

Chapter 4

Corpse Polemics

The Third World and the Politics of Gore in 1960s West Germany

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In 1969, West German conservative cultural critic Karl-Heinz Bohrer wrote that “terror no longer designates a state of exception but the everyday.”¹ He saw themes of gore, aggression, and violent death dominating both cultural production and true-life reportage. Bohrer described registering an image in *Time* magazine first as a piece of art—“some tomato-red ketchup Pop-picture”—before slowly recognizing it as a photograph of physical carnage from the Vietnam War.² He cited the incineration of three American astronauts in their capsule, the self-immolation of monks in Saigon, the Japanese “suicide-happenings,” and Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Weekend* (1967) as “alternately aesthetic and real events that have become substantively interchangeable.”³ For Bohrer, postcolonial war was coming home to the West in a visual and aesthetic environment so soaked in blood that it threatened to swamp the division between the aesthetic and the real.

Bohrer saw radical artists and the New Left as accomplices in the descent into “everyday terror.”⁴ His central evidence was a 1967 leaflet in which the West Berlin collective Kommune I called for the arson of department stores to recreate the experience of the Vietnam War for a complacent (and thus complicit) West German public. By using shock and provocation as tactics of protest, Bohrer argued, the authors’ “surrealist cynicism terrorizes the nerves of those who can be addressed morally (*die moralisch Ansprechbare*).”⁵ In condemning the Kommune I action as part of an “aestheticization of politics,” though, Bohrer failed to acknowledge the function of a vocabulary of violence and gore in New Left internationalism. New Leftists did not use images of violence in their flyers, films, posters, and magazines simply to “terrorize the nerves” of moral West Germans in a Dadaist spirit of *Bürgerschreck*. Rather, in most cases they employed gore to spark new cognitive identifications or understandings that might turn passive citizens into political actors.⁶ Ideally, they used images and invocations of violent Third World death not only to shock but to enlighten.

Yet Bohrer identifies correctly the fine line trodden by New Leftists as they sought to make meaningful interventions in an ever-bloodier visual environ-

ment. The emergence of what I call “corpse polemics” in the West German political culture of the mid to late 1960s occurred in a vexed space between sensitization and sensationalism, and amid overlapping developments. As activists wielded images of dead or mutilated Third World bodies as political weapons, a commercial boom in hyperviolent action films and soft-core pornography multiplied the number of traumatized and sexually exposed bodies being enjoyed as entertainment. Images of the real dead Third World body, the dead fictive body, and the sexually exhibited First World body shared space (sometimes within the proximity of inches) in the print products of the late 1960s as canny publishers folded political acts of Third World advocacy and sexual transgression into a more passive field of visual consumption. New Leftists formulated their political interventions in a fraught relationship with a visual environment saturated with both disturbing and pleasurable images of violence and gore.

The following analysis turns around three signal moments in the development of corpse polemics in the late 1960s. The first is the furor around the film *Africa Addio* in 1966, which brought the politics of representing the dead Third World body into open discussion in West Germany for the first time. The second is the emerging left-wing critique of violent cinema, especially of the so-called “Sado-Western” wave beginning in 1967. Finally, Harun Farocki’s two Vietnam films, made in 1968 and 1969, serve to reflect a new suspicion of the power of the image by some members of the New Left and a desire to move beyond corpse polemics as a mode of political enlightenment.

Africa Addio: The Rhetoric of the Dead Body

On 31 July 1966 the West Berlin newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* advertised the premiere of a new film “more exciting and interesting than detective and spy films,” promising “images of an unimaginable reality never seen before.” The name of the film was *Africa Addio* (1966), also known as *Goodbye Africa* and, in its American release, *Africa Blood and Guts*. The principal filmmaker was Gualtiero Jacopetti, who had made his name with the internationally successful 1962 film *Mondo Cane*, a so-called “shockumentary” featuring eccentric and often brutal human practices from around the world.⁷ He had spent three years in Africa shooting *Africa Addio* with his collaborator Franco Prosperi. As in *Mondo Cane*, Jacopetti privileged the gruesome, including extended sections devoted to the dismemberment of savannah animals and long aerial shots of Arabs massacred during the 1964 Zanzibar revolution. According to the opening text, the filmmakers intended *Africa Addio* as a “document of [Africa’s] death throes (*Todeskampf*).”⁸ The overall message was that the end of colonial rule had initiated the process of Africa’s self-destruction.

Banned in England because of its graphic images of on-screen death, the West German Film Rating Board (Filmbewertungsstelle Wiesbaden) lauded the

film for the potentially edifying effect of witnessing scenes of brutality. Their official statement read:

The viewer receives insight into the horrifying and ongoing problems of the African continent and encounters the entity of the African human (*mit dem Wesen des afrikanischen Menschen*) in a new, often startling way. The hard shock effect of the film provokes an unfamiliar, yet possibly beneficial, insight into the reality of the black continent, even when the film's bias is evident.⁹

Based on this positive analysis, the board designated the film as “valuable” (*wertvoll*), freeing it from luxury taxes in the largest West German states.¹⁰

The film premiered on 2 August 1966 at the Astor Theatre in West Berlin and was met with unexpectedly forceful protest. Whistling and shouting “turn it off” (*Absetzen*) throughout the screening, a group of African, Haitian, and West German students stormed the stage after the scene of the execution of a Congolese partisan by American-led mercenaries. Nigerian student Adekunle Ajala physically held the curtains closed, and the film stopped rolling.¹¹ Eight students were arrested. On a second day of protest, between six and eight hundred students and workers demonstrated in front of the theater, resulting in forty-three arrests.¹² Damage to seats and theater curtains and the fear of further demonstrations led theater owners to discontinue the film. The leaflets and letters generated around the action and the subsequent trial illustrate two key aspects of the emerging protest genre of corpse polemics. Representations of the murdered body of the “other” (African, Vietcong, Jew) became a goad to articulating outrage and resentment, and the right to speak in the name of the victim emerged as the defining source of political and moral authority.

The author of the leaflet distributed by the leading leftist student group, the Socialist German Students Union (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, SDS), was Bernard Pierre-Louis, a foreign student who would later die fighting the Duvalier regime in his native Haiti. Pierre-Louis argued that *Africa Addio*'s ostensible humanitarianism was, in fact, sadism. “Blood-thirstiness, barbarity, murder, corpses,” he wrote, were “the themes that satisfy the camera of the Italian director.”¹³ He called for direct action to prevent that themes of gore be “elevated into ‘humanitarian’ categories.” To Pierre-Louis, the film reflected the perversity of European colonialist claims to morality: “What colonialists call the expansion of their own culture, what the colonialists call the creation of a welfare society, means dehumanization, rape of cultural values and humiliation for Africans.”¹⁴ Pierre-Louis did not let Third World violence stay in Africa but brought it into West German society: “*Africa Addio* calls on its Berlin viewers to vent the violence incited by the film against students, interns, and soldiers, indeed, on all people in Berlin of black skin color. *Africa Addio* calls out for human slaughter.”

The heat of Pierre-Louis's reaction likely stemmed in part from the troubling realities, and frequently accompanying violence, of being black in West Germany in the 1960s. In the early years of the decade, West African students in many West German cities complained of being regularly insulted in public and receiving no assistance from the police.¹⁵ In 1959 a woman assaulted a Rhodesian student verbally in a Hanover train station, screaming, "Nigger, go home (*Nigger geh heim*)!"¹⁶ In 1961 two African students reported being beaten up in a Bonn bar and again receiving no help from the police.¹⁷ In late 1958 in Mannheim, it was the police themselves that beat Humphrey George, an African intern at an electrical company, to the point of permanent brain damage after falsely accusing him of stealing a sweater in a department store.¹⁸ A 1962 sociological study carried out by an Indian-born sociologist concluded that foreign students faced systematic discrimination, with incidents increasing according to the darkness of their skin color.¹⁹ As unarmed objects of "foreign aid," non-German black students in the 1960s may have been more susceptible to direct discrimination and racial violence from the West German population than African-American GIs, the other large black population in the country, the brunt of whose share of racist hostility came from their white GI colleagues.²⁰

Pierre-Louis's lived experience of racism in West Germany likely contributed to the rhetorical register of his writing, which tended toward a language circling around the physical, and the polemical invocation of other murdered bodies, rather than remaining within the realm of abstract principles. To strengthen his claim, Pierre-Louis inventoried other pariah groups murdered with popular and state sanction, writing that "to remain passive toward 'Africa Addio' means to be complicit in the murder of six million Jews, in the mass execution of Congolese, Vietnamese mothers and children, to name only a few examples."²¹ Establishing a tone followed by many future activists, Pierre-Louis did not attempt to express his anger through ethical-political abstractions but by localizing his polemic in the figure of the dead body.

The *Africa Addio* protesters came to trial in January 1968, a year and a half after the contested premiere. By this point, white West German activists had also experienced police brutality and civilian insult, bringing them closer to the position from which Pierre-Louis had written in 1966.²² The critical interceding event was the 2 June 1967 murder of West German student Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer during a protest against the West Berlin visit of the Iranian shah. To the shock of leftist students, many West Berlin residents reacted to the incident with bloodlust rather than sympathy.²³ One bystander told a participant in Ohnesorg's funeral procession that "fifty demonstrators, not just one, should have been shot to death so that peace and order could finally prevail."²⁴ Elderly passers-by berated other demonstrators, saying that "they haven't shot enough of you yet," and "you should all be sent to the concentration camp (*KZ*), in the gas chamber."²⁵ At the 2 June demonstration itself, one witness reported an onlooker

shouting in Berlin dialect, “You all need to be gassed; it was probably just your relatives that got gassed, right (*wohl nur deine Verwandten vergast, wa?*)?”²⁶

West German students found themselves addressed as a pariah class subject to the contempt and death threats of the civilian population. A 1967 satirical cartoon of a cocktail party “thirty years in the future” summed up the feeling of convergence between racial minorities and leftist students. “What’s the difference between a hippie (*Gammler*) and a Negro?” a guest asks, and answers: “Simple, the Negro doesn’t come out in the wash!”²⁷ On trial for the *Africa Addio* protest, West German New Leftists felt that they spoke from an experience of everyday persecution in 1968 broadly analogous to Pierre-Louis in 1966.

Like Pierre-Louis, West German *Africa Addio* protesters used a graphic language of violence and invoked the murdered Jews of the Holocaust to lend rhetorical force to their argument. When the former Nazi Party membership of a prospective judge became public, protesters released a flyer refusing to stand trial, saying that the judge “should find himself other Jews (*soll sich andere Juden suchen*).”²⁸ A protest flyer read: “today, we are to be dealt with by a former backwoods-Aryan (*Provinz-Arier*), who still chews on the fascist placenta in the movie theatre.”²⁹ The authors of the flyer were graphic in their language and imagery:

Anyone can come along and say: I was a member of the NSDAP, I have the qualifications to judge the film “Africa Addio.” I know the material already—it was all there before: Slaughter, stab, snap, burn, sack, spear, cut, rape, smoke out, massacre, torture, cut off hands, knock off heads, kill nigger-jews, murder, execution-games.³⁰

Protesters equated Jews murdered by their parents’ generation of Germans with the Africans murdered by Western mercenaries. At the same time, they equated themselves with those persecuted, claiming a position of victimhood from which they could speak, as Pierre-Louis had done, with the moral authority granted by that status.³¹ This tactic was ambiguous; New Left activists invoked the murdered Jews only to displace them again through spurious comparison to their own predicament, or analogy to postcolonial Africa.³²

A 1968 SDS press release about the *Africa Addio* trial again made reference to the Holocaust while simultaneously relativizing and instrumentalizing it. The authors began by demanding that *Africa Addio* demonstrators receive the same amnesty given to those who protested the screening of a new film by Veit Harlan, director of the anti-Semitic *Jud Süß* (1940), in the 1950s. The leaflet drew comparisons between the two films, writing that “all the world knew what importance the film *Jud Süß* played in the preparations for the extermination of the Jews of Europe.”³³ They felt that *Africa Addio* served a similar function: “Incitement of racial hatred against the people prepares the masses in the metropole psychologically for the violent suppression of emerging national and

social liberation struggles in Africa.”³⁴ In the schema of the protesters, Africans were the “new Jews,” placed outside of the realm of human and thus able to be killed. Showing the murder of black people as a form of entertainment, they contended, both reflected and furthered their exclusion. *Africa Addio* proved that the production, control, and display of images demanded the attention of an activist New Left.

Didactic Gore: The Mutilated Body as Legalistic Truth

Bernard Pierre-Louis cited the Vietnam War in his 1966 *Africa Addio* protest flyer. In the late 1960s, anti-war protesters regularly turned to gory images as tools of didactic enlightenment. If images could prepare the population for acceptance of atrocities being committed “in their name,” as in the case of *Jud Süß* and *Africa Addio*, then presumably they could be used in reverse: to turn a population against the military undertaking with which they were complicit. This strategy sought to reveal a truth through images compelling enough to reorient the political position of the viewer.

Exposing the napalm-damaged face and body was an especially common tactic in campaigns against the Vietnam War. In 1966, *Pardon* magazine titled a series of pictures of napalm victims meaningfully, “The Truth About Vietnam.”³⁵ In December of the same year, the Ça Ira club in West Berlin translated and circulated a pamphlet originally produced by the Berkeley, California-based group “United Committee against the War.” The pamphlet featured a photograph of a dead Vietnamese woman and child in lieu of a headline, accompanied by a caption: “A mother, a child and napalm.”³⁶ A youth magazine, *Elan*, published in West Germany but funded by East Germany, prefaced its March 1968 series of full-page graphic images of disfigured children’s faces with the statement:

Dear readers! We deliberated a long time about whether we could show you the pictures on the following pages. They are horrifying (*grauenerregend*). But in a situation in which responsible U.S. politicians call for the use of atomic weapons, we believe that we must show the full horror of the criminal U.S. war in Vietnam.³⁷

The author casts the images of scarred and injured children as the symbolic counterpart to the American atomic bomb: weapons to be deployed only when needed. Unauthorized posters created for the international art exhibition Documenta in Kassel in 1968 used grisly humor as an enlightenment tactic, showing close-ups of napalmed flesh with the caption: “U.S. art. National teamwork. Medium: Napalm on Skin and meat of *coloured* people.”³⁸ In the exhibition itself, American artist Paul Thek displayed animal flesh under glass as a straightforward commentary on the Vietnam War.³⁹ In a similar mode of dark irony,

protest signs showed close-ups of partially dissolved Vietnamese faces with the slogan “Napalm—this is how the U.S. saves face in Vietnam.”⁴⁰

Film theorist Bill Nichols has remarked how documentary film seems to follow the legal notion of habeas corpus in representing the truth, “both insisting on the principle that we must be presented with the body. Witness and testimony, deposition and refutation, accusation and denial—all depend on direct encounter and physical presence.”⁴¹ Protesters applied a similar principle in their attempted acts of enlightenment. New Leftists used the mutilated body as legalistic evidence most transparently at the 1967 Stockholm Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal. In a moment widely circulated as a photograph, prosecutors held up a naked, napalm-scarred Vietnamese boy as evidence against the US military in the course of the proceedings.⁴² The body, it seemed, was the ultimate means of truth-telling.

For all its effectiveness, the display of traumatized Third World bodies often involved a trade-off.⁴³ When the individual body became a symbol of larger suffering, individual identity tended to vanish. The case of the Iranian dissident Parviz Edalat-Manesch illustrates the dynamic well. Through the 1960s, Iranian activists in West Germany repeatedly reproduced an image of Edalat-Manesch’s tortured body, shown to below the waist, including his badly bruised or bloody buttocks.⁴⁴ Gory images served an important purpose in the Iranian dissidents’ campaign against the repressive shah regime, personalizing their demands by connecting abstract rights talk to the (often abused or even murdered) features of individual human faces and bodies. Edalat-Manesch’s most prominent appearance was on the back cover of West German-based Iranian intellectual Bahman Nirumand’s ironically titled 1967 book *Persia, Model Developing Country, or the Dictatorship of the Free World* (Figure 4.1), which would ultimately sell over 100,000 copies.⁴⁵

The image sat alongside a photograph of a mutilated face, and another of two men, blindfolded, bound, and possibly dead. As was the norm, Edalat-Manesch’s image appeared without his name. Tellingly, activists paired the image with Edalat-Manesch’s name only once: to accompany a 1964 letter he wrote from prison.⁴⁶ In this case, they also made a critical edit by cutting the image above the buttocks. The choice to remove the gore from the image suggests an apparent antinomy between the damaged body and the individual voice. Including the normally hidden or obscene buttocks heightened the visual effect when the dissident was serving as a mute metonym for the shah regime’s oppression. Yet when he spoke in his own voice, activists sanitized the image, restoring individual dignity while diminishing its power to shock.

The authors of a 1964 article in a self-published West Berlin student magazine observed that in James Bond movies, though villains were killed by the dozens, the only ones that took on a distinct identity, as opposed to dying anonymously, were those for whom the killing was prolonged. Perversely, torture became “the only concession to human dignity, to individuality,” separating them

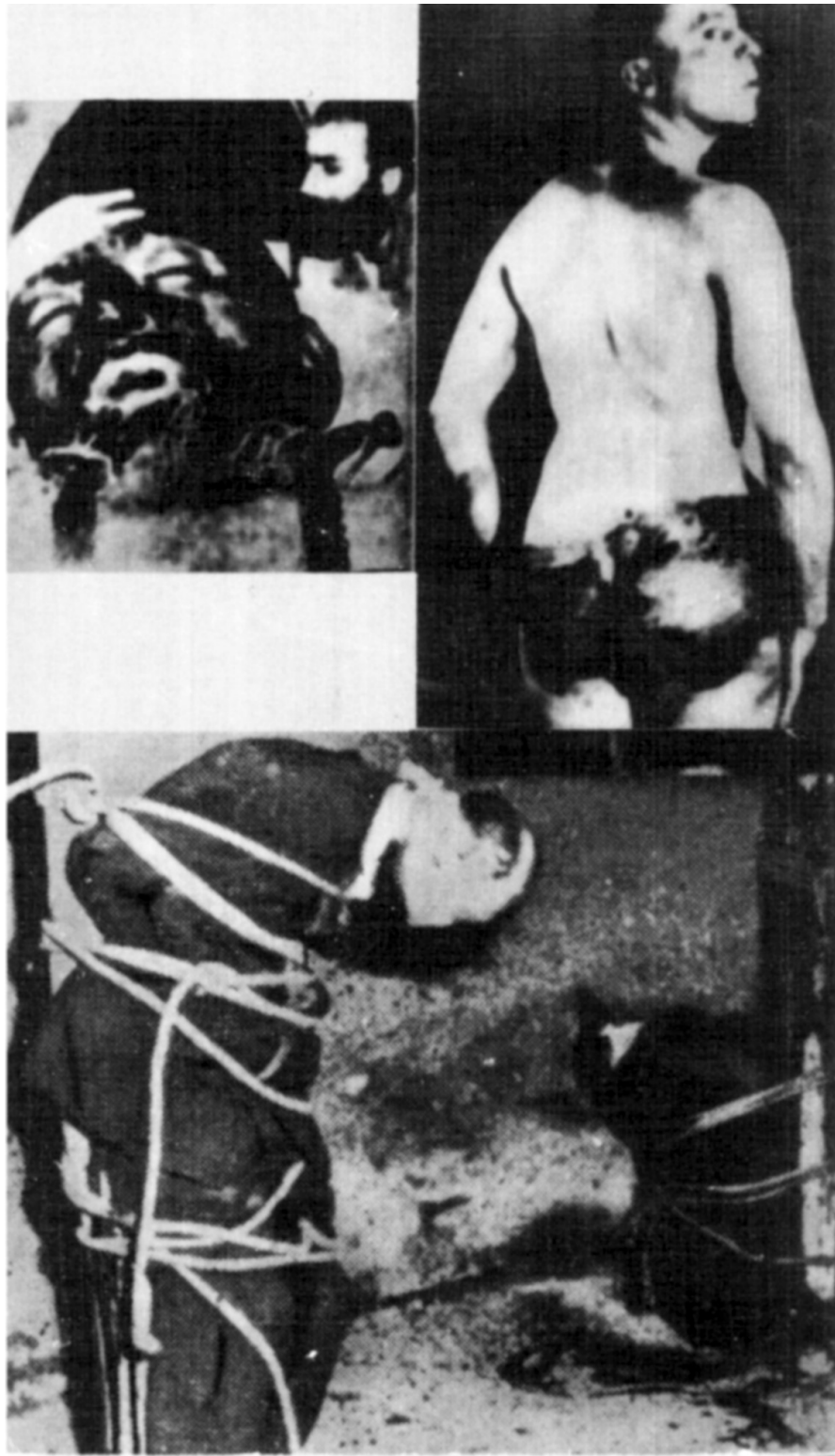


Figure 4.1. Back Cover of Bahman Nirumand's 1967 book *Persien, Modell eines Entwicklungslandes, oder die Diktatur der freien Welt*. Courtesy of Rowohlt Verlag.

from “from face- and name-less number of the statistic-bodies, whose only task was to give scenes background through their aesthetically directed deaths.”⁴⁷ The case of Edalat-Manesch shows how this dilemma could play out within leftist protest culture: at times, members of the Third World entered the sphere of circulation and gained their identity as tortured bodies but without accompanying names or opportunities for self-articulation.

The inclusion of the buttocks in the image of Edalat-Manesch also points toward the slippage between gory imagery and pornography. A 1966 review of *Africa Addio* had referred to the “perverse thrill” of “bathing visually in blood and disgust” offered by the film.⁴⁸ By the late 1960s one could see images of the dead and injured Third World body more and more next to images of First World sexuality. From 1965 on, the covers of *konkret*, the leading magazine of the counterculture, which sold over 200,000 copies monthly by 1967, consistently combined images of postcolonial violence with near-nude women.⁴⁹ The mixture led to such paired headlines as: “Student Love: Striptease and Mathematics” next to “Black Hell: Congo”;⁵⁰ “Sex Party of Four” next to “Indonesia: 80,000 Murders”;⁵¹ and “Sick for Sex” next to “3 Months with the Vietcong Rebels.” The last showed a woman in a push-up bra and black sunglasses next to a photo of a Vietnamese youth with a spear against his throat.⁵² *Pardon* magazine took the juxtaposition to the point of satire with a two-page spread of a Greek bathing suit model cavorting topless on the beach with speech bubbles above her head (along with a photomontage image of a beaten political prisoner) talking about torture and human rights abuses in Greece.⁵³

It is difficult to generalize about how *konkret* readers received this mixture of images. The sole reader’s letter on the theme complained in 1966 that the use of graphic cover stories about sex suggested a degeneration in the readership to the “naïve” and “cheap” and gave fodder to reactionaries who equated “all that comes from the Left” with “immorality” and “sensationalism” (*Sensationsgier*).⁵⁴ Some buyers of *konkret* likely merely tolerated the sensational imagery for the sake of article content, while others may have bought it specifically for visual titillation. Publisher Klaus Rainer Röhl publicly defended the combination. He pointed out that it was gory photos from the Congo conflict and articles about youth sexuality that prompted the most strenuous attempts by conservative federal officials to censor the publication.⁵⁵ Such facts may have heightened the sense that it was an inherently politically progressive act to both print and consume those stories and images that made the authorities uncomfortable.

In a more cynical moment, Röhl referred in his 1974 memoirs to the “gruesome mixture” of “sex and social issues, joie de vivre with indignation at injustice” as the “Röhl blend” and his “recipe for success.”⁵⁶ The composition of the covers was especially important, he wrote, and could determine a swing in sales of between 20,000 and 30,000 copies.⁵⁷ In relying on women’s bodies and images of gore to sell product, the standard-bearer of the left-wing counterculture closely followed the marketing style of the right-wing Springer tabloid

press, which also routinely printed explicit images of car accidents and military violence alongside semi-nude models. Though authors regularly criticized the reporting bias of the Springer press in the pages of *konkret*, their formal visual similarity suggests a cross-political consensus in the late 1960s on the availability of the bodies of white women and dead non-Europeans for voyeuristic consumption. By early 1969 feminist critiques had begun to emerge about the sexist representations of women in *konkret*, but the depiction of non-white corpses remained unchallenged.⁵⁸

The display of injured or dead Third World bodies, often naked—as in the young Vietnamese napalm victim and the Iranian dissident—for the purpose of political enlightenment involved an obvious paradox. Activists made the demand for dignity by displaying and circulating images of indignity. In the late 1960s the proliferation of images of gore made it more difficult to defend the simple display of the body as a political tactic. The multiplication of images from Vietnam, combined with the continued public support for the war, also presented activists with a dilemma: what to do when “the truth” has been exposed visually, and the act of revelation had no effect? When public indifference not only persists but deepens into a perverse enjoyment of the horrific violence? This became more of a disturbing possibility as images of the Third World violence appeared literally side by side with the pornographic. Discussions of film and the sadistic pleasures of on-screen violence most directly addressed questions about the effect of images, and their defensibility as tools of politics.

Texas Addio: The Left Critique of Sadistic Cinema

On 21 April 1967 *Africa Addio* returned quietly to West Berlin, opening in eleven theaters that Friday and eight more the following week.⁵⁹ The advertisement for the film’s re-premiere sat next to another much larger advertisement for a 1966 movie called *Django, der Rächer* (Django the Avenger)⁶⁰ Originally titled *Texas Addio*, the film shared *Africa Addio*’s themes of gore and shocking violence. It came to West Germany as part of a wave of Italian Westerns, known in the US as “spaghetti Westerns” and in West Germany as “Sadowesterns” (Figure 4.2), which distinguished themselves by their graphic realistic violence and departure from the morality narratives of the US Western.⁶¹ Though seemingly peripheral to the question of the political use of gory images, the discussion around Italian Westerns and violent cinema illuminates the broader cultural context within which the New Left formed its strategies.

Leftist West German film critics tended to see the Italian Westerns as both expressing and fueling an ascendant social-political climate of aggression, sadism, and violence. Writing about Italian Westerns along with James Bond films and Jacopetti’s Mondo documentaries in *Pardon*, critic Eckhart Schmidt called sadism “the new feeling of life.”⁶² An East German-funded magazine declared



Figure 4.2. “Sadism: The New Feeling of Life,” *Pardon* magazine, March 1967.

the “sado-films” the “ideological response” to the “present state of imperialism ... The ‘democratic mask’ has long since been removed, the Americans speak openly of ‘power’ or a little more delicately, of ‘interests’ that they defend in Vietnam.”⁶³ Leftist critic and impresario Uwe Nettelbeck was shocked by the “joy” that Italian Western director Sergio Leone seemed to take in portraying violence, and critic Werner Kließ saw Italian Westerns as entering the realm

of the pornographic, showing the “gunfight as an act of love” (*Revolverkampf als Liebesakt*).⁶⁴ The violent and the pornographic shared screen space in West German theaters as a sex film wave beginning in 1967 shattered previous taboos on depictions of sexuality.⁶⁵ Humorist Chlodwig Poth satirized the commercial utility of dead Third World bodies in 1967. He imagined a producer instructing his director to put “two or three dead bodies” in his film, saying: “There was a big stink with *Africa Addio* about the corpse. The best promotional gag in the world! Nothing more. Nothin’ better could happen to us than a big fuss about murder, with student demonstrations, boycott threats and all of that.”⁶⁶ Corpses were not only weapons of political enlightenment but had become increasingly common objects of entertainment.

Film critic Helmut Färber was concerned that film viewers could not distinguish between real-life and fictional deaths. To the filmgoer, he wrote, “[t]he filmed corpse of an actual person is only a film-corpse. The filmed death of a real person is only a film-death ... As one who is filmed, the actually murdered is nothing more than any of the cinema-dead, that stand up again and have their wounds taken off in make-up.”⁶⁷ Färber observed that the repeated consumption of filmed violence led to indifference; what is “intended to escalate our disgust turns instead into blasé routine.”⁶⁸ Film violence had an apparently paradoxical effect: “it simultaneously deadens and adrenalizes (*Sie stumpfen ab und putschen auf zugleich*),” leaving the viewer ultimately unaffected.⁶⁹ Connecting these observations to New Left practice, Färber wrote that the adrenalizing/anesthetic effect of violent images was “one of the reasons that it is only counterproductive to demonstrate against the Vietnam War with images of battle and destruction.”⁷⁰ Färber suggested an entropy of the effect of violent imagery. Even if powerful at first, the shock wore off with time, leaving the distillate of perverse pleasure. Footage of war carried no more inherent force of mobilization than a fictional Western gunfight.

“Express Vietnam Here”: Harun Farocki’s Protest Films

It was New Left filmmakers that most explicitly confronted the implications and risks of using violent imagery as a tactic of protest. Inspired by Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard, they sought to intervene into contemporary politics through the medium of film without submitting to the manipulative techniques of mainstream moviemaking.⁷¹ The West German center of political filmmaking was the German Film and Television Academy (Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie; DFFB) in West Berlin, which opened in 1967 and was occupied by its leftist students for several days and renamed the Dziga Vertov Academy in late May 1968. In two films about the Vietnam War made at the DFFB, Harun Farocki, one of the academy’s most active students, engaged directly with questions of the political use and responsibility of the image.

A member of what one contemporary called the “Godard-cult” at the academy, Farocki followed the program laid out in Godard’s 1967 film *Loin de Vietnam* (Far from Vietnam), made in collaboration with Chris Marker.⁷² The influential journal *Filmkritik*, which Farocki would co-edit after 1971, printed the spoken text from *Loin de Vietnam* in full. One section read: “Rather than shower it with high-mindedness, the best that I can do for Vietnam is to allow it to seize me, to make clear for myself what place it has in our everyday life, everywhere.”⁷³ Farocki attempted to follow a similar injunction in his two Vietnam films of 1968 and 1969. As a character in his 1982 film would describe it, the goal was “to replace the images from Vietnam with images from here, express Vietnam here.”⁷⁴

The first of Farocki’s films, made in early 1968, was entitled *White Christmas*. With black-comedic technique, Bing Crosby’s vocals played over kitsch images of Christmas (Santa Claus’s sled, children being given war toys) that transition into images of bombs falling over a landscape and the placard “The Americans think of the Vietnamese at Christmas too. They drop down ‘explosive toys’ for them from the sky.” A toy house bursts into flames on-screen. Another placard reads, “Today our Savior is born,” followed by the image of a Vietnamese mother with a dead child, and the placard “Tortured—murdered—resurrected!” and the image of an armed Vietnamese youth emerging from a water hole. The final scene of the movie, from television, shows a quiet street in which the Vietcong suddenly burst from the bushes, ending Crosby’s song.⁷⁵ The film plays with a Christian vocabulary of redemption and resurrection. It also makes the jump, as Klaus Kreimeier notes, from the Soviet-bloc slogan of “peace for Vietnam” to the more radical Third-Worldist celebration of the guerrilla and the call for “victory in Vietnam.”⁷⁶ In making bloody geopolitical realities the uninvited guest to the insular dream world of Christmastime, the film also resembled the 1966 SDS demonstration on the main West Berlin shopping street where 200 students chanted “Christmas wishes come true, bombs made in the USA.”⁷⁷

The film’s central image is what Farocki later called the “Vietnamese Anti-Madonna,” the woman holding the dead child who is figuratively resurrected as a guerrilla fighter. Farocki describes an event during the making of the film that affected his understanding of the use of images and helped move him toward a new political technique. While making the film, he showed the anti-Madonna photograph to Holger Meins, a fellow student and future Red Army Faction member. Meins’s response was to take a stick of charcoal and “heighten the contrast between the woman and the background. He then began to shade her face, saying something along the lines of: if you’re going to do it at all, then you must exaggerate a little, her suffering has to be really visible.”⁷⁸ Farocki read this as a subtle critique on the part of Meins. He seemed to suggest mistrust, Farocki recalls, for “the political rhetoric we employed at the time,” implying that “we ourselves had been exploiting Vietnam, by making it our thing.”⁷⁹ Meins had a point; indeed, the image could have easily come out of one of the right-wing

Springer tabloids despised by the New Left. The Springer-owned *Bild-Zeitung* had published a “Vietnamese Madonna” photograph of its own in April 1967, portraying a woman cradling a dead child with its head lolled back and its mouth hanging open. The caption read, “The war in Vietnam daily claims innocent victims.”⁸⁰ Farocki’s tactic in *White Christmas* was to take such a Pietà image, with its static statement of depoliticized moral tragedy, and inject it with dynamism. While the tabloid presented the image as a lamentable dead end, Farocki supplied a sequel in guerrilla struggle, appropriating and repositioning the image in a new narrative leading toward potential Vietcong victory. Yet as Meins suggested, he accomplished this move at the expense of transforming individual suffering into an iconic station on the road to collective redemption. Responding to Meins’s critique, Farocki’s next film would use a different tack, moving from pop appropriation and guerrilla boosterism to Brechtian pedagogy.

Farocki’s 1969 film *Nicht lösches Feuer* (Inextinguishable Fire) went beyond the simple salvaging and recoding of images from the mainstream media to find a way forward from the back-and-forth of corpse polemics. It begins with Farocki sitting at a table speaking into the camera, reading a report written by a Vietnamese survivor of a napalm attack. Establishing the strategy of the film, Farocki asks the camera: “How can we show you the deployment of napalm and the nature of the burns it causes? If we show you pictures of napalm wounds, you’ll close your eyes. You’ll close your eyes to the images, then you’ll close your eyes to the memory, then you’ll close your eyes to the facts.” An off-camera voice intones that a cigarette burns at around 500 degrees and napalm at around 3,000 degrees, as Farocki takes a cigarette from an ashtray and presses it into the flesh of his arm. The camera zooms slowly in. Farocki seeks to reach the viewer here by filming the actual act of burning, rather than the effects of it, and personalizing the pain by inflicting it on a well-dressed man speaking fluent German, rather than a geographically distant Third World body.⁸¹

The larger part of the film works to transmit the means by which the US produces napalm without either moral revulsion or resistance on the part of the producers. A sign on a piece of paper designates the set as “Dow Chemical” and the film proceeds, through a series of wooden, non-naturalistic dialogues, to show how each sector of the company takes charge of different aspects of production. One department ensures that the substance is sticky, another that it maintains high temperature, and so on. The theme of the film, repeated more than once by the film’s characters, is that “[a] chemical company is like a box of building blocks. You can create the entire world with it.” The division of labor within industrial production, the film demonstrates, inoculates those within it from realizing the larger implications of their work.

Farocki conceived the film in the context of a “technology campaign” at the DFFB by which, as critic Kließ described it in 1969, film students “sought to enlighten engineering students about the political nature of their [engineering] work and about the [fallacy of the] concept of the so-called ‘ethical neutrality’

(*Wertfreiheit*) of research.”⁸² In 1968 Farocki had produced a film, *Wanderkino für Ingenieure* (Traveling Cinema for Engineers), that similarly sought to enlighten engineering students about their implication in political processes. He took the film to ten towns that year, screening it outdoors and in auditoriums at technical universities.⁸³ Disappointed at the lack of response from students, Farocki made *Inextinguishable Fire* with funding from the public television station WDR, where it aired first on 27 July 1969.⁸⁴

Critics received Farocki’s film warmly at the year’s film festivals.⁸⁵ In a dissenting review, *Die Welt* objected that factory workers rather than festivalgoers were the film’s real audience, but Farocki defended television as a medium for work that dealt with long-term problems such as the relationship between technology and politics.⁸⁶ As the number of West German households with television sets tripled from 17.6 percent in 1960 to 80.3 percent in 1974, the television was also becoming a far more reliable conduit to the attention of the working class than the direct factory visit.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The politics of gore relate to recent scholarly discussions about how New Leftists operated within a media landscape dominated increasingly by images rather than the spoken or written word.⁸⁸ Social scientists and historians have observed that activists, though critical of the mainstream media, were nonetheless caught in a relationship of dependency with television and the press for exposure. Some argue that this dependency helped drive activists to ever more spectacular and provocative forms of protest.⁸⁹ Sometimes this strategy was self-conscious; Dieter Kunzelmann of Kommune I claims to have recognized in the early 1960s “how the media could be put to use, so that despite the negative cast of their reporting, they would still spread and make known the ideas that they intended to suppress or silence.”⁹⁰ The didactic use of gore by protesters followed this logic. They tried to create a visual sensation large enough to register in a public sphere already awash in violent images. Yet as Oskar Negt, Jürgen Habermas’s assistant in Frankfurt in the 1960s, has pointed out, relying on subverting the mainstream media ultimately “surrendered to the rules of the dominant public sphere that one was struggling against ... exhausting itself in that one’s own success became measured in the amount of attention created by certain actions in the media.”⁹¹ Both Negt and Habermas saw 1970s left-wing terrorism as emerging in part from a destructive symbiosis with mainstream media that demanded ever more radical acts to keep the attention of consumers.⁹²

Images of the near-nude capture and later death by hunger strike of Farocki’s former collaborator Holger Meins were paradigmatic instances of voyeurism for the West German media.⁹³ Farocki remarked with bitter irony that the widely circulated image of Meins’s emaciated corpse followed the very Christian icon-

ographic conventions that he had criticized in Farocki's first Vietnam film.⁹⁴ Farocki's own collaboration with public television and his "technology campaign" serve as examples of how New Left activists intervened in the West German public sphere without adopting or relying on the sensationalist methods of mainstream media and entertainment. In *Nicht lösches Feuer*, Farocki found a way to illuminate the mundane processes that led to atrocity rather than relying on the visual impact of the atrocity itself. What this strategy lost in immediate shock value it gained in demonstrating how seemingly benign everyday mentalities facilitated injustice. It also suggested that awareness—and not only transgressive violence—could begin the reform of an oppressive system from within.

