, everybody thinks they know what they mean by it but I don't. It's a term that masks or clouds the realities of film experience, seeming to deny that fiction can tell useful sober truths and affirming that documentary can do nothing but. When I teach documentary, I use a substitute term, "films of edification", because I think the best way to describe this group of films is by their stance. All non-fiction films claim to edify, (whether they do or not is another matter). Dramatic films don't make that claim.

But as I say in *What Farocki Taught*, we need another term, a sub-category of the edifying film, for Farocki's *Inextinguishable Fire* and others like it. Clearly it's not bourgeois melodrama, but its strategies also put it outside the domain of the "documentary" as it's practiced and understood in this country. In my film I call it "agit-prop"; *Inextinguishable Fire* has a clear political analysis which it puts forward very directly – the film is punctuated by inter-titles that speak direct political statements to the viewer about what to do. It takes responsibility for its thesis, something 99% of documentaries never do.

Q: The Kodachrome also distinguishes your film from a traditional documentary look.

Godmilow: Well, I thought of my replication or re-enactment of Farocki's film as a period piece, so I had to find costumes, sets and props from the late 60's. I even asked the male actors to let their sideburns grow if the character they were duplicating had long sideburns in Farocki's film. But how to get a period look to the filmmaking itself? The obvious choice was to replicate the film in black and white, but that presented a dilemma: I disagree with the film convention of using black-and-white to represent "the historical", Schindler's List-style. And I wanted to clearly separate Farocki's black-and-white film from mine. I looked for a color way to go and ended up picking one of the reversal stocks from the 60's and 70's – to get the right feel and look. There was also a technical and economic reason, I planned to superimpose certain scenes from *Inextinguishable Fire* onto my color scenes. That is much cheaper to do with reversal than with color negative stocks, because you can avoid making expensive optical negatives. I should mention here that I find the Kodachrome colors quite punchy and brilliant and have always wanted to use that stock again, although it was expensive and difficult to find.

Q: This not the first time you have put yourself before the camera. There are a variety of reasons to do this. What does it mean to you to appear in front of the lens?

Godmilow: Perhaps it's for lack of a better idea, but there were some things – simple things, I hope – that I wanted to say about Farocki's film and I couldn't think of a better way than just to stand up and say them. Because I could never have performed that much text in one take, I broke my thoughts up into a series of questions and answers. I was pretty sure I could answer questions on camera. I had my production manager ask me the questions. Later I re-dubbed the questions with a very flat, youngish "studenty" kind of voice to mark the pedagogical nature of the sequence. A collaborator of mine, Gloria Jean Masciarotte, thought some of my answers were a little high-handed, so I interrupted my answers here and there with black film, which gave me time to explain what I "really meant" by what I was saying. That's how filmmaking goes for me. Just solve problems as best you can.

Q: *Inextinguishable Fire* is a film which is clearly quite critical of the military-industrial complex and of a specific corporate entity within that complex; but the film also raises questions about the place or role of cinema in capitalism, as a technology of reproduction, and also as a product.

Farocki: The film is not really very technically critical. The end says something like an aware production can control the use of technology rationally. However, the film poses the question: how should the people in film appear? A deconstruction of the figures like in something from early Brecht. By the way, it was the editor who was afraid that the film would look too much like a bad film and not like an intentional deviation. So I had all the dialogues between two people dubbed and we did that with very long loops so that the tone was never quite synchronized.

Godmilow: Certainly film is an industrialized process. Less so the small independent production with a crew of six and a budget of \$10,000 than a major motion picture with a crew of 200 and a budget of \$600 million – to draw an extreme picture. I remember being in France, in about the third week of production on *Waiting for the Moon* [Godmilow's 1987 feature about Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas]. One day I looked around at the crew of forty-five and was struck like lightening with the disheartening thought that filmmaking was the ultimate capitalist process – squeezing the labor out of forty-five people for six weeks, and the juice out of \$950,000 of materials and goods, all of which would flow through me and my ideas to end up spread (like butter) on a thin piece of celluloid with sprocket holes, weighing about forty pounds, which could be endlessly reproduced into hundreds of copies, all of which could be running simultaneously in front of audiences all over the world, audiences who were watching it on a sixty-foot screen, and listening through huge speakers, in the dark. This is advanced capitalist production of the highest order. This is what makes me think you have to be morally responsible, and quite conscious of the experience you produce when you make a film.

That acknowledged, one can still ask how the production of the film *What Farocki Taught* differs from the production of napalm, as Farocki laid it out. One could argue that the crew and cast had all read the script of my film before they signed on to the project – whereas most of the scientists and engineers who developed napalm could not know what would come of their individuals labors. And one can say that the two products operate very differently in the material world. Serious cultural products – and a good film is

one of these – are objects of contemplation. You can't wear them, or eat them, or kill anybody with them – at least directly. They are for perception only, designed to open minds. (They can close minds too – and misrepresent, and raise violent emotions and stupid fears that result in destruction). Napalm, on the other hand, was designed only to produce fear and terror, to drive Vietnamese peasants from their villages into the American camps, where they could be watched and controlled, and supposedly "protected from their oppressors," the Vietcong.

Q: Does *Inextinguishable Fire* address a viewer who would be encouraged to think of him or herself as a national subject, a citizen? In other words, is *Inextinguishable Fire* addressed to a national public? An international one?

Farocki: I believe that the film appeals to everyone who had seen the pictures from Vietnam on the television every night. It has to do with the lifestyle, with consumerism, with the people in North America and Europe above all.

Godmilow: Because *Inextinguishable Fire* speaks to its German audience very rationally about a specific war they are not responsible for, it creates an unusual space for American audiences – who are or were responsible for the war – to watch it with some distance, exactly because they are not the designated audience of the film. I think some of this space (and perhaps the unusual frisson generated by watching Germans produce American roles) is lost for American audiences in *What Farocki Taught*, because of the translation into English and the use of American performers. Yet I'd argue that *What Farocki Taught* speaks to an international audience as well because of the analysis it offers, which is pertinent to people in any industrialized country in the world, whether they are engaged in a war at the moment, or not.

Q: What sorts of directions did you give your actors? Brecht's "alienation-effect" comes to mind.

Farocki: It was like this very often in the later films; I had to constantly tell the actors "not that way" and could hardly give them a positive model to follow. One must build up/ create/ learn a Brechtian acting method over years the way it would be if an ensemble wanted to learn in the Japanese or Javanese styles.

Godmilow: I used non-actors – mostly friends and university colleagues, as did Farocki – to play the parts. When I was shooting, I wasn't sure that I would eventually dub all the film's speeches, so I tried to get performances from these folks that matched Farocki's dubbed speech. It's very hard even for professional actors to give up performing emotional values when they're speaking lines like these. My actors, after lots of coaching and rehearsals, did well enough, but the complete alienation effect was not there, perhaps simply because of the effect of synch sound. Actors opened their mouths and perfect synchronized speech came out. They became "people" and lost the aspect of just "standing-in" for others. So in the end, I dubbed all the on-camera dialogue, as Farocki had done, and made sure that the dubbed speech appeared to be dubbed, often slipping it a frame or two to move it out of synch enough to achieve the right effect.

Q: The issue of place seems important to both *Inextinguishable Fire* and *What Farocki Taught*. Did you think that what you were doing was an attempt to have viewers understand their own place – social, historical, geographical – differently?

Godmilow: Ideologically, I think the first "location" you have to occupy, in order to oppose national policy, is an understanding of where your own labor goes. Who uses it and what is it used for? You have to cut through dis-information, as do the students, who are sure the vacuum cleaner plant they work in is making automatic weapons for the Portuguese, and the self-inflation, as does the female chemist, who asks, "I'm a chemist – what should I do? Then you have to move your labor out of a system that produces napalm, or even, if you are a university professor, dis-information itself. So yes, it's always an individual matter first, requiring self-alienation from systems of thought and production. The film actively tries to alienate audiences from the way they think about their own labor.

Farocki: The issue is interesting and had often occupied me in my daydreams. What injustice that some people could be at the right place at the right time and others not. As Goethe said in reference to a Napoleonic battle: "and you can say that you had been there."

Jennifer Horne teaches at the University of Minnesota. She is a graduate student in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature. Jonathan Kahana teaches at Rutgers University. He is a graduate student in the Department of English.