

# THE SCHMUTZFINK

**Throughout his prolific career as a filmmaker, Harun Farocki grappled with a basic question: is it possible to represent violence without exploiting its victims?**

**by Pujan Karambeigi**

Six stills from Harun Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1988, 16mm film, 75 minutes.

All images this article courtesy Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, Berlin, and Greene Naftali, New York.

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THE GERMAN WORD *Schmutzfink* (dirty slob) describes people who get too close to things that could harm them. *Schmutzfinken* have a strange desire to taste the slice of pizza that has fallen to the ground, to lick the pole grips on a train, to touch the toilet seat in a public restroom with their bare hands. When filmmaker Harun Farocki identified himself as a *Schmutzfink* in his autobiography *Zehn, zwanzig, dreißig, vierzig* (Ten, Twenty, Thirty, Forty), published posthumously in 2017, it was more than a passing comment. Defining a *Schmutzfink* as one with a proclivity for doing something “unthinkable—like spying through the keyhole into the bathroom,” Farocki offered the term as an equivocal description of his own practice.<sup>1</sup>

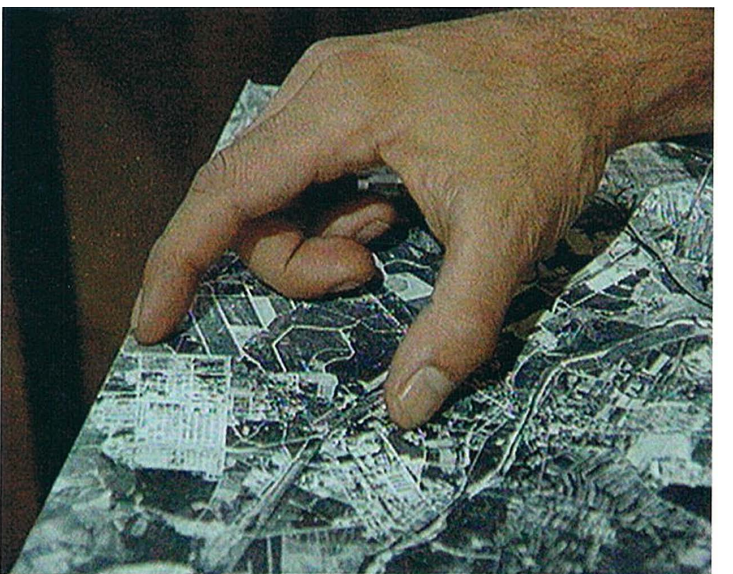
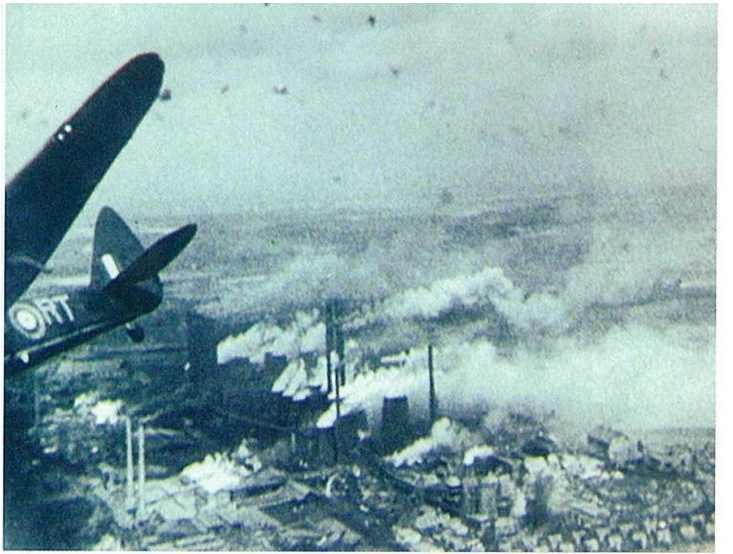
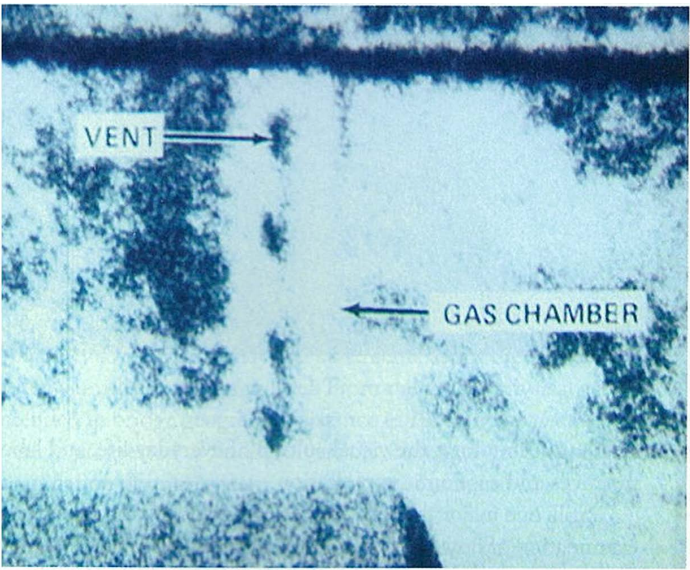
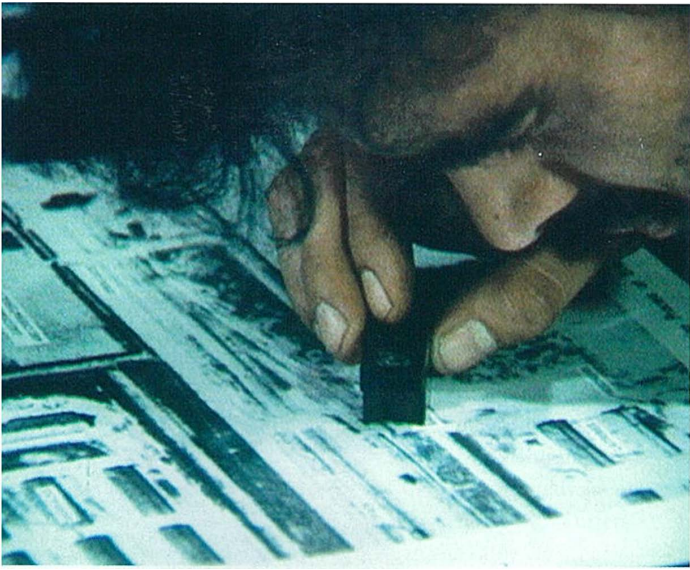
Born to a German mother and an Indian father in 1944, Farocki had an itinerant childhood in Czechoslovakia, India, and Indonesia. The voyeuristic impulse of this *Schmutzfink* has roots in a feeling of exclusion and marginalization. Indeed, driven by an obsession to observe what usually remains invisible, Farocki produced more than ninety films that document mechanisms of power and foster empathy for those subjected to exploitation and violence. But as he seemed to acknowledge with his identification with the *Schmutzfink*, rendering the conditions of marginalization visible can flatten the distinction the actions of a witness and those of a voyeur.

A tension between voyeurism and empathy is central to Farocki's early film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969). Sitting at an editing table, he reads the testimony of Thai Binh Danh,

a survivor of an American napalm attack in Vietnam on March 31, 1966. Thai initially recounted his ordeal in 1967 before the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm organized by Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre. After reading the testimony with his gaze fixed on the text, Farocki looks directly into the camera, asking bluntly: “How can we show you napalm in operation and how can we show you napalm injuries?” Aiming to represent the reality of the violence in Vietnam through a brief black-and-white film, Farocki refrains from depicting atrocities. “If we show you a picture of napalm injuries, you will close your eyes.” This deliberate omission counters the experience, shared by many in the West, of watching televised scenes of the war in their living rooms. Spectacular and horrifying images may have elicited sympathy or pity from some viewers. But graphic depictions of violence could also be tuned out abundantly or regarded with a detached numbness, further underscoring the distance between Western audiences and those Vietnamese who suffered during the war.

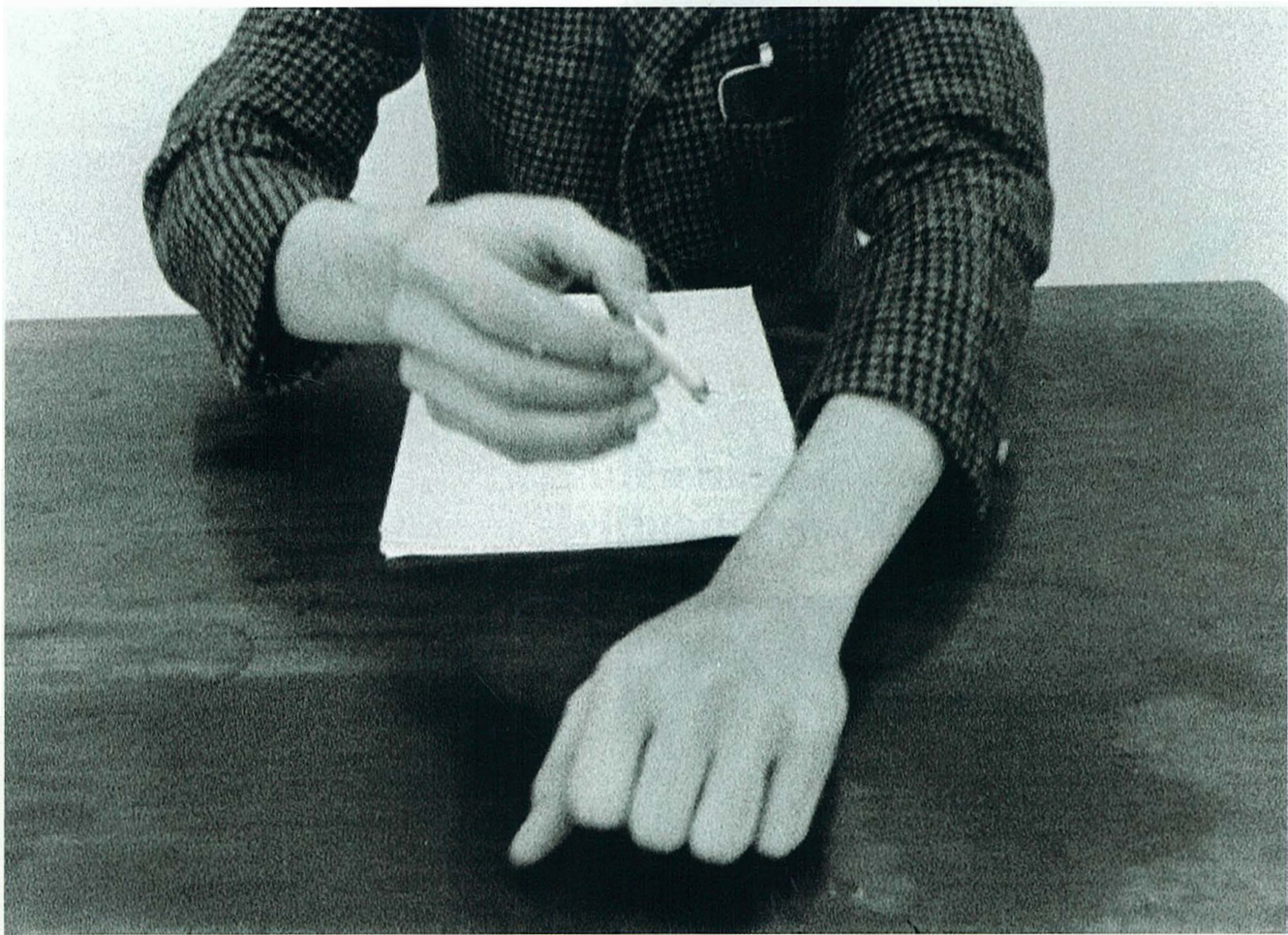
Rather than risk repeating this dynamic, Farocki kept the camera on himself. “We can give you only a very weak representation of napalm's effect,” he says, before pressing the burning end of a cigarette into his forearm. “A cigarette burns at four hundred degrees,” he intones in a voice-over. “Napalm burns at a heat of around three thousand degrees.” Farocki's gesture may have been staged for dramatic effect, but it was also painfully real. He described the scene three decades later: “My act was







*Inextinguishable Fire*, 1969, 16mm film transferred to video, 25 minutes.



about the here and now: Vietnam was far away, and the punctual contact with the heat should approximate it.”<sup>2</sup> Farocki’s own body, in other words, became a kind of medium capable of making the horrors happening “over there” seem proximate. Empathy appears as an act of extension. Farocki effectively produces a sense of immediacy through the film’s didactic tone, spare set, static camera, and minimal editing.

*Inextinguishable Fire* was screened as part of a recent retrospective at Anthology Film Archives and 80 Washington Square East Gallery at New York University. Featuring twenty-seven works curated by Lucas Quigley and Robert Snowden, the program covered Farocki’s entire career, from 1967 to his death in 2014. The scope of the retrospective was broad, with each of the sixteen screenings highlighting a different theme in the filmmaker’s body of work. Many of the thematic links between films in a given program were indirect. For instance, a screening of his early works designed for political agitation, including *Inextinguishable Fire*, was followed by *In Comparison* (2009), which documents, in an unadorned style reminiscent of cinéma vérité, various brickmaking processes employed around the world, from a community effort in Africa to a digitized system of production in Europe. Rather than attempting to distill an organizing principle from Farocki’s work, the retrospective revealed a variety of interrelated concerns, including military

imaging technology, the visual culture of everyday life, and labor practices and economic exploitation.

Still, one major through line in Farocki’s career is a deep examination of how moving images can elicit empathy. The canonical *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988) is one of the strongest expressions of this effort. Echoing his statement in *Inextinguishable Fire*, Farocki questions the possibility of representing the horrors of the Holocaust: “How can one show the victims without reproducing the violence with the pictures of their painful dying?”<sup>3</sup> His challenge was to represent mass violence to an audience separated from it by historical distance.

*Images of the World* depicts Farocki studying aerial footage of Auschwitz taken by US forces in 1944. The images were originally produced to identify industrial targets for bombing. But the footage also captures clear evidence of the massive concentration camp—evidence that was initially overlooked or ignored by analysts. Instead of attempting to bring us closer to the individuals who suffered in the camps, Farocki foregrounds the distance—historical and spatial—between viewers and victims. This distance is not presented as a problem to be overcome, but as a precondition for studying tragedy without lapsing into exploitative depictions. The imperfect camera technology that fails to reveal identifying details of anyone in the images, according to Farocki, is a protective



## Farocki foregrounds the distance—historical and spatial—between viewers and victims.

shield. “In the grain of the photograph their personalities are protected,” notes a narrator speaking in voice-over.

The image of Farocki or a surrogate working at a film editing table is a common trope in his work. In the 1980 essay “What an Editing Room Is,” Farocki argues that “work at the editing table is something in-between,” establishing the editor as a neutral mediator.<sup>4</sup> It affords him the ability to establish connections between an image and reality as the film winds “back and forth, and one frame comments on another.”<sup>5</sup> By highlighting this process of constructing meaning through the analysis and re-presentation of archival footage, *Images of the World* offers a “weak representation” of the Holocaust, in the same way that Farocki provided a highly mediated representation of a napalm burn. The focus is not on the direct experience of the camps or the subjectivity of prisoners there, but on the footage itself. Film strips move back and forth as Farocki names the function of each building and organizes the infrastructure of death into a diagram. The editing table provides him with the objective means to describe the material context of the concentration camps, to make the conditions of its violence intelligible without having to explicate his own position. The seemingly neutral setting precludes him from offering a somatic or emotional portrait of the victims. Yet the film is affecting precisely because it seems to acknowledge these limitations, ultimately lending credibility to Farocki’s analytical statements about the broader systems involved in mass murder. From the urgent physical act intended to bridge geographic distance in *Inextinguishable Fire*, Farocki progressed to finding a version of empathy in a laborious examination of images from a once-ignored archive.

*IMAGES OF THE WORLD* was the film that gained Farocki critical acclaim in the United States, eventually leading to a visiting professorship at the University of California, Berkeley, where he cowrote *Speaking about Godard* (1998) with Kaja Silverman. His connection to the academy has led many critics of his work to emphasize *Blickschulung* (viewing pedagogy) as the core didactic aim of his practice. However, this reception may have obscured the subtler shifts in what might be called his pedagogy of empathy.<sup>6</sup>

The questions implicit in *Prison Images* (2000) reiterate those in Farocki’s earlier works: How can we show you the control room of a prison? And how can we expose the violence of prisons? Initially conceived as a film “about the representation of prisons in movies,” the project ran out of money before it was completed. Farocki began looking into footage from prison surveillance cameras as a way of continuing without relying on the costly rights to excerpt commercial movies.<sup>7</sup>

The final version of the work comprises footage from a variety of sources, from Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket* (1959) to a 1943 German propaganda film on prison practices to clips from cameras at the maximum-security prison in Corcoran, California.

A civil rights activist from the group California Prison Focus granted Farocki and his fellow researchers access to hundreds of hours of material from the recess yards in Corcoran.

Over the course of roughly sixty minutes, a narrator describes the correlation between image technologies and the infliction of violence. In the prison, surveillance cameras complement a suite of other devices, including biometric scanners and electronic tags, that constantly monitor inmates. These control mechanisms enable a totalizing form of electronic voyeurism. Inmates’ images may appear on a screen in a control room, but they are also represented as a sequence of numbers that makes their location and condition readily accessible to guards. Indeed, *Prison Images* shows how surveillance cameras are not merely recording. Instead, they are complicit in the violent transfigurations of a living body into a divisible and calculable object—the production of what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “bare life.”<sup>8</sup>



Two stills from *In Comparison*, 2009, 16mm film, 61 minutes.

# ***Prison Images* compels audiences to confront the blurry distinction between racialized categories of innocence and criminality.**

On this basis, *Prison Images* could be regarded as a continuation of *Images of the World*: found footage is subject to an analysis of the conditions of violence, which ultimately allows for a weak representation of the victim. However, a crucial reversal has taken place: putting these pictures together in a film forces one to participate in what Farocki describes as “symbolic violence.”<sup>9</sup> In *Prison Images*, he clarifies that the editing table can no longer be thought of as a site of objective observation.

This surrender of a neutral vantage point is most clearly revealed in a scene that brings his meticulous analysis of prison imagery to a halt. Surveillance camera shots are in black-and-white, silent, and a little blurry. The uncut footage seems to be in slow motion as each shot halts, dividing the movements of the inmates in the frame into tiny fragments and making it “look like something from a cheap computer game,” as Farocki noted shortly after the film’s premiere.<sup>10</sup> The action is simple: one man attacks another. The backdrop is a triangular courtyard with a concrete ground and concrete walls. White smoke appears: one of the men in the scene staggers before hitting the ground. A dark substance spreads around his body.

Speaking in voice-over, an activist tells us that the body we see is that of thirty-year-old William Martinez. (The speaker was involved in a lawsuit against the guard who shot Martinez to break up the fight.) We are also told that Martinez lies on the ground for another nine minutes and fifteen seconds. The footage is sped up, the duration compressed into one minute and thirteen seconds. Farocki’s voice is audible again. He does not ask what might have happened if medics had arrived earlier. He does not try to speak for Martinez, nor does he attempt to “humanize” the man or put the audience in Martinez’s position. Instead, Farocki zooms in on the already pixelated image, effectively putting viewers in the position of the guard who observed the scene. This zoom renders the referent of the image, Martinez, completely opaque. Enlarging the image’s pixels exaggerates the conditions of vision inside the control room. The prisoner appears transfigured into a nondescript object: the very condition, the film implies, that enabled this death to occur. As this transformation happens, Farocki repeats a basic fact: “Shot on April 7, 1989.”

“Today, it is only too clear that we are shown images from a distance to save the dead another humiliation,”<sup>11</sup> Farocki has written. His practice changed radically after he confronted the technologies of the control room. In zooming in on Martinez’s image, Farocki identifies the voyeuristic violence of the control room with his own seemingly objective position at the editing table. The apparently innocent in-betweenness of the editing table, its ability to establish a connection to the victim from a distance, has been revealed to be an exercise of power. If anything, employing Martinez’s image suggests the inability of Farocki, or any filmmaker, to represent violence without becoming complicit in it.

FAROCKI’S CAREER offers an important touchstone for artists and critics grappling with representations of violence in contemporary art. Arthur Jafa’s video *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016), for example, incorporates explicit representations of racist lynching and police brutality, eschewing the kinds of verbal and visual analogies evident in films like *Inextinguishable Fire* and *Images of the World*. For Jafa, however, these images are crucial for allowing audiences to learn about historical experiences of suffering. As he said in a 2017 interview:

Ultimately it comes down to the relative presence or absence of empathy. You cannot oppress people without expending a certain type of psychic energy, unless the whole mechanism, the whole superstructure is supporting that understanding of the other as being less human, less feeling than you are. I think you learn empathy. I think it has to be taught.<sup>12</sup>

Though they have divergent approaches, Jafa and Farocki share a commitment to fostering a pedagogy of empathy. Indeed, Jafa’s aim to teach audiences to empathize implies that he is seeking more than an immediate emotional connection to charged imagery. Farocki noted a few years after releasing *Prison Images* that empathy is “a finer expression than ‘identification.’” He goes on to define empathy as “somewhat forceful sympathy. It should be possible to empathize in such a way that it produces the effect of alienation.”<sup>13</sup>

The idea that an alienation effect would accompany empathy may sound counterintuitive, but it speaks to the pitfalls of what sociologist Sadhana Bery describes as “consumptive identification,” a superficial feeling of emotional connection to victims of violence. Speaking at The Kitchen in New York this past summer as part of a symposium on race and culture called *On Whiteness*, Bery argued that consumptive identification buttresses “the structures of white supremacy” by allowing individuals to partake in the emotional catharsis of viewing images of suffering without demanding that they reflect on their own complicity in that suffering.<sup>14</sup> Echoing this line of argument, Aruna D’Souza, who also spoke at *On Whiteness*, argues in her book *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* (2018) that empathy can easily turn into “a narcissistic act,” as it allows white audiences, in particular, to avoid confronting the “glaring blind spot” of their own role in tacitly perpetuating injustice.<sup>15</sup>

For scholar Jackie Wang, this blind spot is based on the liberal politics of innocence. Examining the techniques of incarceration that have emerged since Ronald Reagan’s presidency, Wang describes in her book *Carceral Capitalism* (2018) the “connections between our lives and the generalized atmosphere of violence [that] is submerged in a complex web of institutions, structures, and economic relations.”<sup>16</sup> The politics of innocence manage to establish a clean moral distinction



between an innocent (mostly white) public on the one side and criminalized (mostly black and Hispanic) inmates on the other.

Among Farocki's films, *Prison Images* most effectively compels audiences to confront the blurry distinction between criminalized categories of innocence and criminality. Martinez's image functions like a mirror, reflecting back onto Farocki and the audience. Rather than prompting identification that would afford emotional relief or offering the illusion of access to the victim's position, the barely decipherable image of a languishing body is supposed to alienate the audience: to imply the observer in the observed, to cast the empathizer as a perpetrator. A self-described *Schmutzfink*, Farocki struggled to attain empathy, while simultaneously coping with the voyeuristic quality of such an endeavor. A risk one must be willing to take if empathy is understood, as Wang would say, not as a theoretical posture," but as "a lived position."<sup>17</sup> ○

*All translations by the author unless otherwise noted.*

1. Harun Farocki, *Zehn, zwanzig, dreißig, vierzig*, Cologne, Walther König, 2017, p. 19.

2. Harun Farocki, "Der Krieg findet immer einen Ausweg," *Cinema* 50, 2005, p. 30.

3. Harun Farocki, "Die Bilder sollen gegen sich selbst aussagen," in *Auszug aus dem*

*Lager*, ed. Ludger Schwarte, Bielefeld, Germany, transcript Verlag, 2007, p. 295.

4. Harun Farocki, "What an Editing Room Is," in *Imprint*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen, Berlin, Lukas & Sternberg, 2001, p. 78.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

6. See Thomas Elsaesser, "Political Filmmaking after Brecht: Farocki, for Example," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2004. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, "How to Open Your Eyes," in *Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun, London, Koenig Books, 2009.

7. Harun Farocki, quoted in Rembert Hüser, "Nine Minutes in the Yard: A Conversation with Harun Farocki," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-lines*, p. 298.

8. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 185.

9. Farocki, "Der Krieg findet immer einen Ausweg," p. 30.

10. Harun Farocki, "Controlling Observation," in *Imprint*, p. 308.

11. Farocki, "Der Krieg findet immer einen Ausweg," p. 30.

12. Arthur Jafa, quoted in Arthur Jafa and Tina Campit, "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," *e-flux*, April 2017, e-flux.com.

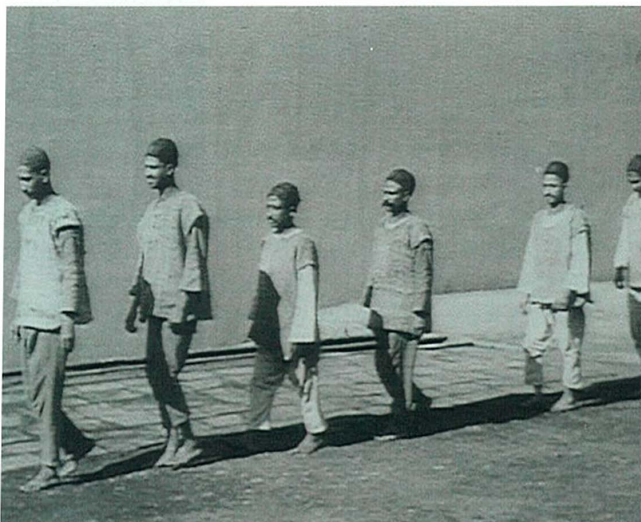
13. Harun Farocki, "Empathy," in *Another Kind of Empathy*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Carles Guerra, London, Koenig Books, 2007, p. 105.

14. Sadhana Bery, from the panel discussion "A Diagnostic of Whiteness: The Empathy Conundrum" at the On Whiteness symposium, The Kitchen, New York, June 30, 2018, youtube.com.

15. Aruna D'Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts*, New York, Badlands Unlimited, 2018, p. 48.

16. Jackie Wang, "Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety," in *Carceral Capitalism*, South Pasadena, Calif., Semiotext(e), 2018, p. 287.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 295.



Four stills from *Prison Images*, 2000, video, 60 minutes.

