



The Guernica Cover-Up in the United Nations in 2003: Politics and the Suppression of the Concrete Realities of War

Christine Landfried

Tuesday, June 14, 2016, 12 noon, Room A 300/310

Invitation

Throughout history persons with power seem to have been convinced that they could influence the people most effectively with visual art and therefore they invested a lot of resources into the visual presentation of power. It is usually argued that the people with their “simple minds” need visual art to understand a complex world. However, it might be more to the truth that not the people but the rulers themselves are the most addicted persons to the messages transported by visual arts. The stabilizing effect of visual arts for the rulers themselves could probably be the actual driving force for the ongoing and especially in democratic societies intensified use of visual media. In psychological terms one would speak of “auto-suggestion” and the process of suppression.

This thesis of the art historian Martin Warnke will be demonstrated for the cover-up of the tapestry “Guernica” in the United Nations. This cover-up happened when in 2003 the United States declared war on Iraq. As I will show, the repression of the consequences of war for civil society did not occur just for the short period when “Guernica” was covered up. The tapestry has been circumvented by politicians all the time. The potential issue of the realities of war has been permanently kept out of politics in the United Nations. The criticism of the cover-up in the international press was limited to a short moment and did not trigger a public debate. “Guernica” was spatially even more marginalized in the United Nations after the cover-up than it has been the case before. The new arrangement in the foyer of the United Nations gives the flags and the UN logo a central place, while the tapestry has been moved towards the edge of the foyer. “Guernica” has not become more visible after the cover-up.

Christine Landfried is Professor Emerita of Political Science at the University of Hamburg, Germany. She currently holds the Max Weber Chair in German and European Studies at New York University. She has studied Political Science, History, and International Law at the University of Heidelberg and at Harvard University. She was president of the German Political Science Association from 1997-2000. Since 2016, she holds the chair of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center's Scientific Advisory Board. She analyzes the role of Constitutional Courts in democracies, the impact of campaign finance on democratic legitimacy and the process of European integration. With her work on the European Union she aims at exploring the conditions that allow to enhance the positive potential of cultural, economic, and political difference for democratic governance. She has recently been awarded with the Schader Preis of the Schader Foundation, Darmstadt.

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