

## Light Weapons

Thomas Keenan

... *Scan Freeze, arrêt sur image.*  
(Paul Virilio, *Guerre et Cinéma*)

### LIGHTS ON

One of the Jewish prisoners forced to work in a so-called "special detail" at Auschwitz told Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah*, a film which contained no historical or archival images, what happened when a new transport arrived at the station and the SS was notified:

*Now one SS man woke us up and we moved to the ramp. We immediately got an escort and were escorted to the ramp -- say we were about two hundred men. And the lights went on. There was a ramp, around the ramp were lights, and under those lights were a cordon of SS. [...] Now when all this was done -- everybody was there -- the transport was rolled in.*(1)

Asks Harun Farocki, reading from the caption of an image of this ramp: *First thought: why all these spotlights? Is a film being shot?*(2)

### CLICK

Farocki's film, which focuses on found photographs and documentary or industrial images, answers the question of the reason for these lights with an analysis of some of the film being shot: images, and the light that made them possible. *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges [Images of the World and the Inscription of War]*(3) is a film of light and disaster: of exposure and its time, or more properly its timing and hence its speed. It is not a film of montage, of cutting and sequencing, nor one of zooms and pans and travellings. Its title makes things clear: what is at stake are images,(4) the stilled traces left over after light has etched itself on film, the remnants of *the silver that turns to black in the grain of a photograph*. And yet, *Images of the World* is not exactly a film about seeing, either. One does not simply see an image, it says; its light is always shadowed by something that does not belong to the perception or intuition of the visible (which is to say, finally, to the aesthetic). Of necessity, there could never be enough seeing to saturate an image. *Images of the World* fixes on what is not there to be seen, on what could never be seen, not because of some invisibility but rather thanks to a sort of blindness built into sight; it attends to what is not of the order of sight, to another light or an oversight in the image. Which is to say, it takes these images as inscriptions, to be read and not just to be seen or looked at. This excess of the image over the eye that would see it (*more images than the eyes ... can consume*), this non-coincidence of what is shot and what is seen, means that something always remains in the image: remains, not only to be seen.(5)

*Images of the World* practices a politics or a tactics of the flash and the click, the burst of light and the snap of the shutter, the passage back and forth of the diaphragm across the lens. It constantly reframes its stills, dissecting and re-cutting them. It operates on them with a kind of acuity, with a sharpness of cutting that crops, isolates, zeroes in on a spot in detail sufficient to bring it to the blurring point. The timing is that of enumeration and reinscription: cut, re-cut, blow-up, explosion. Its clarity is thus that of glare and blur; not the clear and distinct ideas of Descartes, not the perspicacity of vision, not the transparency of the human subject to itself, but the brightness and obscurity of exposure. In other words, the inscriptions are not just of war but of what Virilio has called the *guerre lumière*, the lighting war that he dates to the first use of the military searchlight in 1904.(6) *In World War 2*, the film tells us, *the largest metal sheets were pressed for searchlights, to show up aircraft in the sky. The aircraft, for their part, threw light bulbs like a lightning flash, to illuminate the earth for a photo. War of images, at the speed of light -- sometimes too bright, and long delayed in its arrival.*(7)

The important images rarely move in *Images of the World*; its privileged temporality is that of the still, and its cherished motion that of the play between light and darkness. The image takes place in the still of the moment, the blink of a shutter. *The photograph captures the moment, and thus crops away past and future*. But the moment has no self-sufficiency to it; it needs the future in order to have its past. In the moment, what it showed was not there to be seen, "lost to vision altogether." Today and tonight, in the light of the future, the possibility opens up finally to read what it could not see.

The shutter clicks twice in *Images of the World*, and the film turns around the two resulting images ... of Auschwitz, for so long and so many the very figure of something immune to representation, and of an imperative to bear witness. Images from sky and earth, products of a technology intimately tied to the machinery of death: *the preserving photograph, the destroying bomb: these two now pressed together*. Auschwitz from the camera of an American reconnaissance plane, 26,000 feet above, and Auschwitz from the camera of an SS man, on the unloading ramp: testimony in the decisive language of this century to its most indelible scar.

### AUFKLÄRUNG

Just a few minutes into Farocki's film, the English voiceover tells us: *Enlightenment, that is a word in the history of ideas, in German, Aufklärung*. And a few minutes later, the phrase is repeated with some additional information:

*In German Aufklärung also has a military meaning -- reconnaissance, flight reconnaissance. In Central Europe, the sky is cloudy most of the time, clear skies on about thirty days of the year. On the 4th of April 1944, the sky was cloudless. Preceding rain showers had precipitated the dust in the air. American aircraft had taken off in Foggia, Italy, and flown towards targets in Silesia, factories for synthetic petrol and rubber known as Buna. On the flight over the I.G. Farben Co. factory, still under construction, a pilot clicked his camera shutter and took photographs of the Auschwitz concentration camp. First picture of Auschwitz, taken at 7,000 meters altitude. The pictures taken in April 1944 in Silesia arrived for evaluation at Medmenham, England. The analysts discovered a power station, a carbide factory, a factory under construction for Buna and another for petrol hydrogenation. They were not under orders to look for the Auschwitz camp and thus they did not find it.*

Blindly, the airman clicks his shutter, and focused as they are on industry, the photo interpreters fail again to see. *It was not until thirty-three years later that the ... the word "gas chamber" was inscribed*, by the two CIA photo interpreters who discovered Auschwitz in their files. Only with time does another image come to light in it. The image records the inscription of war, archives it for another time and place, for memory. At the first mention of the word *Auschwitz*, the narration is interrupted by the image track, and the screen goes black. Click. When the light and an image reappear, it shows the *first picture of Auschwitz*. While there are many other such reconnaissance photographs of the camp,<sup>(8)</sup> as it turns out, for Farocki there are really only two images of Auschwitz. The other was taken by an SS man, charged with documenting as well as killing. Before we see it, the light goes out again: cut to black, coincident with the sharp click of a shutter on the soundtrack. Click. When the light returns to disrupt the darkness, another image arrives with it:

*A woman has arrived at Auschwitz. The camera captures her in movement. The photographer has his camera installed and as the woman passes by he clicks the shutter, in the same way he would cast a glance at her in the street, because she is beautiful. The woman understands how to pose her face so as to catch the eye of the photographer and how to look with a slight sideways glance. [...] The camp run by the SS shall bring her to destruction, and the photographer who captures her beauty for posterity is from this very same SS. How the two elements interplay: preservation and destruction.*

The light goes out only twice in *Images of the World*. Two images, and a striking emphasis on the cut and the darkness that precedes them. The formula is repeated --the click of the shutter -- and the film underlines the opening of the aperture by reinscribing the passage to black in its own action. The darkness against which an image, a photograph or a film, finds its possibility is here brought into the event of the film itself.

These images are not new. The SS man's photo collection had been published by Serge Klarsfeld in

1980, and the reconnaissance imagery became a commonplace of Holocaust literature within a few years of the CIA report.<sup>(9)</sup> But the professionals of photo interpretation and of the Holocaust each fail to do justice to the peculiar difficulty of these images. Farocki seeks to understand what it means for the camera to be *part of the equipment* of destruction, indeed for the destruction to be in a certain sense impossible without the camera. This is what he calls *aufklärung*: no bombing without reconnaissance, certainly, but also no annihilation without the record of what has been accomplished. *Since the authorities began to take photographs, everything is accompanied by images, even the crimes they themselves commit.*

The difficulty is that the *interplay of preservation and destruction* will not stop here. The luxury, or the protection, of simply playing preservation against destruction and finding them entangled, is denied to the reader of these images. Click one: what is preserved is the record of the destruction that should have taken place, but never did. So much destruction with images from the air, and an oversight. Click two: what is preserved is the record of the destruction that took place with such disastrous efficiency, the record that might have stopped it as well as allowed it. No destruction without images, yes, but also no response to the destruction, no critique and no intervention. This is what justifies Farocki in reading and reinscribing these images as a question of enlightenment, that *Aufklärung* defined by Kant as the release or exit (*Ausgang*) from immaturity<sup>(10)</sup> and later dialecticized by Horkheimer and Adorno as at once inseparable from liberation and "totalitarian." With his attention to the interplay, to the eventuality of destruction as the very condition of preservation, Farocki seems closest to the disenchanting wisdom of *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* opening words: "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."<sup>(11)</sup> And yet, the radiance does not give in so easily to the narrative of the exit or to the dialectic of the "yet," the symmetrical reversal of liberation and domination, preservation and destruction. The Allies needed their imagery so as not to miss the factories, and so they missed the camps that remained unseen on that same imagery. The SS, and the filmmaker, required their photographs for something terribly like the same reason: so as not to forget what had been done. The radiance, the flash or the glare, of the disaster is as it were the oblique reflection or the signature, the shadow, of the Enlightenment. So the inscription of the light war is, for Farocki, something like the "writing of the disaster." It is, says Blanchot, "the dark disaster that carries the light": "The light flashes -- the flash which, in clarity, clamors and does not clarify (the dispersion that resonates or vibrates dazzlingly). Flash, the shattering reverberation of a language without hearing."<sup>(12)</sup>

The temptation to find an easy irony in this interplay is difficult to resist, but Farocki -- a practitioner of the still and its manipulation, not of the montage and its narrative -- betrays no sense of surprise in the coincidence, no hint that the one simply befalls the other. *The SS took these pictures. The camera was part of the camp equipment. [...] Again, these pictures that the SS had made to show the world one day how they had destroyed the Jews.* No destruction without this preservation, just as much for the SS man at Auschwitz as for the reconnaissance aircraft overhead. The record already implies, even looks forward to, the disappearance of its object: hence no security, no good conscience, for the one who records. Including the filmmaker. The irony, if there is one, would be that of history and memory, and the risk of the utter disappearance of the trace. It would be the terrible irony that splits the subject without insulating the parts from one another, the irony that implicates and contaminates even as it seems to offer the *safety* of that distance from the *actual* (the *on the spot*) historically attributed to images. This is lesson of radical magnification: the image is the spot, deprived of distance.

#### **BLUR**

Farocki's images finally put to the test the distinction between public and private, on which the question of enlightenment has been founded since Kant. Neither private nor public, they come to light in a history of disaster, accident, and failure. Their overexposure, their glare, blurs the distinction and defines the task of a new publicity and a new enlightenment. The blur is the mark of our implication, the collapse of distance and our exposure to the image. *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* ends with a blur, an arrow aimed at the heart of a blur. Which is to say, it ends with an image (even the soundtrack ends on the word *image*), and a question. How to see a blur? -- not a blur of motion but one of magnification, the explosion of a still to its unsignifying points. Or rather: how to *read* a blur, not a blur of vision but one of light, the dissociated points of what is finally the only enlightenment worthy of the name.

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**THUNDER AND LIGHTNING**

Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf told his troops on 17 January 1991, "you must be the thunder and lightning of Desert Storm." It did not take long to learn that the thunder and lightning would be the audio and video feeds from the gulf, that this war would be fought with weapons of light as never before: not only with laser rangefinders and target designators, night illumination devices, airborne and satellite imagery provided in near real-time, and television cameras that both guided their weapons to their targets and provided a record of the event in the same moment ... not only with those weapons, but with the television screens of the world as well. Thunder and lightning meant the roar and the flash of the cruise missile launched before the cameras on the deck of the battleship *Wisconsin* and captured in flight over other cameras in the streets of Baghdad, played out -- fought -- in the new electro-optical public sphere. In this sense, there was only one image from this war: not the reiterated arrival of guided weapons at their targets, not the bodies on stretchers or the look of horror at a dead comrade, not the lights over Baghdad, but the pilot's sure grasp of a videocassette.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust (The Complete Text of the Film)*, tr. A. Whitelaw and W. Byron, New York: Pantheon, 1985, 41-2. The prisoner was Rudolf Vrba.
2. The image is a drawing by Alfred Kantor, which can be found in *The Book of Alfred Kantor: An Artist's Journal of the Holocaust*, London: Judy Piatkus, 1987 [1971], 29. Kantor's caption reads: "Concentration camp Auschwitz. Dec. 18th 1943, arrival at night after 2 1/2 days in a sealed cattle car ... first thought: what are all the spotlights for, a movie?"
3. Directed by Harun Farocki, 1988/89, 16mm, 75 minutes, available in the United States on videocassette with an English voiceover. All citations from this voiceover are printed here in italics.
4. Farocki's concept of the "image" seems deeply involved with that of Heidegger in "Die Zeit des Weltbildes": "*weltbild*, when understood essentially, does not mean image of the world but the world conceived and grasped as image." Later, Heidegger writes: "Everyday opinion sees in the shadow only the lack of light, if not light's complete denial. In truth, however, the shadow is a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light" ("Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1972, 82, 104; "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 129, 154).
5. As Thomas Elsaesser shows, Farocki is committed to this project of "reading" images that come from somewhere else, and this reading is not the activity of a subject examining an object. The image, strictly speaking, puts the subject in question. Farocki -- seeking as he put it in the notes for his 1978 *Industriefotographie*, "images that fit into no households, on no wall, into no pocket, no illustrated book [...] and on no retina" -- provokes the question for Elsaesser of "what images might represent for whom [...] once neither neither the retina nor the image are conceived as metonymic stand-ins for a subject/object duality." Elsaesser has written the two best articles on Farocki in English: "'It started with these Images' -- Some Notes on Political Film-making after Brecht in Germany: Helke Sander and Harun Farocki," *Discourse* 7, Fall 1985, 104, and "Working at the Margins: two or three things not known about Harun Farocki," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 50, October 1983, 269-70.
6. Paul Virilio, *Guerre et cinéma 1: Logistique de la perception*, second edition, Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1991, 121. The epigraph can be found on p. 147.
7. According to "a military manual published at the beginning of the century," the earliest applications of military searchlights were as an aid to infantry movements, where the first use is listed as ... "to dazzle defenders." Cited in E.W. Chivers and D.E.H. Jones, "The Function and Design of Army Searchlights," in *Symposium on Searchlights*, London: The Illuminating Engineering Society, 1948, 7. On "the blinding beams of massed searchlight batteries" in the air battle over Germany, see Alfred Price, *Battle Over the Reich*, London: Ian Allan, 1973, 50.
8. According to Roy Stanley, "Allied photorecon aircraft made it to these targets less than two dozen times between 4 April 1944 and 14 January 1945 [and] half of those missions also coincidentally got cover of the death camps -- a few frames in each of eighteen rolls of film" (*World War II Photo Intelligence*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981, 346).
9. On the history of photography at Auschwitz, see Serge Klarsfeld, ed., *The Auschwitz Album: Lili Jacob's Album*, New York: The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1980, [5-23], and Peter Heller's introduction to the commercial edition of the collection, *The Auschwitz Album: A Book Based Upon an Album Discovered by a Concentration Camp Survivor, Lili [Jacob] Meier*, New York: Random House, 1981, vii-x, xxiv-xxvi. On the aerial photography of the camp, see Dino A. Brugioni and Robert G. Poirier, *The Holocaust Revisited: A Retrospective Analysis of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Complex*, Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, February 1979 (still available from the National Technical Information

Service, NTISUB E 280 002); Stanley, *World War II Photo Intelligence*, 340-351, which extends the CIA analysts' work; Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981, 190-341; David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, New York: Pantheon, 1984, 302; and Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, New York: Penguin Meridian, 1989 [1987], 193. Gilbert's book became the subject of a BBC television film, also called *Auschwitz and the Allies*, in 1982.

10. Immanuel Kant, *Was Ist Aufklärung?* [1783], ed. Jürgen Zehbe, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985, 55; "What is Enlightenment?," in *On History*, ed. and trans. Lewis White Beck, New York: Macmillan, 1985 [1957], 3.

11. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Amsterdam: de Munter, 1968 [1944], 13; *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, New York: Continuum, 1991, 3.

12. Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1980, 67.