"To Set One's Developmental History Within the Frame of the World's Course"
A conversation with Peter Weiss on the motives behind his *Aesthetics of Resistance*

Harun Farocki: You said that a trip to Vietnam, while it was being bombed, gave you the impetus for your book *Aesthetics of Resistance*.

Peter Weiss: Because in Vietnam we saw what the consciousness of participating in cultural life means. There were theater groups that penetrated right up to the farthest reaches of the front lines and read classical poems and performed classical operas. That was a foundation for the population; they weren't left hanging in the air, they knew what they were fighting for, they had a strong relationship to the past, to the family, to the collective of the village. By "culture" I don't mean here a culture that encompasses only the arts, but rather the very ground of consciousness, the ground of life for people who reflect and are deeply bound up with their existence.

F: The book *Aesthetics of Resistance* is a novel made of documents, and through a few questions I want to work out how literally the novel is to be taken.

W: To begin with, all the figures in the book are authentic. But by taking figures and also calling them by their real names, I'm not thereby saying that this is a biography of these people. These figures serve as a scaffolding; on the other hand, they say nothing—at least I believe so—that they could not have said.

F: In the second part of the book, we meet Rosner, an emissary of the Comintern living underground in Sweden during the Second World War and publishing a newspaper. When it says: "The arched front door with the number 77, shabby stucco-work, above it a few steps, a hinged door with glass panes, a hallway at whose end the staircase spiraled around the central pillar, the doorbell to the right"—are these authentic details?

W: Rosner in particular has a great deal of historical substance. It took me years to find out where Rosner had lodged. He was so hidden that only a few knew where. Not even the members of the central committee of the Swedish party, with whom I spoke, could tell me exactly where he had lived. When the manuscript was already in proofs, I found an old Swedish comrade who could show me the house. It was under renovation, but I still managed to get in and could see the apartment with his room, which was no larger than a closet.

F: The name of the first-person narrator is never given.

W: The name is never given, but in many autobiographical novels no name appears. One doesn't describe oneself—this is what I look like, this is what I'm called. There must be a center to the narration, and that is this "I," and this "I" contains many of my own experiences and my own reflections, but it is also a novelistic figure. Of course the actions this "I" performs are not identical to the actions I, as Peter Weiss, carried out at that time. For in this character the experiences I gained only in later years are condensed, and the "I" articulates things I could not possibly have articulated then. I had to work this out for myself, and this working-out is also the theme of the book. As the "I" of the book constantly labors to try to find out what situation it is in, the work is performed that the writer, too, has performed.

F: Your father was a factory owner; the "I" of your book is a worker. Did you, like your narrator, have to fight to acquire cultural knowledge?

W: Very much so. At fourteen, fifteen, I was torn out of school by Nazism, and I did not subordinate myself to my family but chose the profession of painter. Being in exile and an artist is a proletarian, lumpenproletarian existence. Of course I had the great privilege of growing up surrounded by books; even before 1932 I had heard *Mahagonny* and the *Threepenny Opera* and knew who Brecht was, and Münzenberg, Lenin, and Trotsky.

F: Did you know people like the heroes at the center of your book, who are workers and at the same time try to fight their way to an education?

W: In exile in Sweden I worked for years in factories and in the forest. There I met people who faced the problem of how, after the deadening work of the day, one could pursue studies, read, do research. I connected this initiative with the concept of the human being of the scientific age, which was coined by Brecht—people who cannot live unless they are constantly engaged in intellectual activity.

F: There is a scene in your book where Brecht has to pack up his belongings to leave Sweden. One gets a precise picture of the room in which the books are being packed. Two policemen enter, and their faces are not described. I have the impression that for you the events that have gathered themselves in rooms, constellations, objects, are more important than the events one is supposed to read from faces.

W: In that scene it was more important for me to show that behind the outward turmoil there was a consistent level. Brecht was, fundamentally, invulnerable. He took his work with him; that was the essential thing: to save his work. And at that point it was more important to describe which books he gathered around himself daily. I researched it in the Brecht Archive: the editions, the publication dates. It mattered to me to show: Brecht lives among books. He is a man who writes.

F: In your book there is little outward action, much inner life: memory, reflection. Very often a whole chapter turns on just a single gesture or movement of a person. Rosalinde visits the narrator and lies motionless on the bed; Münzenberg presses his nose flat with his finger while speaking...

W: Perhaps such an image holds the dense material together better than if many events unfolded simultaneously. What is meant to be depicted is the density of the events. I write in large blocks, not in short paragraphs fragmented into individual impressions; rather, the self-contained event, made of many things that flow together, is depicted—that which lies within a small gesture.

F: Let me summarize one passage from memory. The first-person narrator strolls through Paris with Otto Katz and converses with him. Otto Katz talks, among other things, about Willy Münzenberg, and then he reaches a fortune-teller's tent. He enters and leaves the narrator behind alone. Then there's a break, a cut. Now it continues with Münzenberg. As in a film, one doesn't at first know in what time and what space this Münzenberg is, and then it turns out that Münzenberg is likewise strolling through Paris, but with a different gait. Münzenberg goes over a great deal: his own life, art theories, Lenin in Zurich, questions of propaganda. Then it leaps back to the other level, and Katz steps out of the tent—the fortune-teller has evidently given him a dire prophecy, one that points to his later fate, namely being hanged.

W: And to Münzenberg's fate too! Both suffered death by hanging—that was foretold by the fortune-teller. In this way these two scenes are held together almost filmically. The first-person narrator stays outside the tent and waits, and meanwhile the episode with Münzenberg can take place. That episode breaks off, and we return to the scene in which Katz steps out of the tent. In between, a span of time has passed. My technique of writing in blocks certainly relates to my work as a filmmaker. Here they are blocks of memory that are strung together one after another, and that contain a great deal—the way consciousness, and in part the subconscious, works, in that associations are constantly being awakened.

F: This corresponds, too, to the fact that there is so little outward action. When the hero comes to Spain, he doesn't end up in great battles. That also corresponds to the role a person has in history—that he perhaps washes dishes and is connected to the world of events only through reflection.

W: The whole aim here is to write anything but a heroic novel about the anti-fascist struggle.

F: There is at one point a very filmic cut: Rosalinde Ossietzky visits the first-person narrator and no intimacy between them is shown, and then it continues with the narrator, who cannot help thinking of her while at work. One knows this from films—that important emotional events are brought out precisely by not showing them, by leaving them out in a meaningfully charged way.

W: And in the following block the narrator thinks about her and finds himself between the acid vats of the tinning shop in the factory where he works. In this way a strong contrast arises again with his own personal thoughts.

F: Your book begins in the year 1937, and the not-yet-published third volume will end with the year 1945. Entirely different eras appear—ancient Greece, the Paris of the nineteenth century—and through the material Brecht works on, the Engelbrekt theme, the fifteenth century also comes in. Is that an attempt to find a grounding for the class struggle?

W: Yes, just as the book is being written in the present moment, and therefore acts upon our present—almost thirty or forty years lie in between—so the material discussed back then is again very closely linked with the historical memories and relationships and associations that the speakers connect with their past. That is why the most varied epochs are constantly taken up, in order to show the presentness of history and also the weight of history, how necessary it is to maintain this constant relationship to one's own past and one's own history, and how necessary it is to analyze, again and again, and to bring history back onto the agenda of the present. By having the mind constantly occupied not only with present things but grappling with the developmental history that led to this moment, the dialectic, too, is kept current. The narrator and the people in his circle are concerned to find out what has happened in recent history, and what is unresolved, and what is hidden—what is hidden by lies. It must be clarified; it must constantly be established: out of what most recent past do we come, how have we come to terms with that past, what difficulties are now arising for the next steps. And in connection with this, the narrator and the other people constantly return to the fact that they do not, after all, live only in this present moment, but that they carry the whole developmental history with them. It is precisely the concept of culture, the concept of an aesthetics as I try to sketch it here, that is bound up with an infinitely long developmental history—a developmental history of thought as such. That is why the book also begins with the image of a great classical, ancient work of art, the Pergamon Altar, which forms, as it were, the basis for the whole developmental struggle that lies ahead—namely the eternal class struggle. That the upper classes are constantly there and the lower classes constantly revolt, revolting again and again in different forms against those above. They are crushed again and again, and rise up again and again, in all cultures.

F: In your book, Brecht is working on a historical subject, and you suggest he was inclined to abandon this fifteenth-century material, and the Julius Caesar novel as well, precisely because he didn't see an exact connection to the present—at any rate no exemplary connection of the old material to present-day politics.

W: I infer that from the fact that he gave up both the Engelbrekt theme and the Caesar; there is no

other explanation for it than that he suddenly lost interest in it. The Engelbrekt theme exists only as a few pages of sketches, a few stories and stage directions, but it is by no means worked out to the degree to which I work it out in the book. Rather, the fact that Brecht occupied himself with this figure Engelbrekt merely prompted me to draft a play now, starting from this basic idea. I don't think it was a matter for Brecht, either, of writing a historical play; rather, he wanted to show the infinitely long path of revolutionary history—that in the most varied eras, again and again, the seeds of revolution arose, spread, and led to great successes, then stopped again, and then set in again at another point in the history of the Swedish workers' world, on another continent. And that was the interesting thing, and it is discussed in the book too: that it is not merely a matter of laying out a historical, epic narrative here, but of finding out everything that happens, in the way of attempts at liberation, in the course of this great intellectual developmental history that is being carried through here.

F: Perhaps one can put it simply: history is never an analogy—so Caesar is not Hitler, but Caesar is Caesar—and it is only through the exact exposition of what Caesar means historically that one learns anything at all about the mechanics of history.

W: Of course—history, after all, does not repeat itself, and a work of art does not repeat itself; every historical event is unique, every self-contained work of art is unique, and every artistic sketch is unique; every thought that arises in the course of a broadly conceived history is unique, and yet in its uniqueness it is bound up with an enormous complex of impulses. In a single second a flash arises out of a concentration of enormous material, and so the struggle of Engelbrekt and the struggle of the peasants, who allied themselves with the early bourgeoisie, is a part of the developmental history of humanity in which we live today and out of which further development still proceeds, and which stands as the foundation for the Swedish workers' movement. That is why, following the Engelbrekt struggle, the movement is narrated—and it stands out in particular relief precisely by standing after the historical event and showing that the tradition of the struggle, the tradition of a people that wants to free itself from the rule of those above, had already existed ever since the thirteenth, fourteenth centuries, and that through the strength of this struggle the Swedish agricultural laborers, too, were spared from serfdom.

F: In your book one sees Brecht producing; he works together with many people and has around him something like a scientific-artistic institute. Wouldn't you need something like that too? Here, after the research, you are alone in the writing.

W: That is perhaps bound up with my origins as a painter—there one holds one's tools in one's hand and works. It is also a carryover from exile: in exile one is thrown back on oneself alone; above all, as a complete beginner, I had no opportunities at all to meet other writers.

F: When one has written such a large book—600 pages so far—does one know one's way around it in every detail, like the rooms of an apartment one has furnished oneself?

W: I ought to know my way around it, but of course one doesn't live only inside a work; one also has a world around oneself. Family, children, everyday problems that tear one out of the flow of continuity. But that accords with my way of working. I don't work in a single go. Rather, it is a laborious piecing-together, and constantly starting anew and leafing back.

F: Did you travel to the places where your book is set?

W: I was still able to see the house Brecht lived in. It had burned down, but it still stood there as a charred ruin. When I describe a place that no longer exists in that form, it helps me greatly to have photos of the place before me. It gives me the possibility of visualization; I can find my way more easily in what I'm describing. I don't need to lose myself in reveries; instead, I have the exact picture before me the whole time, and I can see whether it's ten meters to the house on the other side of the street. Such things are so important to me, and they connect with my working method—that I like to be able to feel sure. One telling example was a scene in Volume Two, from the Engelbrekt wars, of how Engelbrekt lands before the city of Stockholm, at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Until then there had been no accurate, reliable descriptions of how it looked at the time—and again only when I already had the book in proofs, excavations suddenly took place, in Stockholm in front of the old parliament building, and there they uncovered the remains of the city walls and of fortifications from that period, from which one could gather how these structures stood in relation to one another. That immediately gave me a chance to add some very important details to this description. I count this kind of investigation as part of the craft of writing.

F: Perhaps one can call what you describe in your book the culture of the workers' movement. Before 1933, in Germany, there were hundreds of thousands who sought to understand the world in order to be able to intervene in it politically. That has disappeared. I've been wondering: when one wants to conjure up something that can no longer be seen, must one not describe the setting especially precisely?

W: Precisely through the exactness of the outer frame, the events themselves are made concrete. The constant search for a pictorial, a visual frame that can be precisely established in all its details, that lies around the events and lends the events a particular weight. How people relate to one another—that is important to describe, and equally important is in what space the people find themselves, and then, in a wider circle still, in what country, in what society, under what historical conditions. Everything has to hold up; it is a technique. Writing, for me, is not something that comes from mere imagination; rather, it is a description of processes that took place, that could have taken place, and that are also rooted in a specific time—and in terms of that time they are depicted, too, as roots for developmental processes whose results we observe today.

F: Is it the case that you bring into this book everything accessible to your life and your experience, or do you select only a part, cut some of yourself away?

W: I have tried to cut away as much as possible—psychological descriptions and private experiences, and also the all-too-private appearance of the person.

F: What does "private" mean?

W: Well, from the private sphere, from so-called inwardness, which is so much in fashion today. I try, throughout, to depict people as historical figures and as representatives of particular forces—so that they become valuable and interesting to me only when they stand in a specific relation to the events of the time and to the particular conditions that existed at that moment; so that they grapple less with their own inner, dreamed, utopian thoughts, and grapple more with the reality bearing down on them.

F: So when someone is in despair—and many are in despair in this book—then they are so because of the real external world, and not because of what one might call the ontological or the existential.

W: That becomes clear in the scene with Rosalinde Ossietzky, who has no wish to kill herself but who describes herself as an active and joyful person—one who is then forced by external circumstances into a situation in which she no longer sees any way out, and through specific occurrences that are here, too, narrated very concretely. And that is why the telling thing is precisely how this kind of human being perishes under these conditions—that they perish not from personal suffering, personal misery, but under a pressure that comes from outside and becomes overwhelming. Under this pressure many people can no longer hold out.

F: But in your earlier, more autobiographically inflected books, you described the suffering of life even without external influence—such as *Vanishing Point* and *Leavetaking*. There are despairs there that do not come from a nameable adversary, that is, not from the nameable external world.

W: Because those narratives were still bound to the family history. The family as the smallest cell of society—and back then I had not yet come far enough with my insights to be able to relate this cell to a larger whole. That came only later, in my own developmental history as a painter and writer: that I first had to clarify what had happened to me, and had to resolve the conflicts that had arisen through the exile situation—and of course much earlier still, in childhood. The particular "I" that came into being back then gradually worked its way out of the narrower orbit of the revolution within the family, toward a vantage point that saw the struggle for liberation on a larger scale.

F: Is this also something that changed with the experience of the Vietnam War?

W: With the Vietnam War it was, in fact, confirmed, for it already existed beforehand, it had long since been set in motion; the decisive experience was Vietnam, and the decisive experience was the liberation struggles of the countries of the Third World against imperialism, which represents the greatest oppressive power in today's world. What whole peoples fight for against mighty oppressors, neocolonizers—that the individual human being, too, in his own circle, on a somewhat smaller scale, has to accomplish and to carry through in the same way. To which is added: what decisions he makes, which front he feels he belongs to, and in what way he wants to fit himself into a common line of struggle. And there one arrives, of course, at the more collective point of departure we spoke of earlier: as soon as one reaches the point of no longer experiencing one's own situation as narrowly egoistic, but in connection with the social forces, one has the possibility of setting one's own developmental history within the frame of the world's course—without thereby overreaching in any way and saying, I can make a great intervention there, I can achieve a great deal there. The insight alone already suffices to get a good deal further with one's personal life and one's personal knowledge. It is not absolutely necessary that one fight directly, weapon in hand; rather, we can change a great deal by first changing our own consciousness and then deciding for one side and supporting the forces that want change on a larger scale. For me, Vietnam was a turning point at which I saw directly and concretely what happens when a people knows how to assert itself against the cruelest, most brutal, most domineering adversary.

[Photo caption:] In the summer of this year, the filmmaker Harun Farocki visited the Stockholm-based writer Peter Weiss. The subject of the visit: a detailed conversation with the writer about the motives, themes, and structure of his great novel Aesthetics of Resistance*, of which two volumes have already appeared with Suhrkamp; Weiss is currently writing the third and final volume. The passages reproduced here are taken from Farocki's documentary film, which was recently shown on several regional (Third Programme) television channels. The interest in Weiss's* Aesthetics of Resistance*—which deals with the international history of the Left (and the history of the "Internationals") between 1933 and the immediate postwar period—may also have to do with Farocki's own film* Between Two Wars*.* Between Two Wars *has just been declared "Film of the Year" by the* Jahrbuch Film 79/80 *(Hanser Verlag). Our picture shows Peter Weiss (standing at the wall of a property where an illegal émigré had hidden during the Second World War) with the sound engineer Lasse Säsström (left) and Harun Farocki, playing back tapes.*