

**UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS DOCTORAL SCHOOL  
OF ARTS**

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**The Visual Narrative of Suffering in  
Photography and the Visual Arts**

DLA Disertation Thesis

Supervizor

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## Introduction

If we are looking for an answer to the question of how human suffering can be represented as a visual narrative in the visual arts, we can explore a specific system of relationships through the language of visual communication, which can be described as a process of interaction between 20th century and contemporary photography and fine art. Along the lines of this thesis, I will analyse in more detail the relationship between the creative genres of press photography, photographic art, graphic art, painting and installation art. A chronologically definable creative process can be described along the cultural-historical links. One of the starting points for outlining the themes for my DLA research was the personal involvement of having experienced the indirect effects of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s in Yugoslavia as a child before my art studies. Drawing on my own experience, traumatic events become emotionally transcendable when reinterpreted objectively within a logical framework. Visual art, acting as a catalyst in this mental process, can be able to systematise and symbolically process the experiences of the person concerned, the artist. By developing a conscious artistic creative programme, the narrative of suffering and its representation can be articulated. Moving away from the individual experience, we can also take the history of humanity as a starting point in a broader sense, shaped by ongoing conflicts throughout history. From this perspective, we can discuss themes of conflict between individuals or of the broad social struggles that can escalate into war. With today's visual communication methods, the genres of visual art and photography can be used by print or digital mass media to promote a goal-oriented resolution of a conflict.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I consider special art historical and philosophical studies crucial to my DLA research, which are centered about 20th century and contemporary visual art, such as the writings of Susan Sontag, Boris Groys, Gerhard Paul, which emphasize the importance and documentation of the historical and cultural context of images of war and suffering.

### The Subject of the Research:

Since its invention in the 19th century, photography has been in constant interaction with the visual arts, most notably with painting and various graphic techniques, but it also plays a key

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<sup>1</sup> Jenifer Dasal writes in detail about how the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the CIA were able to use art as a propaganda tool against the Soviet Union during the Cold War years. In doing so, she shades the cultural background to the history of the contemporary art canon. The title of the article:  
How MoMA and the CIA Conspired to Use Unwitting Artists to Promote American Propaganda During the Cold War  
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artcurious-cia-art-excerpt-1909623> (06.07.2023).

role in documenting performance and installation art. When conducting research from a curatorial perspective, it is important to describe a process of clear temporal and cultural interactions, according to a thematic scheme, along which the pictorial motifs are organised. This method of visual communication is a fundamental technical and documentary necessity in contemporary art exhibitions and museum exhibitions. An essential element of exhibition catalogues is the contextualisation of pictorial reproductions of works of art and the publication of related studies. A conceptual definition that is fundamental to photography is the fact that it rapidly captures a moment in time as an impression of a flat image.<sup>2</sup> In this way it documents a situation in life that can later be widely published through press photographs. Continuous technological advances have combined the ever-improving precision of cameras with the increasingly sophisticated quality of print reproduction. Thus, in the first half of the 20th century, once an image was printed, it could reach a wide mass of people in a short time. This process of reproduction and its philosophical interpretation is discussed by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction* (1935).<sup>3</sup> From today's perspective, this technical development is culminating in the online culture and the digital images that are taking over our everyday lives. A separate thematic area in the history of photography is the study of war press photography, which has a significant international literature. Examples are the renowned photographers such as Robert Capa and Nick Ut who created images of the brutally raw reality of World War II and the subsequent Cold War, which became symbols of the events. Robert Capa's *The Death of a Militia Man* (1936) and Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* (1972) are among the core documents that artists have reused in multiple ways through the art of appropriation. By placing the essential elements of the original photograph in a new context, artists (e.g. Warhol, Banksy...) show other possibilities

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<sup>2</sup> A definition of photography translated from Hungarian language: „Photography is the recording of visual information conveyed by light using technical means (camera, light-sensitive material, etc.). It derives its name from the Greek φως phos ('light') and γραφίς graphis ('drawing'), meaning 'drawing with light' or 'light drawing'. Photography, in a broad sense, can also be included in the concept of media.

The purpose of photography can be practical or artistic. In the beginning, photography did not want to be seen as anything more than a precise means of depicting reality, as is shown by the fact that it was included among the scientific and technical innovations at world exhibitions. It was at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries that it began to be more widely recognised as art, and the specific characteristics of photography began to emerge. In the meantime, the different fields of non-art photography were also becoming more and more diverse, as portraiture, nature photography, press photography, advertising photography, etc. required different qualities and techniques.”

Source in Hungarian: [http://www.jgypk.hu/mentorhalo/tananyag/MediaelmeletV2/iv11\\_a\\_fotografia\\_fogalma\\_cljai.html](http://www.jgypk.hu/mentorhalo/tananyag/MediaelmeletV2/iv11_a_fotografia_fogalma_cljai.html) (09.07.2023.)

<sup>3</sup> "Generally speaking, the technique of reproduction takes the reproduced out of the realm of tradition. To the extent that it reproduces the reproduction, it replaces its one-off occurrence with a mass one. And because it allows the reproduction to appear according to the situation of the recipient, it actualizes the reproduced." Walter Benjamin (1936/1980) *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility, Chapter II* [http://aura.c3.hu/walter\\_benjamin.html](http://aura.c3.hu/walter_benjamin.html) (09.07.2023.)

of interpretation, drawing attention to broader historical or social events. In this way, by acting as a particular visual code-system, the newly created works are able to articulate certain critical ideas for today's society.<sup>4</sup> This is how Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) became a symbol of antiwar movements and Peace. The painting has multiple textile copies, one is now on display at the United Nations in New York. The *Guernica* as an inspiration is an element of several contemporary art programmes, as documented by the *Guernica Remakings* artisti programme, curated by Dr Nicola Ashmore, an American design historian. To reinterpret the symbolic significance of *Guernica*, a series of exhibitions involving contemporary artists as creators has been started.<sup>5</sup> Photographs of the painting appear in a number of activist art concepts at anti-war protests, thus symbolically transcending *Guernica* itself and presenting it in a different time and space as a reference to peace. I discuss these connections in a separate chapter. Artworks dealing with the war conflict are regularly displayed in the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale, which also demonstrate the importance of thematic treatment of human suffering in contemporary art discourse. For the present dissertation, it is important to be able to present the object of research through the presentation of thematically collected and selected photographs and images, almost as a guided tour of an exhibition, in addition to the literature analysis.

#### Research Methodology:

During the doctoral training, the development of the dissertation topic has been constantly changing. Methodologically, the definition of the topic had to be narrowed down from time to time, providing both a structurable and chronologically consistent conceptual framework. The novelty of the doctoral thesis lies in the fact that, using selected international literature, it is possible to present essays and volumes of studies in German and English, as well as online publications in Hungarian, which have not yet been translated into Hungarian language.

The DLA research was based on visits to international exhibitions and the collecting process of literature during the training period, which started in 2017. The main objects of study were the selected photographs and artworks from World War II, the Cold War and the later 1990s Yugoslav war. A major turning point in the formulation of the theme was the global Lock Down that started in 2019, followed by the war crisis in Ukraine in 2022. The consequences of these events for contemporary culture can only be interpreted objectively years later, and are therefore

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Paul in his book titled *Bildermacht* describes this method in detail.

<sup>5</sup> The *Guernica Remaking* program can be followed online: <http://guernicaremakings.com/about/> (09.07.2023.)

only discussed tangentially or by way of highlighted examples. In this definition, the subject of my research is not a closed process, but also, without claiming completeness, a kind of analysis of a cord document. As the events of the last years have affected the lives of all people as global traumas, as a given narrative, these cultural imprints will be further explored in the future, both in the social sciences and in art history. Through collective experience, it may be possible to interpret a special given art project from multiple perspectives, but based on a common unified knowledge. This can be the case with the invisible enemy and the destructive tragedy that eliminates all existence, which can appear before our eyes on an almost apocalyptic scale. This line of thought has inspired me as a creative programme in my own artistic practice, in addition to writing my thesis. The dissertation is accompanied by an exhibition of completed works that summarise the creative work of the last few years.

#### Results of the Research:

At the beginning of my dissertation research, I started with the utopian theory that art can raise awareness of war conflicts in society and thus prevent their recurrence. It was on this premise that I began my research, looking for a positive conclusion. A notable example is Gyula Várnai's *Peace on Earth* exhibition at the 2017 Venice Biennale. However, it later became clear to me that this theory is clearly not correct as it can only be interpreted as fiction as opposed to everyday reality. Because art can only potentially bring about real change at the level of the individual in this respect. War and its visual representation is a defining part of human culture which, tragically, is constantly renewed and can emphasise the elementary importance of periods of peace alongside the fundamental human questions of existence.<sup>6</sup> This thematic has regained importance in Hungarian and foreign artistic discourse. Examples include the series of centenary commemorations of the First World War, or the exhibition titled *Permanent Revolution, Contemporary Ukrainian Art* at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest in the year 2018.<sup>7</sup> The thematic division of the dissertation will be based on the analysis of the various literatures that have similar themes on the relationship between war press photography, aggression and

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<sup>6</sup> "Central to modern expectations, to modern morality, is the conviction that war is an aberration, even if it is inevitable. That peace is the norm, even if it is unattainable. Throughout history, of course, war has not always been seen in this way, War has been seen as normal, peace as exceptional." Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p.135.

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Museum's exhibition *Permanent Revolution* won the 2019 Global Fine Art Award Audience Prize <https://artportal.hu/magazin/a-ludwig-muzeum-kiallitasa-nyerte-a-global-fine-art-awards-kozsegdijat/> (07.07.2023.)

the visual arts. They are often stylistically very different, although they deal with the same subject. This presents a particular difficulty in producing academic writing on art. Among others, I am particularly interested in essays by art theorists Susan Sontag, Boris Groys and Gerhard Paul. In my research, I analyse the writing of the world-renowned aesthete and philosopher Susan Sontag, titled *Regarding the Pain of Others*. In her last essay, published in 2003, she summarizes the history of the wartime press photograph and how it came to be part of our everyday lives. Sontag interprets images of human suffering as a critique of the capitalist system, citing examples from history and art history that have infiltrated everyday life through the TV screens of living rooms. In the essay, she specifically addresses the role of the media in transmitting images of remote locations and influencing society. Her observations that these impressions are completely impossible to avoid are still valid today. In contrast, the art philosopher Boris Groys, in his essay volume *Art Power* (2022), makes hypothetical propositions according to a trapezoidal line of thought that are based on a loose imagination, which seems to reveal difficult-to-follow connections. In some instances he also provides a succinct and analytical account of the links between art and war.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the comparison concludes with a volume of German-language book by the historian Gerhard Paul, *Bildermacht, Studien zur Visual History des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (2013), which precisely compares the roots of 20th-century European and American visual communication through the presentation of posters, photographs and artworks. The title could be translated as *The Power of Images*, and a major positive feature of the book is that it is a readable combination of literature and images, catalogued with an academic concern. In this way, he also methodologically points out that, despite the many challenges, it is possible to examine the subject in a way that is relevant to contemporary art and also to the historical contexts that, even if unnoticed today, still determine the everyday lives of the society. An important finding is that, in addition to the historical enumeration, the mechanisms of artistic context are also analysed.<sup>9</sup>

The aim of the dissertation was to bring together, in the form of an own selection, a synthesis of art theoretical writings that allow us to compare the visual motifs that depict the

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<sup>8</sup> "Warriors no longer wait for the artist to depict their acts of war or terror: the act of war is now synonymous with its documentation and representation. Art as a medium of representation, the artist as a mediator between reality and memory, is here completely eliminated." Boris Groys, *The Power of Art, Part Two, Art in War*, p. 150, published in hungarian language

<sup>9</sup> „Entkontextualisierung und Überschreibung im visuellen Global Flow ist dessen bestandigte Aneignung und Umnutzung in der zeitgenössischen Kunst.“ translated from original german language to english: "Decontextualization and overwriting in visual global flow is its insistent appropriation and repurposing in contemporary art." Gerhard Paul, *Bildermacht, Studien zur Visual History des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts, Das Foto im Künstlerischen und weiteren publizistischen Diskurs*, p. 462.

horrors of aggression, suffering and war from a new perspective. This will allow us to analyse the documentary nature of photography and the system of relationships between the symbolic content of the artworks created by using war press photographs. Examples include the style of painting that took off in the second half of the 20th century during the Cold War, like Pop art and Hyperrealism. In 2021, the Ludwig Museum in Germany organised an exhibition entitled *The Cool and the Cold*, which includes a collection of American and Soviet paintings from 1960-1990. In Berlin's Gropius Bau, the curators have thematically juxtaposed paintings that were made under the influence of a completely different ideological systems during the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, they evoked the global conflict of the period of the so-called nuclear age, which people were generally led to believe had definitively ended forever. A month after the exhibition closed, the world was polarised again, as the Russian-Ukrainian war broke out. In a strange coincidence, proving that the period of peace seems to be more of a state of grace than we are used to. It is true that these historical facts point beyond the scope of this dissertation, but they are unfortunately inescapable for today's eyes and may become the focus of future exhibitions of aesthetic and visual art research. In 2023, the world's first permanent exhibition of Robert Capa's life's work, *Robert Capa the Correspondent*, opened in the new exhibition space of the Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Centre in Budapest. This is important because it updates the cultural significance of war press photography.

The motto of the dissertation was the following quote by Akira Kurosawa:

“To be an artist means to search, to find and look at these realities. To be an artist means to never look away.”

Pécs, 09.07.2023.

Dénes Fekete

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<sup>10</sup> „With this project we artistically depict a period characterized by global political events that have shaped our lives today in planetary fashion, making their impact visible everywhere and with abiding influence” Brigitte Franzen, *The Cool and the Cold –About the Conception of the Exhibition, in The Cool and Cold, Painting in the Usa and the USSR 1960-1990*, The Ludwig Collection, 2020, p. 100

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