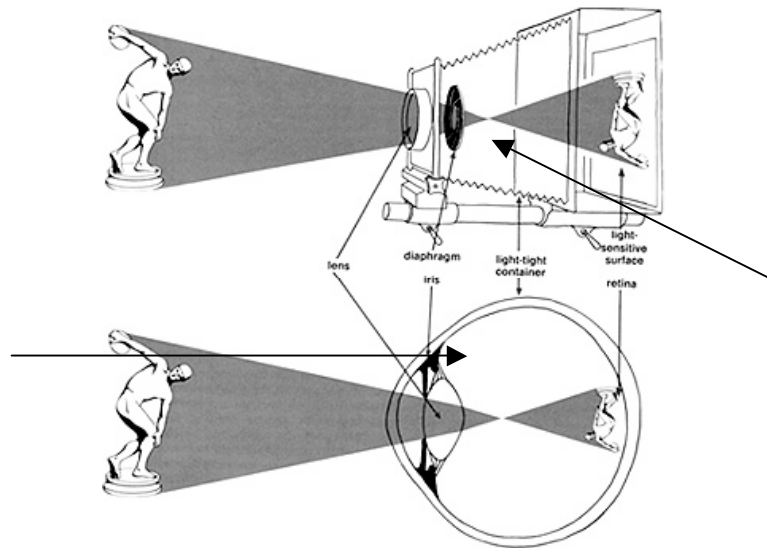


Essays on Camera Work

Chris Kennedy and Kwame Braun In Person

Sunday, April 20, 2008, 7:30 pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts



Tonight's films divulge the buried undercurrents of institutional manipulation, emotional experience and the social politics imbedded within documentary images and image making. Kwame Braun's experimental video essay, *passing girl: riverside—an essay on camera work*, unfolds the complexities of emotion and politics entwined within a simple moment between a young girl and a man with a video camera. *Memo to Pic Desk*, by Chris Kennedy and Anna van der Meulen, takes an idiosyncratic look at the theatricality of vintage news photography using typewritten materials from the archives of Toronto Daily to disclose how moral codes, delinquency, and freewill are pulled into an altered coherence. Harun Farocki's *Respite* resurrects archival footage from 1941 that documents the life of inmates at the Dutch transit camp for Jews in Weterbork, Holland. Shot by an inmate of the camp at the command of an SS officer, the hidden politics of the images create a visual tension of conflicted interests. Farocki, in an ode to silent film, has inserted inter-titles with detailed descriptions of the images as well as his own ruminations of the psychologically complex footage. (Jennifer Blaylock)

Passing Girl: Riverside—an Essay on Camera Work (1998) by Kwame Braun; video, color, sound, 24 minutes, tape from maker

At a street festival in West Africa, a young girl is delighted to discover a video camera trained on her. But her exuberant display is quickly cut short when she recognizes that the cameraman has already lost interest in her. But all is well: he has a document of the moment. Video has tipped the balance in another human interaction, and turned it into a curio.

This experimental video essay probes the complexities of video as a tool for cross-cultural research and representation: it examines, in effect, the politics of its own production. How does the intrusion of this expensive technology distort relationships?

What are the ethnographic filmmaker's responsibilities towards his "subjects?"

Yet perhaps these concerns are themselves distortions, preoccupations that obscure a more balanced encounter, in which human accommodation can flow in both directions.

Memo to Pic Desk (2006) by Chris Kennedy & Anna van der Meulen; 16mm, color, sound, 6.5 minutes, tape from maker

Memo to Pic Desk takes an idiosyncratic look at staging in news photography, using materials from the archives of a Toronto daily. Moral codes, delinquency and autonomy are pulled into an altered coherence, as vintage photos are examined next to their type-written paper trail.

Respite (2007) by Harun Farocki; video, b&w, silent, 40 minutes, tape from maker

Harun Farocki's *Respite* resurrects film footage shot by Rudolf Breslauer, a temporary inmate of the Dutch transit camp for Jews, Westerbork. Commissioned by the camp's SS commandant, Breslauer films the unloading and loading of incoming and outgoing trains, footage of prisoners processing, and devotes much of his footage to the varied work and activities of the inmates. The surviving, mostly unedited footage and Farocki's silent inter-title commentary is ambiguous despite the simplicity of content and the surprising specificity of the filmmaker's research—from a barely visible stamp on a suitcase the titles identify not only the person in the image, but the specific date the footage was taken as well as the woman's place and date of death. What the footage initially seems to show is a rare concentration camp that relatively free of violence, death and an oppressive atmosphere of pain and suffering. Some smiles, a sensed ambience, camp theatrical productions and group exercises would seem to support this impression. But of course like all images, these are produced; Farocki indicates that the under populated camp was in danger of being closed down, so Breslauer's film of productive labor certainly had its own purposes from the Nazi side. [The camp was not under populated—but the process of imprisoning and deporting the Jews living in the Netherlands was nearly completed when the images were shot. Note by Harun Farocki] More interesting though is that, as Farocki correctly points out, the audience's familiarity with 'conventional' images of concentration camps will almost definitely conflict with or overlay the Westerbork documentary, giving the images an aura of death that may not have actually existed there. This burden of knowledge and the weight of accepted representations even make Breslauer's footage seem intrinsically untrustworthy, if not downright blinded, even if these things are not true. (A lone close-up of a sorrowful child's face does seem to speak for what Breslauer purposefully shot around). That Breslauer was a victim, and eventually a fatality, of the concentration camp system yet somehow was able to produce a documentary, however compromised, of the daily make-up of camp life is remarkable in itself. Farocki's appreciation and commentary on this footage not only serves a possible purpose of re-consideration of generally accepted visual understandings and impressions of the concentration camp system, but also speaks for how the possible revelations and new knowledge to be found in Breslauer's work will be forever compromised due to the hyper-prevalence of images that speak counter to this documentary work. (Oct. 3rd, 2007, by d-kaz from <http://www.farocki-film.de/>)