

Harun Farocki

(Nový Jičín, Czech Republic, 1944)

Farocki and his film production have given us one of the most reliable and articulate reflections on the nature of the documentary and its linguistic codes.

Images of the World and the Inscription of War, 1988, analyzes, from a historical vantage point, the use of photography in its dual nature as tool for both war and knowledge. From photography, and particularly from the various possibilities offered by the development of eighteenth-century photogrammetry, the artist draws a paradigm of the human view of the world, of the desires for possession inherent to this view and the two tensions that derive from it: preservation and destruction. Preservation is expressed in the creation of photographic archives, while destruction is what photography allows by expanding the possibilities for control of territory for military ends. Farocki seems to basically maintain that there is a tension toward destruction, even in photographic archives, which, guaranteeing the survival of memory through images, seems to free the culture from the obligation to preserve real referents, which is what has happened in the case of the demolition of a city like Berlin, rebuilt in the 1930s, after an obsessive and painstaking campaign of documentation.

Farocki indicates that an emblematic example of this interweaving is the first photographic record of the concentration camp at Auschwitz, since the historical images, shot during aerial reconnaissance campaigns in 1944, were not recognized as documents of the concentration camps until much later, after the actual discovery of the camps themselves. Nothing, no matter how large, no matter how terrible, is recognizable for what it is unless it is already known; it is not visible unless one is already looking for it. Photography records the reality indiscriminately, freezes it to make it legible at a later time, when the glance is equipped to take in the information it contains. The artist summarizes the ambiguous nature of photography through the off-screen repetition of the phrase: "Aufklärung (Enlightenment) is a term that comes from behavioral science, Aufklärung (reconnaissance) is a term that comes from the military sphere." Knowledge and destruction often utilize the same scalpel to carve the surface of time: the Auschwitz extermination camp, in SS jargon, was called a "Laboratory." (EV)