

HYPOTHESIS FOR AN IDEOLOGICAL JOURNEY

MARCO MAZZI dhe HARUN FAROCKI

In lieu of an abstract

In March 2011, a violent earthquake followed by a deadly tsunami hits Japan causing catastrophic damage to the Fukushima nuclear power plant, killing thousands of people, and giving rise to a true ecological and social disaster of terrifying proportions. I am living in Japan at this point in time and find myself shaken to the core by the reality that the city of Tokyo is experiencing. It is precisely at that moment that I decide to contact filmmaker and writer Harun Farocki (1944-2014), proposing a video project to be shot in Berlin during the summer of that year. I already know Farocki, having organized a public talk about his films at the University of Waseda in Tokyo only a few months ago. My new project is going to be called *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* and it is going to be about the alignment of historical memory with

the archive, film as an archive, and the collective and historical memory of a city as an archive. Farocki agrees to participate in the project and I send him two questions: “What does the public, historical memory of a city consist of and what is the function of the archive?” and “What is the point of recording (and thus archiving) a revolution?” The second question is inspired by Farocki’s and Andrei Ujică’s film *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992). Together with Diego Cossentino, we shot the interview with Farocki on the morning of 14 June 2011. In addition, we amassed several hours of video footage from areas of Berlin that had undergone radical architectural change since 1989. Can we think of ideology as a journey? If so, would it be a journey of discovery, of growth, or of reverie? Is, perhaps, the act of choosing an ideology, a political, philosophical, or existential set of beliefs, a one-way journey? Or is it always possible to retrace one’s steps after having made certain determinate choices? Is the choice itself reversible? Is the meaning of a choice (existential or political) dictated by forward momentum or the hypothesis of a return, of a revaluation? If the ideological journey anticipates or at the very least does not exclude the possibility of “a return”, what is the role of the archive in all this? Can it be licit to write and rewrite history according to our ideological “shifts”? The journey itself, the journey as tangible experience of another world and culture, might it constitute an experience so totalizing that it is capable of making us reconsider and even disavow an ideological choice that at first seemed inevitable? Could the journey, this movement of body and thought, also be a means of pausing and of accepting the otherness of the other? These are the queries that *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* seeks to evoke. The video was recorded in 2011 but was edited and published on DebatikCenter of

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Contemporary Art in the spring of 2020 while under quarantine as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

Florence, 8 April 2020

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Marco Mazzi: Can you please say something about the role of archives in the contemporary world? Is there any difference in using found footage and shooting original images?

Harun Farocki: In 1991, I was very astonished that everybody opposed the idea to go to war with Iraq in Germany. The resistance was spontaneous and also people who usually would support American politics in this case were understanding the protestors, and the first thing is that the main protestors were born the last 20-30 years so they probably don't even know the exact dates of the Second World War. That experience was something terrible and you can still see the impact of the war in the streets of Berlin, and nearly every German city is a form of living archive. You can see what the war has destroyed and how many buildings are new if compared to Great Britain, France, or Italy. So I came to the astonishing opinion that historical memories are not only connected to archives. Archives feed in a very complicated way into the discourse and the discourse becomes part of the collective memory. Probably [there are] more explicit archives and

¹ See: <https://debatikcenter.net/archive/hypothesis-for-an-ideological-journey>.

more implicit archives. For example, family history: everybody remembers a dead grandmother, a starving mother, and the bad times in 1945. All of this is deeply stored in German collective memory, I would say. I have to guess of course. I cannot prove it. Probably, archives are something *potential* and not something *actual*. It's a little bit like the library you have at home, where you haven't read all the books, or you may have forgotten some of them, it was long ago when you last looked at them. Probably, there is some potential there, there are some options. There is a collection, there is a *reason* why a book is in your library and another book is not. The reason can be different. For example, a book can be there because you are interested in that topic, or just because your grandmother gave it to you, so it also documents a relationship.

In my field, in filmmaking, the weird thing is that many things are preserved, also footage which companies have shot for promotional videos or films, but most are in a terrible shape and there is no solution. Just think that the French Cinematheque, this very important place, hardly has, or only has the money to restore the copies by Bresson or Cocteau because famous companies like YSL give them the money to do it, but they never have the money to restore or to keep in order the work of important filmmakers. Perhaps not even Renoir is preserved in an adequate way. I also have the problem that after 20-30 years some of my film copies and negatives are already decaying and there is no way to find the means to digitalize them in an appropriate way. I don't want to complain about it, it is just a problem that there is this huge hierarchy at work. In the case of paintings or sculptures, when they are older than 100 years and belong to the canon, there is no doubt that archives, at least in Central Europe, will take care of them and

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preserve them. It is always very much a question of what a society thinks should be preserved and should be stored, and should be remembered. But you can continue with the question.

MM: I would like to know something about the use of archival images in films and the shooting of original footage. What do you think is the difference between these two ways of using the image, the basic difference?

HF: In the mid 1980s, when I shot a lot in companies, at production sites, in factories and so on, very often when I went there people said: "Usually the television people put the camera here, here, and here." And that was annoying. I tried to find a better place [to position the camera] but there was no better place! It's a bit comparable to the use of verbal language, of course. A lot of expressions exist already. You cannot invent the syntax or the structure of your discourse every moment. You must somehow find a fresh access to it, otherwise you are just repeating stereotypes. In a similar way, when we documented the so-called smart weapons at the beginning of the century, between 2000 and 2003, very often I had to film something in a company but I was aware that it was not really filming, it was just a way of copying reality with a camera. I didn't add something new to it. In other cases, I used preexisting archival footage to document it, like all the stuff generated inside computers, for instance. In this sense, this is a microscopic field, it is very difficult to find the difference between self-produced and pre-recorded images. When it comes to bigger events [it may be similar]. For example, the fall of the Berlin wall and the fall of the Eastern Block, the end of the two Germanys. I was in Berlin in those days and I don't know how

many thousands of cameras came to Berlin and documented everything. I didn't know what to shoot. I felt so ashamed. I thought, I am a documentarist and such an event occurs, and I don't know what to film. I thought everything must be copied already, and everything is recorded whatever happens. Of course it was not true. Recently I saw a work by a man from East Germany who had filmed all these meetings before Nov. 9th, where people were debating about the future of the GDR, should it be an independent state and so on. You saw this mode of transition, which was nearly unconsciously changing then, and this was a huge document. In retrospect, I know that many things could have been filmed by me, because you would get a different access to them. So, very often pre-existing historical footage comes from a very official point of view. Sometimes some aspects that are overlooked you can contextualize them differently, you can read them differently than they offer themselves to be read or beg to be read, and of course this can mean a lot. Some years ago, I went back to some footage which is quite well-known already.² Alain Resnais used it in *Night and Fog* (*Nuit e bruillard*) (1955). This is probably the only image of a deportation of Jews on a train station platform which was shoot in Westerbork. The head of this German camp in the Netherlands, he asked one of the inmates...ask is not the right word...He commissioned a film and one of the inmates, Rudolf Breslauer, filmed it. Very often one uses this clip for any context, but it is really worth looking at the entire footage. It consists of 90 minutes and perhaps some 45 [minutes] are very interesting. You can read them totally differently, because they show you the victims of the Holocaust not only as victims. You see them in their everyday aspect, in their normality. You can align them to images

² Harun Farocki, *Respite* (2007).

from other people from the 1930s and 40s that you have in mind. Usually you only see them [the Jews] as victims, they are already excluded from our society by being victimized again and again, by repeatedly showing this footage. This is just an example that sometimes preexisting materials can offer a different lecture.

MM: Can you talk about filming *Videograms of a Revolution*?

Harun Farocki: In 1991, a lot of books were published about Romania, mainly in France. They were all about this TV revolution, this fake or *virtual* revolution which did not really take place, but was created synthetically in a studio. Baudrillard, for instance, got a lot of mileage out of it. I became interested in this aspect and met Andrei Ujică, who was an expatriot from Romania. Together we went in Romania to look at the preexisting footage [of the revolution]. The astonishing thing was that, first of all, we thought that if some one hundred thousand people on the 22nd of December knew that they had to go out in the streets, as they did recently in Cairo, this meant that it was a real revolution, it was not a fake revolution, otherwise how would a hundred thousand people know what to do at the same moment? They could sense that there was a crack in the power and that they could change things. [Maybe, things] did not turn out the way they imagined but they understood that it [was] a historical moment. Another astonishing thing was that very, very many moments were documented; very decisive moments, like the moment in which Ceaușescu escaped with his helicopter from the Central Committee building. This was filmed by two cameras. One was shot by a total amateur who had hardly ever filmed something except his family or so, and the other

[camera]...and that was mostly the case, by people who were somehow “filmmakers”; they were cameramen working for TV or sports institutions, keeping a camera at home and in this moment they used it in a different way. The astonishing thing was that we found all these elements, these narrational elements, not atmospheric elements but really decisive exchanges between politicians; somebody captured and tried by revolutionaries, an old Minister, for instance, a Secretary of State. It was really like a typical feature film about historical events. It was a little bit kitsch because it was based on the idea that every decisive moment finds an adequate representation in a filmic scene, which is also a bit uncanny because, let's say, why did this revolution happen in the East? It happened because people came to understand [that] without the guarantee of the Soviet Union they could do whatever they pleased, they could join the West, also, but they didn't know it, it was just an unconscious feeling. Nobody has ever said in a debate: "I think we can change things, the Soviet Union will not intervene anymore". That is not filmed, so not everything is filmed. Many things happen which are not cinematographic scenes, but there [in Romania] because the power was in such a crisis we have this unique scene that lasted over six hours. The head of the *Securitate*, the secret service, and the head of the army are sat down and taking phone calls and communicating with the units and the camera is present, which you could never do in a normal state, only in a state of crisis [all of this] is possible. You became aware of how few things we see in normal life and how many decisive moments occur to which we don't have access, but also in Romania many things were done behind the doors. Behind every door there is another door, and continuously there are all the secrets behind all the things which are revealed. I think that today it would be less

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interesting to reconstruct such an event out of found footage. In those days it was very rare; there were not many cameras in Romania. Today cameras are used by so many people in a more automatic sense, in that they see an event and just point at it. I will give an example. One man [in Romania] was smart enough to film his family while watching the revolutionary announcement on the television. You could see their faces and their amazement. Such things are hardly ever documented. We were looking for one special shot which we never found: How does normal life continue in such a crisis? Let's say, a woman cooking and down there you see the demonstration or the clashes; or people shopping, and then you see the police fighting. These images were all missing and I doubt that you would get them in Egypt now. If you would really ask one hundred thousand people to turn in their footage, I think you would always get nearly the same [footage]. This is, of course, the same problem you have with archives: Who makes the selection? Who has the reason to document something, and why is it stored?

Berlin, 14 June 2011



Fig. 1. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.



Fig. 2. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.

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Fig. 3. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.



Fig. 4. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.



Fig. 5. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.



Fig. 6. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.

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Fig. 7. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.



Fig. 8. Still frame from *Hypothesis for an Ideological Journey* by Marco Mazzi (2011-2020). Courtesy of the artist and DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art.

