

TELEKRITIK: Über Song of Ceylon

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Director: Harun Farocki

First broadcast: 7 October 1975



Depending on how you count, Harun Farocki's 30-minute analysis of Basil Wright's *The Song of Ceylon* was either the third or the fourth program the director realised for the *Telekritik* series at WDR. In 1973, his *The Trouble with Images* (1973) had provoked heated debates within the channel since many journalists felt offended by Farocki's critique (see Angelika Wittlich's account [here](#)). The *Struggle with Images* (1974) had followed the same pattern of dissecting the format of the journalistic feature.

Features are giant exploitation machines. They chop the topics that don't particularly interest us, into tiny pieces, and also those that could actually interest us. [1]

Between the two programs, Farocki had realised a third one that focused on television presenters and their rhetoric (*Moderatoren im Fernsehen*), but it was not broadcast. In the program on Basil Wright, Farocki turns to a positive model, a historic example which can stand in for documentary integrity and a reflected balance between observation, sounds and music, and voice-over. From the start, Farocki leaves no doubt about the educational impetus of his exercise:

We're going to examine films here, to learn something for today's television. For watching television and for creating television. We will make you aware of a few cinematic methods and we'll look at what consequences a few cinematic methods have.

Accompanying the title card 'Learning for TV (I)', he then specifies his method of singling out individual moments and operations in the film:

Instead of a fleeting glimpse of the whole, it is preferable to show a few particular things in detail. And: When you show a few particulars in detail, an idea of the whole might emerge. I, too, will only provide a few particulars about the film *The Song of Ceylon*.

In the following half hour, the program is organised as a back-and-forth between clips from Basil Wright's film (and, in a few instances, reference material by Eisenstein and Walter Ruttmann) and hand-written title cards and drawings that interrupt and punctuate this material. It belonged to the ethics of analysing movies of some of the WDR directors (Helmut Färber, for instance) to abstain from intervening into the footage that was analysed – it was taboo to inflict cuts that were not part of the original film, or to have a voice-over while the material was shown. Farocki respects these rules. He never talks over the sequences of Wright's movie. Whenever a montage, concrete gestures, or other particularities are explicitly commented upon, the drawings set in. Reminiscent of storyboards, those drawings are, as Michael Baute has pointed out,

sketches that outline motifs from the images of Wright's film. They are also schematizations that depict something vividly which was either shown before or will be seen later. Accentuations, underscores. [2]

Today's viewers might wonder why Farocki chose to use hand-written intertitles that have the character of children's drawings. After a screening of the film in 2008, the filmmaker recalled:

TV was a highly official affair at the time, and using these hand-written, scribbled intertitles was a wonderful gesture of rebellion. Also, the people in the final sound mix were appalled that an amateur like me did the voice-over, and not an alert professional speaker. The transgression against a certain sound and tone – that was important. [3]

The use of a DIY method thwarting the serious and official attitude of television also had its counterpart in the partisan decision to side with repetition.

All the important aspects of dealing with film consist of repeating things many times – the essential films need to be watched a hundred times; today, this is quite easy with the technology. At the time, it required an almost heroic effort.

The plea for repetition (a primary and essential didactic tool) also entailed repeating in the commentary what can be seen in the images.

On television, one of the first lessons to learn is that you should by no means repeat in the commentary what is seen in the image. You still learn that today. To me, it was almost mandatory to repeat what is in the image, that's the only way to create a tension. [4]

There is, Farocki argues, no such thing as redundancy in the relation between words and image since they belong to entirely different registers of relating to the world. While some of today's practitioners of the video essay rather look down on ekphrasis and description (they think the presence of the image renders them obsolete), Farocki stresses the virtue of finding the right words for something that is seen.

The 1970s were a decade of difficulties and hardship for Farocki. His manifesto film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) had put him on the map of political filmmaking, but it took nine more years until *Between Two Wars* (1978), his first film with a regular cinema release, was finished. The filmmaker himself tended to accentuate the frustrating and disappointing experience of this phase in his career.[5] However, it should be noted that despite these difficulties, it was an incredibly productive period, not least due to the alliances to WDR. Roughly 20 television productions of varying length were realised and co-produced by different channels; from children's television (clips

for *Sesame Street* and *Sandmännchen*) to experimental explorations into narration. A program like *Erzählen* (1975) co-directed with Ingemo Engström, offers an important blueprint for later forays into essayistic practices. Farocki's regular work for the radio is still largely unknown.

In economic terms, public television in the 1970s provided for Farocki what the contemporary art context started to do in the late 1990s (albeit on a more modest scale): it enabled him to maintain a steady flow of productions and investigate questions of visual literacy and media education over long stretches of time. It is an important chapter where Farocki devises his 'compound system' of work, combining research work for radio with articles for FILMKRITIK and essayistic work for television. It is a phase that is yet to be re-discovered, and *TELEKRITIK: About Song of Ceylon* is one important building block in the architecture of Farocki's working method.

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Harun Farocki (1944-2014) was a filmmaker, installation artist, writer, and teacher. His vast body of work contains essayistic films for cinema and television (*Images of the World* and *Inscription of War* [1988], *Erzählen* [1975], co-directed by Ingemo Engström), children's programs for *Sesame Street* and *Sandmännchen*, overtly political interventions like *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), installation series like *Serious Games* (2010) and *Parallel* (2012-2014), and observational cinema. The question of visual literacy has been a prime concern throughout his work.

References

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Notes

- [1] Farocki 1973.
- [2] Baute, 'Telekritik: Über »Song of Ceylon« von Basil Wright', Kunst der Vermittlung Website, Dossier 'Harun Farocki'.
- [3] Harun Farocki in conversation with Michael Baute and Stefan Pethke, Kino Arsenal, 10 October 2008, on the occasion of the Kunst der Vermittlung screening (my translation).
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] For an illuminating account about this phase, see Farocki's articles in FILMKRITIK between 1974 and 1979. Most recently, his unfinished autobiography, structured along his 10th, 20th, 30th, and 40th birthdays also offers important insights. See Farocki 2017.