

Vacuum Cleaner or Submachine Gun: A Traveling Cinema for Engineers

HARUN FAROCKI

TRANSLATED BY TED FENDT

According to general practice and perception, a political film is a variation of the bourgeois film: sex film, adventure film, political film. What's needed is to turn film into a variant of politics: analysis, demonstrations, actions, and, in between, films.

If we are going to talk of political film here, then we must talk about the political work out of which it comes and in which it is situated. The film has no title, but the political work to which it contributes does: It is called Technology Campaign.

For about a year, a project group in Berlin has been working on technology. It is concerned with the study and work of the techno-scientific professions. Its first motivation was self-help: students of sociology, philosophy, etc., can understand their political work as part of their curriculum. For scientists and engineers, political work has hitherto been additional work. To do away with the additional work, engineers have begun to politicize their courses. They have investigated the importance of their politicization, and they have seen that politicized engineers can be more dangerous to the base and superstructure of monopolies than the politicized surplus and alibi scholars (sociologists, philosophers, etc.). Therefore, they had to take their discussion to the student body. The discussion about questions like: Who defines science and technology research, or how does it define itself? How does one crush the ideological deception that is dubbed the impartiality of scholarship? What do the educational systems of the technical colleges and Höheren Technischen Lehranstalten (Htl, for short) accomplish, and what do they carry out in terms of planned repression?

We decided to make a tour through a dozen West German cities. In the relevant technical colleges and HtIs, we announced events, discussions, and teach-ins. We prepared a film.

Political speech is flexible; it can start anywhere, even from the slightest, subjectively felt contradiction. Film is rigid; it follows its own concept, which is based

on many existing contradictions.

To make the film more flexible, we shot it on Ampex videotape and played it back on monitors in order not to be tied to one social situation, the movie theater.¹ Moreover, the film was only supposed to provide information that would then stimulate the political discussions. We let four engineers speak; they made statements about their work situation. The film begins and ends with a nondocumentary, agitprop section. An actor says at the beginning: I am a student at an engineering school. My work is threefold. First, I study. Second, I work for the student council on the organization of the study. Third, I work on the connection between the organization of the study and the organization of labor . . . This connection between study and work should be produced by the students using the information from company practice. The adjustment mechanisms that operate in working life should help them determine the importance of adjustment mechanisms in student life. An agitational spot at the end of the film puts it this way:

An actor says: I am a worker and work in a vacuum cleaner factory. My wife could really use a vacuum cleaner. So every day, I take a single component of one with me. At home, I want to assemble the vacuum cleaner. But whatever I do, it always ends up as a submachine gun.

An actor says: I am a student in an engineering school. At the moment, I work in a vacuum cleaner factory. But I think this isn't true and the factory is manufacturing submachine guns for Portugal. We could really use this evidence. So I take a single component home every day. At home, I want to assemble the submachine gun. But whatever I do, it always ends up as a vacuum cleaner.

An actor says: I am an engineer at an electronics company. The workers think we are manufacturing vacuum cleaners. The students think we are manufacturing submachine guns.—This submachine gun can become a useful household item. This vacuum cleaner can become a useful weapon. What we manufacture depends on the workers, students, and engineers.

For a film that is a political film due to its political context, the discussion about aesthetics becomes one about aesthetic effects. At first, we believed the monotony of the thirty-minute statements that are all recorded with the same camera movement—tracking from wide to medium—would make listening to them impossible. But it soon became clear that many students are uninterested in the situation of working engineers and their monotonous reports.

What influence do the screening location and situation have on the reception? Sometimes we would show the film in an assembly hall before an event. Then the students would receive the hierarchically flowing images from the screen just like

they would receive them from a lecturer. Were we to set the equipment up in an open space—for example, in front of the cafeteria—the students would have the courage, which they often lacked in their courses, to learn on their own, and they would interrupt the screening or not feel disturbed during the screening. Sometimes we would arrange the equipment so that it was possible for some of the students to listen, whereas others would not be bothered by us in pursuing their other campus activities. Having portable equipment in no way means that one can determine the situation of reception.

Political agitation cannot consist of unrestrained communication; it must, however, constantly strive to surpass its own limitations. The above-mentioned spot tries this with conventional means; it offers itself up to free interpretation, making it possible to project one's own situation onto it. In this way, it tends to be nonbinding. Better: the film changes every day, the way we changed our lectures and contributions to the discussions every day. Recording with Ampex videotape made this possible in a technical sense; however, we were not organizationally capable of achieving this end.

Had we been able to redo it, we would have made a film about self-organization in learning. The discussions proved that the students were more open to the suggestion to change their situation than to analyze or reproduce it, as the film-statement was trying to do. What speaks in favor of the political effectiveness of learning by example is that the industry demands a certain amount of self-organization from the engineers. Learning by example and self-organized learning mean learning in a conscious fashion. It all depends on an extension of awareness to the goal and motive of the learning situation. And how can one coerce those who have recognized their situation into becoming an engineer in the annihilation and manipulation industry?

Notes

Originally published as Harun Faroqi, "Staubsauger oder Maschinenpistolen: Ein Wanderkino für Technologen," *Film*, 12 December 1968, 1, 7.

1. Ampex is an electronic image-recording technology, a corollary to sound tape. The disadvantage of Ampex is that the footage cannot, as with film, be easily edited; the advantage is—and this is important for this experiment—that new footage can be recorded and immediately played back at any time (no development process) and that one tape can be easily played back on many screens (monitors) simultaneously.