Foto: Nick Ut/AP

LET'S TALK TO ONE ANOTHER

(Text by Thomas Schadt, February 2022)

For many years now, I have been holding a seminar at the start of the academic year in the Filmakademie with the title "Reading Images". Using sample photographs, different types of imagery are analysed and the opportunities and impacts of visual dramatic composition are examined. The images I show include a photograph by the Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut. On 8 June 1972 twelve photojournalists are on a country road watching a napalm attack by the US Air Force on the South Vietnamese village of Trang Bang, in which North Vietnamese soldiers were reportedly holed up. Unexpectedly, a group of South Vietnamese soldiers and fleeing villagers come towards the photographers, among them a number of children. The one who catches the eye immediately is the girl Kim Phúg, who runs screaming, with her arms outstretched and completely naked, towards the photographers. Nick Ut's quickly taken analogue photograph found its way onto the front page of the *New*

York Times by the very next day; he subsequently won the Pulitzer Prize for his dramatic snap. Still today the photo is an icon of war photography with its deeply authentic collision of child-like innocence and nakedness with military violence, and it was one of the triggers in the USA for the start of mass protests against America's war in Vietnam.

The students also know/recognise this image, it is stored in their visual memory, even though most of them do not know why that is the case or how to place the photograph in terms of its content and history. The role of the discussion in the seminar is to cast light on precisely that. But while, in the early years, a discussion used to unfold which ended with everyone agreeing that war should never be allowed to be a solution to political conflicts, the discourse about this photo now takes a different direction. Is the image not sexist, some participants ask, especially since it was taken by a man? Others wonder if it might be a (re)constructed, staged scene. There are even some voices that call for a "trigger warning" before being shown such violent and sexist images in future, because they or others might be retraumatised by seeing them without preparation. One vehemently demanded psychological support for seminars of this sort, calling for the Academy to provide on-site medical care if acute retraumatisation required it.

The tone of some, when I ask them to start by putting the image into its historical context, becomes extremely aggressive. And while the vast majority of the students say nothing, the course instructor is politely but firmly told by the spokespersons for the group that he is representing the typical world view and power of the white, male bourgeoisie. At this moment I feel misunderstood and, despite all my experience of life and as a teacher, I have no immediate idea how to prevent a further hardening of positions and destruction of the debate. At a loss to know what to do, one might be tempted to break off the discussion at this point and send everyone home as a shock tactic.

Born in 1957, I was socialised in the 1960s and 1970s. Brought up alternately by my parents, my grandparents and then again by my mother, I was confronted at an early age with both the moral concepts of the 19th century and the attempt by the culture and art of the 1960s to break through those moral concepts in a radical way. My great grandmother also lived in my grandparents' house, a proud old woman born in 1876. When I was six or seven years old,

she suddenly slapped her daughter, that is, my grandmother, who was born in 1902, in the face when she came across her one morning naked in the bathroom with her husband, who was born in 1900. From her perspective, what she saw broke a taboo in an intolerable way. The incident was never spoken about again, in the same way that no one in that deeply reticent and archly conservative household ever said a word about nakedness, sexuality or violence, even though, as I discovered later, all of that was ubiquitous. This was also the reason why, when I was thirteen, my mother took me back in. Abandoned at an early stage by my father, she was left to her own devices and worked in a shop that sold expensive designer furniture. Her environment was shaped by artists and a considerably affluent and culturally open clientele. She saw herself, as many did in those days, as "progressive", "modern" and "enlightened". But, born in 1932, she was unable because of her own history either to talk to us about her terrible experiences in the war or to offer us any sexual enlightenment.

I shall never forget the appearance of the rep of a big design studio, dressed in "freak out" style, who was presenting a new three-piece suite at a furniture show with champagne and nibbles. "You can also", he said word for word, "use this as your personal wanking spot". An uninhibited, even approving murmur went round the progressive audience, and from then on I noticed more and more people around me who used or wanted to use words such as fuck, wank and shag, as if they were talking about fresh bread, butter and jam. In order to get a sense of what these words might actually mean, I and my sister, three years older than me, slipped into the cinema one day without our mother's knowledge. It was showing "*Afternoon*" by Andy Warhol from 1965. We were desperate to see the film, solely because there was a rumour going around that it showed an erect penis. Hungry for something obviously visible, we were appropriately disappointed when nothing of the sort could be seen. For us, sexual enlightenment meant taking the extremely laborious path of finding things out for ourselves.

At about the same time, my then history teacher steered our class to a small cinema with the announcement that it was showing an instructive film about the Nazi period. We were then confronted, without any preparation, with the films taken by the US army when they opened up the concentration camp in Dachau. Shocked by emaciated corpses piled up in mountains and survivors who were literally only skin and bone, we ran away appalled, screaming, and

some of my fellow students were actually sick. None of us had ever seen images like that before, we were completely overwhelmed by what we had been shown and we hated our history teacher for it. It was an emotional shock. Only much later did I understand that he did it because he could not see any other way to break through our stoic ignorance of the topic.

Perhaps these examples explain my early yearning to experience a kind of enlightenment in areas such as sexuality and violence. And as I did not find that either at home or in school, I focused this yearning on another place: the cinema. The films of the seventies have left a lasting impression on me that still shapes me today: *"The Deer Hunter"* by Michael Cimino (1978) with the scene of playing Russian roulette with two bullets as a way of escaping the Viet Cong prison, with Robert de Niro in one of the lead roles, made such an impact on me with its violence when I saw it for the first time that I went to see the full film ten days in a row at the cinema; *"Aguirre, the Wrath of God"* by Werner Herzog (1972) fascinated me because Klaus Kinski portrays his own crazily narcissistic personality disorder far better than that of his character, Lope de Aguirre; *"A Clockwork Orange"* by Stanley Kubrick (1972) disturbed me because of the eruption of violent excesses of the young people (my age at the time), ending with a rape scene that is difficult to bear; *"Last Tango in Paris"* by Bernardo Bertolucci (1972), which, through the drastic representation of anal intercourse between Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider in particular, forced my generation not only to pretend to be progressive, enlightened and modern, but actually to reflect on and talk about things which were still surrounded with a taboo of silence in the seventies; *"The 120 Days of Sodom"* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975): I experienced the open representation of rape, torture and murder by Italian fascists in Northern Italy under Nazi occupation like a real crucifixion. The events and images of this film are still with me today and, like the other films, they bear testimony for me to the depths and spiritual abyss of human existence.

For me and many of my generation, these films shook us out of our slumber in a way that was urgently necessary, by confronting us at last with the abysses of human imagination and reality that undoubtedly exist – including our own, about which we had remained consistently silent. In my thoroughly analogue socialisation, without any form of digitisation, mobile phone or internet (not even VHS cassettes), they play a key function in this respect. Even the

consumption of these films was usually a one-off, complex event which could only be repeated if I went back into the cinema a second or third time with a new entrance ticket.

Today those films, like the photograph by Nick Ut, are perceived quite differently, even down to calls to remove them entirely from the canon of film history for the reasons described at the outset. Beginning around the turn of the millennium, digitisation, along with other social changes, has played a crucial part in this in my view.

On 11 September 2001 I was in Canada. I was waiting for a ferry on the banks of the Saint Lawrence River. I went into the waiting room to get a coffee. When I entered the room, a TV was on in the corner. It was completely quiet, the sound was turned off. As I could not quite decipher the images, I walked up to the television until I recognised the smoking towers of the World Trade Center in New York. A couple were standing next to me, staring at the scene in disbelief. While I still could not understand what had actually happened, the impacts of the two aircraft on the skyscrapers were repeated incessantly from various camera angles. By the time I had understood the events, I had seen the aircraft crashing – or had had to see it – more than a dozen times. Magically drawn in by the inconceivable, I was bombarded repeatedly with the same images, whether I wanted to be or not. At first it was an unbelievably hard slap in the face, then I became dazed and after that something forced its way deep inside me without my having the slightest opportunity to resist. It was a rape. It felt as if the terrible aircraft explosions had not lasted seconds but hours. I was drawn in to the drama in such a way that "television time" became real time and real time stood still. No, I did not want those images and their incessant digital repetition, hundreds and thousands of times. And yet they took possession of me in all their brutality.

The removal of taboos from our world took place some time ago through digitisation. And the winner of that digitisation process is the "moving image". Once a moving image comes into the world, it is almost impossible to make it disappear again everywhere and definitively. Images fly relentlessly and with relentless repetition through virtual space. And the rule is: the more repulsive, the more attractive. Who wants to look at a sunset when right next to it a killer is shooting at people live? Even in our private communication, moving images now have more to "say" than words. We use the manipulative power of images to our own ends entirely without

words. But we also use them to finish off, bash and bully others or to lure them into a criminal trap. In her collection of essays *"On Photography"*, published over 45 years ago, the American cultural critic Susan Sontag rightly spoke of a "camera gun" that is able, in the broadest sense, to kill another person, or to put it a little more innocuously: to rob him of his soul. And that was at a time when there was no digitisation at all. Today, we all have a camera gun.

Or more accurately, a camera machine gun, the owners of which almost gleefully use it to disseminate fake news deliberately, to cement power with strategic (image) disinformation and, in extreme cases, to trigger very real wars with scenarios justifying their actions presented through the media. Ever since the invention of photography, actual wars have always been wars of images too, the contextualisation of which in terms of propaganda represented a crucial factor in deciding the war. Political decisions are now fundamentally influenced by photographic images, image messages, the creation processes behind which are often not revealed or are simply invented. The acute impact of their consciously chosen and digitally processed details misleads consumers and manipulates them emotionally before they can even attempt to reach their own, reflective interpretation of the images. My trust in the "authenticity" of media images has been lost to a shocking extent as a result of the opportunities provided by digitisation. Who can tell me with any certainty nowadays how "unprocessed" or "processed" an image really is? Whether photographs and the texts associated with them really belong together or the connection is only suggested by an appropriate caption to create as dramatic an impact as possible?

Intellectual analysis of the power of images should be all the more essential. But although the students who come to us every year can read words and some of them can even read notes – they learned to do that in school – they are neither familiar with nor able to read images, as they specifically did not learn how to do that in school. They can look at images, describe them and use their talent to create them. But reading images in the sense of critical questioning and analysis of their dramatic composition and attitude is largely foreign to them. Instead of receiving essential education in the media, it seems to me that this thoroughly digitised generation has been left to itself in this regard – and thus abandoned to a type of isolation and disorientation in the ubiquitous availability of every possible type of (image) content in the world. All answers therefore seem possible, before the first questions are even – or can even be –

asked. And when young people begin to realise and reflect on this, the desire is soon expressed to limit this continual penetration, put the brakes on it, cleanse it and, last but not least, to apply binding rules to its consumption. My generation, by contrast, was always trying to break the existing rules, to free themselves from censored thinking and the prudish reticence of the 1950s. There must never be a return to times in which there are bans on professions, even on ways of thinking, perhaps even a debate about terms such as "degenerate art"! Quite the contrary, the freedom of art, which is enshrined in the German Constitution and was a key component of my own socialisation and of many others of the post-war generations, must remain inalienable!

No, I did not send the students home at the point where the discussion broke down as I described at the outset, I sent them out for 15 minutes of fresh air. I decided not to give in to the immediate feeling of disappointment, but to embrace the necessity to continue the discussion at such acute moments of conflict in particular. Students sometimes have very emotional disagreements. That's a good thing! It also shows us that they have not yet found the answers to their questions – or only unsatisfactory ones. These discourses must be mapped, tolerated and set up in such a way that students can develop in them. We must take their objections, views, desire to go on the attack and, above all, their silence seriously. We must listen to them, without concealing where we, as older adults, are coming from. In the current debates I have learned how important it is for me not to deny the films with which I grew up. Even though they are undeniably violent, sexist and almost exclusively dominated by men. Every generation has the right to its own canon of films. That's why a meaningful discourse culture is based primarily on unconditional mutual respect. First that means not rebuking people for the film they saw, when they saw it and why. And second it means the participants in the discussion having the courage and will to contribute their personal experiences to the discourse consciously and without hiding behind programmatic ideologies. Last but not least, that requires unprejudiced and clever moderation of the debates; leading a discussion in a way that motivates people to address their personal experience and requires that the counterparty be given the chance to speak and to be listened to.

After the break, the heated discussion in my seminar turned to the desire to be able to speak without fear. The desire for protected spaces in which that should be possible. So we started taking about

fears. Fears of all sorts, fear as an endless list of various fears. Fear as the driver of human actions, as the business model of the media, and so on. We agreed that unspoken fears are the best breeding ground for destruction and for discussions that end destructively, and may be a reason not to speak to one another (any longer). So we spoke about our fears, before our attention was drawn once again to the photograph of the fleeing South Vietnamese girl by Nick Ut. The perspective on the image changed. The allegedly violent sexism of a male photographer was no longer in the foreground, but the question of who was more afraid: the girl running for her life or those looking at her 50 years later. This encouraged me to quote Susan Sontag from her book *On Photography*: "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time." Obviously we are still living in this frightened time, more so than ever. Not just a one-off photograph is a violent act we have to confront now; having to look at an all-encompassing, photographed and digitised world millions of times over is, too. Unfortunately, this seems often to be more realistic than the actual world in which we live – according to my *image* of it.