

Please reduce depictions of violence!

A letter to 200 producers of Hollywood-movies *Internet Forum »Network Against Violence«*

For years parents, teachers, psychologists, pediatricians and pediatric surgeons have been seriously worried about the well-being and the future of our children and youth. This finds expression in readers' letters, articles, books, talks and campaigns which frequently show great concern.

The reason for this are the proliferating depictions of violence in movies and television programs which jeopardize our children, influence their psychological and mental development and in many cases damage them for life.

We alone know of more than 80 articles and a substantial number of books written on this subject. These are characterized by expertise and the deep conviction that changes are urgently needed.

Campaigns such as mailings and collections of signatures were characterized by lively participation and an unexpectedly good turnout; the actual effect, however, was disappointingly small. Conventions were held and talks delivered. Encouraging statements came from public service broadcasting companies but consistent and responsible action failed to materialize.

On the internet site of the Austrian National Broadcasting Company (»ORF«) we find the following statements:

»More and more pupils and students are increasingly ready to use violence; violence among schoolchildren is becoming more and more of a problem for teachers and educational politicians.

It is alarming to see how by now conflicts among children are carried out: The actual aim is no longer to fight the opponent down, but after that to vehemently kick him with one's shoes. Teachers from Salzburg, Austria, report that in some cases this has resulted in serious injuries.

Schoolchildren who are ready to use violence are, however, not only increasingly young but - and this is something new, too - are from upper middle-class families. For this reason not only in the equivalents of elementary school and junior high school but also in high schools in nearly the whole area of Salzburg, Austria, liaison teachers and specially trained police officers who know how to deal with these issues are being deployed.«

Forces of law and order in schools - there has never been anything like this!

A reader's letter from June 7, 2003, in the Austrian regional newspaper »Salzburger Nachrichten« reads: »Every day children quarrel, scrap and tussle as part of a normal development of young people. Our son is no exception to this. But what happened to him recently was shocking in its brutality and inhumanity. While he was already lying on the ground, his head was knocked on the concrete road surface until it bled; after that, his opponent kicked him in his side. How often this eleven- or

twelve-year old youngster must have seen this procedure in action movies and computer games, so that he, so to speak routinely, made use of it in his dealings with other children?»

Since the mid 90s of the 20th century we have witnessed again and again youth in the USA, Germany and other countries running amuck or killing others. In most cases the victims are teachers and classmates.

In Germany, it all started with the so-called »Passau-Case« (Passau being a city in the south of Germany). For years, a 14-year old had played indexed computer games, watched horror and action movies and finally he literally translated »Friday the 13th: The New Blood« into reality. Dressed up and armed like Jason he inflicted on his cousin a severe craniocerebral trauma. The girl was in a coma for 14 days and today is severely disabled.

One night in June 1995, two young people in their car pursued a father of two children on German Federal Highway B26. With his pump-action shotgun the front-seat passenger shot through the rear window and killed the man. Violent movies as well as computer and video games glorifying violence had made firearm freaks out of the two young people who also owned a large number of dangerous and violent imaginary role-play games.

Early November 1999 saw a homicide in the German city of Meißen. A 16-year old youth killed his teacher in front of the class, stabbing her 21 times. After consuming violent computer games, horror, action and science-fiction movies as well as sexual and pornographic media he had developed an increasing urge to kill someone himself.

At the end of November 1999 the case in the city of Metten: three 14-year old schoolboys conceived in minute detail a plot for armed homicide against several teachers, the execution of which was averted in the last moment. They owned numerous media designated as damaging to juveniles, which were confiscated by officials.

End of February 2000 in Darmstadt, Germany: three 15- to 18-year old students dropped heavy stones from highway bridges on traveling cars. They hit a total of 16 cars, killing two young women and severely injuring several other people. It became very obvious that media damaging to youth were connected with the crime.

The TV-documentary »When Children Kill« (July 31, 2001, Second National German Television Station »ZDF«) made it evident that these were media-induced crimes; this fact was emphatically stated by psychiatrist Hartmut Jatzko who had looked after victims of such acts of violence. He said unequivocally: »The media led to these crimes.«

Mid March 2000 saw the German »Brannenburg-Case«: a 16-year old student shot the warden of a private school in the neck. The educationalist died a few days later. After the crime the young man shot himself in the head, was in a coma for a long time and has been a nursing case since.

At the end of February 2002 a former student of a business school in the German city of Freising killed the principal with a firearm. Prior to this he had forced his way into a

company, where he shot two of his former bosses dead. With the last bullet he shot himself in the head. Soon after the crime there were clues that he had been consuming movies about madmen and other media which are morally damaging to young people.

In the German city of Gersthofen near Augsburg a 19-year old stabbed 8-year old Vanessa to death with numerous knife thrusts at the end of February 2002. He used to watch horror movies such as »Scream«, Halloween movies and horror videos. For the crime he wore a death's head mask with a hood and a black cape.

Something similar happened in the French city of Nantes in June 2002: wearing a white mask, a black cape and carrying a knife - like the killer in the movie »Scream« - a 17-year old youth stabbed a 15-year old schoolmate to death with 12 knife thrusts. On being questioned he said: »I felt I had to kill like in the movie.« Prior to this he had watched three episodes of »Scream«.

And finally Erfurt, Germany, end of April 2002 - the massacre of a 19-year old who shot 16 people dead, amongst them 12 teachers and two schoolmates: a violent deed with firearms such as Germany had never seen before! The perpetrator's preferred form of extremely violent media were computer and video games.

Between the mid 90s and the year 2002 there were many more cases than those described above in which it was obvious that the influence of violent media products played a part in the respective crimes.

Also in Austria statistics show an increase in juvenile delinquency. There have been numerous reports about young people committing crimes against life and limb. The reports do not specifically deal with a connection between the respective crimes and the use of violent media.

Professor Walter Hauptmann of Salzburg University writes in an article entitled »The bombardment with violence by the media must be mitigated«, dated October 1, 1994: »Aggression for increasingly trivial reasons is being perpetrated by younger and younger people. They have no more inhibitions with regard to biting, keep hitting others until they go out of their minds and they put the boot in on defenseless victims.«

After having conducted a survey among 404 principals the president of the municipal school authorities of the city of Vienna, Austria, felt compelled to even ask the parliament for suitable countermeasures. More than half of the people interviewed linked »the frightening increase in the readiness to use violence« among Vienna's pupils and students to the influence of the media. Findings like these are none the less serious if one concedes that the situation is even worse elsewhere: In the city of Berlin, Germany, one third of all older schoolchildren purportedly come to school with knives and teargas.

In an interview with the regional newspaper »Salzburger Nachrichten«, Mr. Donabauer, judge at a juvenile court in Salzburg, Austria, said in June 1996: »It is a fact of experience that especially young people who attract attention because of acts of violence are intense consumers of violent videos. Considering several examples I can say that certain crimes were exact mirror-images of scenes in violent videos that perpetrators had watched beforehand.«

On March 24, 2000, Professor Udo Jesionek, president of the Juvenile Judicature of Vienna, Austria, said: »Everywhere in Europe we are registering increasing juvenile delinquency. The inhibition level against violence is sinking steadily.«

Someone who incites directly to homicide, will be punished. But people who are instigating children or juveniles to homicide through video games and violent movies are getting off scot-free and may even make a lot of money from them.

We are stunned to hear this fact justified with the comment that freedom of opinion must be protected! Is our legal concept in this respect still in a balance? Can we sacrifice the well-being and future of our children to the ugly excesses of the free expression of one's opinion? Ought not the liberty to express one's opinion end where it hurts and harms children?!

It is taken for granted that the sale and use of harmful drugs is punished. But there are no hindrances to the production and distribution of films that glorify violence, even though they cause damage of about the same proportions. This is not exclusively about the actual killings that are only the tip of the iceberg and as such hit the headlines; this is also about the less obvious effects on everyone watching: indifference to violence, a loss of sensitivity and a decrease in human culture are evident. Our children - the most precious asset of our lives - are being damaged and in individual cases even measureless suffering is inflicted.

The demand for a significant reduction of depictions of violence is also countered with the argument that a completely violence-free television would be detached from the reality of life. This is true, even though not postulated by anybody. But neither may violence be portrayed as a viable means of solving problems nor the violent criminal as a hero who is imposed upon the viewer as someone with whom he can identify. Moreover, detailed depictions of brutal or sadistic violence are to be rejected.

There is great concern - especially among people who are worried about the future of our children and youth. The sheer amount of talks, books and campaigns on this issue is clear evidence for this, but has not yet been effective in changing anything. On the contrary: violence in the movies is still increasing.

Parents, teachers and educators are being encouraged to communicate positive meaning to children through conversation and constructive experiences and to stimulate their own sense of discernment. All these efforts are highly valuable; they can, however, only ease, but not make undone the negative effect of brutal images that lodge in childrens' souls. Also those children have to be taken into consideration who do not grow up in a functioning parental home and whose parents are consequently not able to provide the necessary positive counterbalance.

For these reasons one can only hope that the conscience of movie producers who produce and distribute movies that are damaging to juveniles will wake up and they cease creating such detrimental media material in the future.

The American physician Dr. Bernard Nathanson, formerly director of the world's largest abortion clinic, could serve as a positive example: for years he had carried out countless abortions himself or taken the responsibility as physician in charge. Little by little he came to realize that this was the wrong way and that he had become

guilty. He changed his aim in life in a radical and admirable manner. In 1997, in an interview with »Vision 2000« magazine, he stated that he himself had carried out some 5000 abortions and taken the responsibility for some 70000 more. He now sees it as his task to confess his error publicly and to stand up against abortions and for life. This he does through films, books and talks and considers it his moral responsibility.

In view of an example like this, one would like to hope that all producers of violent movies test their consciences with boldness and honesty. Should they consequently become aware of the damage that has been done up to now, this would surely result in an initiative to turn away from the destructive media material of the past and to promote valuable and thrilling movies that could have a good effect and maybe even win more viewers than before.

Wouldn't there be countless stories - also from real life - to be told about people who were able to deliver themselves from extremely difficult situations by imagination, single-mindedness, trust in God, force of will or community spirit?! Quite often these also entail surprisingly positive effects on others.

In what ways would our society benefit from higher quality movies? Young people as well as adults could learn something from movies of that kind and take them as an example. Movies like this would be a source of power and would strengthen and encourage their viewers. Juvenile delinquency could decrease and many children and families could lead a happier, more unencumbered life.

Is this a utopian dream? Yes, of course: at first it is utopia. One individual or only a few viewers can hardly turn the tide of events. But influential movie producers who respond and feel responsible could surely cause a change of direction.

Otherwise there would only be one other option described by Clemens Hutter, chief editor of the Austrian local newspaper »Salzburger Nachrichten«, in his article from April 3, 1993: »International solidarity against the war of aggression against the souls of our children is urgently needed. And this means an organized expulsion of the brutal occupying forces from the imagination of our children. We need an alliance of those who do not consider TV-brutality an evidence of progress and liberty. We need the intervention of the European Parliament.«

We do not believe that laws are necessarily the best means to solve the problem of excessive violence in movies. Nobody knows better than the movie producers themselves where and how limits can be set and how their observance can be secured.

Dear movie producers, please assume your responsibility for society!