

## Special Feature

### From Inter-mediality to Intra-mediality: The Image as Becoming



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### **Cinematic Image as a tool for Historical Imagination in Harun Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory***

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Harun Farocki's works demonstrate the possibility of cinema to unveil what is invisible in images to our perceptual modes accustomed to a certain way of seeing. The all capturing camera becomes the theoretical lens to achieve this. That what is made evident is used to imagine history. The gestures that have always escaped through the crevices of history is made significant in the films of Harun Farocki. This paper will particularly focus on his film *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) in this context. To understand the practice of Harun Farocki and his exploration of the complexity of cinematic images, it is essential to locate Harun Farocki's "practice", "image" and "theory" in a historical context.

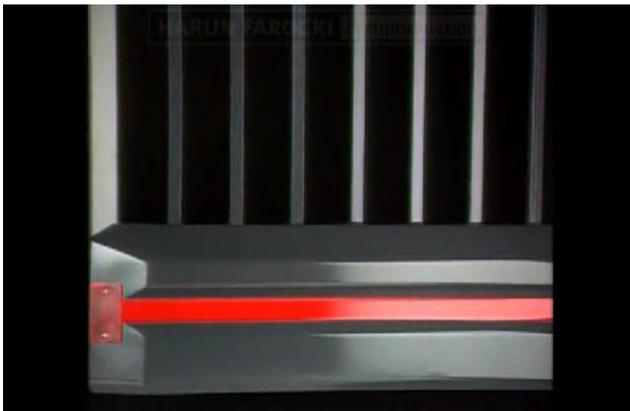
#### **"Pre-history" of Digital Images**

It is probably best to clarify at the very beginning that the term "Prehistory" is not used in the traditional sense to denote a specific period in the history of humanity, rather specifically to denote the historical period before the advent of digital images. One needs to understand the clear distinction between images that were once part of the mythical universe i.e. cave paintings and the later technical images. Vilem Flusser, a Czech philosopher with whom Harun Farocki had

intellectual engagements points out this distinction. Flusser understands this distinction between "pre-historic" images and digital images through the consciousness that has given rise to these images.

According to Flusser, the creation of symbolic images that can be found in early cave paintings goes hand in hand with the emergence of human subjectivity. Subjectivity doesn't restrict itself to the individual alone but also the construction of a shared human intelligence. With the removal of the subject from its objective situations, it became increasingly difficult for the subject to grasp the objects that were once tangible. To understand its immediate reality the subject had to carefully observe the circumstances it was placed in. Images produced by an "imaginative" consciousness became a means for this. A means to construct a shared intelligence that may be used by a community to access elements from their culture. The ephemeral and ever-in-motion reality had to be registered through images for others to access. This shared intelligence became a tool to construct an objective reality. Objectivity or Objective reality isn't an independent autonomous entity available for everyone to access but it can only be accessed through an intelligence shared by a group. The symbolic images that represented the objects in the walls of caves thus were codes shared by a group of subjects. Thus they become what is called "traditional" images. A precursor to a rule and logic-based language that was to follow many thousand years later.

With technical images as Flusser calls it, we have already entered into a phase of history



where linearity has started breaking. The concepts and judgments given rise by language have started deteriorating into bits of information. The continuous motion of particles that were once believed to be so has started breaking into discrete movements. This has to be attributed to the dominant scientific trends and the resultant scientific texts. There

is a void of the interval that is not tangible and inconceivable to the human mind. Reality has to be mediated through images produced by scientific apparatuses for humans to grasp that is not tangible. Technical images arose to consolidate the discrete movement of particles around us. For a scientific apparatus, the reality is a field of possibilities to be traversed through the movement of particles. The photons and electrons that hit the photographic plate at a specific moment result in a certain kind of image. This cannot be done through hands, fingers or eyes but a scientific apparatus. Unlike the man of the mythical universe who had to use the capacity of his “imaginative” consciousness, the man of the scientific realm needs an apparatus produced by the “scientific” consciousness to grasp his reality. The apparatus keeps evolving as new scientific postulates keep altering the ontological reference frame of reality.

### **The Theoretical Practice of Harun Farocki**

Harun Farocki’s theoretical practice has to be understood in the context of his engagements with the works of Flusser. Farocki was already part of a history where reality was mediated through

images. These images are not limited to cinematic images alone. “Operational Images”, as Farocki calls them, are images used for a specific functional and instructional purpose especially military instructions, video games, and propaganda videos.

The scale of complexity of images has multiplied itself manifold since the prehistoric images of cave paintings. Flusser uses the term “scanning” to refer to the process used to unpack



the meanings of an image. New meanings are generated as one views images repeatedly as if excavating meaning from images at different time intervals. With text, the “scanning” is linear parallel to linear historical consciousness whereas with images the “scanning” is circular without rigid causal relationships. A parallel can be drawn here

between the circular “scanning” of images and “magic”. Both images and magic can be considered as a constellation of meanings.

Farocki opts for a more scientific approach where the methods he uses to reveal meanings out of an image are tractable unlike magic where the methods are not tractable giving rise to a sense of “wonder” and “fantasy”. Farocki liberates images from this fantastic element around them through his scientific approach. Images are conceived not as an outcome of simulation but exhibiting their autonomous material existence contributing to the construction of a “commoditized” reality. A materialistic approach influenced by the works of Hegel and Marx is taken both in the conception of images as an entity with inherent contradictions shaped by the

historical process and also with the theoretical tool used to contextualize images, montage. Such a presupposition can help us understand Farocki’s entire theoretical practice.

### **Thinking beyond the Dichotomy of Image vs. Theory**

Historically theory has always been thought appropriate to be represented in a linear discourse through text. Image has always been understood in its capacity to only illustrate textual concepts. The practice of thinking and conceptualization has been reserved only to text. Though there can be many historical causal variables attributed to this, one could be the arrival of the printing press and the dominant mode of knowledge production that existed around that time. Photography was celebrated for its accurate appropriation of the three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional space and cinematic image enamoured the spectators with its capability to capture motion. The possibility of film as a medium for knowledge production was never imagined in the early days of cinema. Research and film practice always had a clear disciplinary boundary. Any theoretical articulation of the medium was expressed only in the form of texts. The representational and immersive quality of film medium was always considered to be the essential quality of the medium thus blocking any possibility to make the medium itself visible for any theoretical reflection.

Such a presupposition that “representation” is an essential quality of the film medium has also resulted in the distinction between fact and fiction. Here images are distinguished into two types, fiction where the self-referential register is numbed and no ontological enquiry of the image

is triggered and fact or theory where the self-referential register is activated and the qualities of the medium are made evident. This distinction stems from different conceptions of the ontological nature of reality. In the worldview of filmmakers



such as Farocki and Godard, the individual subjective experience is projected onto reality as “images”. The structure of reality is essentially constituted of images and images have their material existence. An enquiry into images is an enquiry of reality itself. This is a drastic difference from the traditional conception in which the individual experience is projected onto an already given objective reality and “images” are mere representations of this reality.

As against the views of Bazin and Kracauer, in whose conception cinematic “realism” was an un-intervened reproduction of reality through Mise-en-scene, Farocki didn’t see realism as the inherent essence of cinematic medium but as a culturally and historically shaped notion of representation and film medium. Both Godard and Farocki in that sense envisaged film medium as an interplay between the two gazes, of “representation” of reality through Mise-en-scene and abstraction through montage, thus expanding the possibilities of the medium.

### **History through the Lens of Harun Farocki**

Harun Farocki’s historical consciousness arises from the Marxist historical materialist approach where the development of history can be traced through the contradictions that are inherent to things of nature. Farocki follows the history of labour as well as image production through this approach in his film, *Workers leaving the factory* (1995). Images of different quality from various contexts arranged in a montage give rise to new meanings. The film traverses two historical

registers in simultaneity the history of workers through carefully arranged gestures and also the history of image production. This complexity where multiple temporal registers can be accessed is possible only through images and not texts. The inherent multi-scalar complexity of images offers this possibility.

Our vision is stratified historically due to a certain way of perceiving things. Farocki uses montage and voice over in the film to dismantle this structure and make meanings visible. Cinema becomes significant for Farocki precisely because nothing escapes the camera and history is most accurately appropriated through cinema. Though it might seem at the outset to be redundant when the motif of workers leaving appears again and again throughout the film, it is made evident how meanings keep evolving through a historical process. The arrangement of shots of *Workers leaving the Factory* is not arranged in any linear chronological sequence but meanings are allowed to emerge as shots interact. A different historical consciousness is developed as cinema returns repeatedly to the space of factory gates to capture the protests and passions. Just as the history of factory gates develop in the film, the history of image production also runs parallel. Farocki follows the image of the factory gate from the first cinema camera pointed at the gates to the surveillance cameras later used to fortify the factories, from Lumiere brothers' *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895) to Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964). The space in front of the factory gate is affected by the historical process and becomes a constantly changing site of passion, strikes, pimps waiting for the lower-paid women and violent shootings against workers. Farocki turns the space that is considered a transient space within the frames of the camera into an actively charged site of social relations.



The power relationships that are the underpinnings of the historical structure is made visible through the staging of shootings at the gates. The personal lives and passion between men and women can exist only after working hours. Factories that were once meant for production are turned into a fortress with weapons and surveillance cameras through the course of history. The regulation of the movement of workers once carried out by the gates is now also taken care of

by the new age surveillance cameras. The surveillance camera assumes the role of an ever watching power centre. Workers are made conscious of their gestures with a panoptic camera that makes an imposing power very evident for the workers. The camera always points at the workers, we don't see what the workers see. The point of view of the viewer overlaps itself with the point of view of the surveillance cameras. Even a small gesture like a woman tugging onto another woman's skirt from the Lumiere brothers' *Workers Leaving the Factory* is captured on camera.

As Farocki mentions through a voice-over in the film, factories have always repelled film cameras. This is evident from the innumerable shots of the factory gates in films throughout film history. The camera stops at the entrance of the gates and narratives can start once the workers leave the factories to attend to their personal lives. The gestures of the workers have always escaped the consciousness of the viewers in these fleeting shots of the factory gates. Farocki makes these marginalized gestures visible and significant.

### **Gestures of Labour**

Gestures of workers have always escaped through the crevices of film history. In Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory* these gestures attain significance. Gestures conjured up from films across film history are carefully located in their historical context through voice-over. Farocki uses the camera as a historical tool. From the all capturing camera, he excavates gestures, contextualizes and packs them with new meanings. Though the workers leaving the factory has been shot innumerable times throughout film history, only through the eyes of Farocki do we see that the workers are leaving from the factory space as if pushed by an invisible force. In his eyes, workers are now a homogeneous dehumanized entity "workforce". This force has to be controlled and channelled to increase production. Gates and cameras become a tool to streamline, control and organize the movement of this workforce. Any deviation in gestures from the dictated ones will be punished through the police force. Strikes are seen as a disruption in this cycle of gestures habituated by the power structures. The violent tension under-girding this power relation between the workers and the owners manifests itself into a slower frame rate shot of a speeding truck shredded into pieces by a roadblock.



Like the characters, both men and women walk away from the gates of factories, they escape the power relation with the factories temporarily and a new power relation emerges in a different social circumstance between men and women when they converse about their personal lives. It's as if they leave a world governed by one power structure to enter another with different power relations. As Farocki mentions in one of the voices overs as a man and woman walk away from the factory, only death can liberate them from entering this cycle of worlds and their power structures.

The idea of a factory has also evolved through history, from a site of production to a place of correction for prisoners. Factories are believed to bring in correction to the lives of prisoners, morally corrupt human beings. Prisoners are the low paid workforce. They are better humans now as they have turned themselves into workforce contributing to the production and thus to the greater society. Working is turned into a normative moral qualification for one to assimilate perfectly into the requirements of a society.

## Conclusion

An alternate imagination of history is developed in *Workers Leaving the Factory* where the history of image production and the history of workers entangle with each other. Here the history doesn't follow an arrow of time but traverses a complex system of constantly evolving power structure. Images are artefacts that have contributed to the stratification of both culture and history. This stratification has allowed us to perceive reality in a certain way. An enquiry into these artefacts is essentially an enquiry into our perceptual modes. Harun Farocki creates fissures in this stratified perceptual mode to reveal to us the gestures of labours that have escaped our perception though captured by the camera. A conscientious human's intervention is needed to reveal the layers of images captured by a scientific apparatus.

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