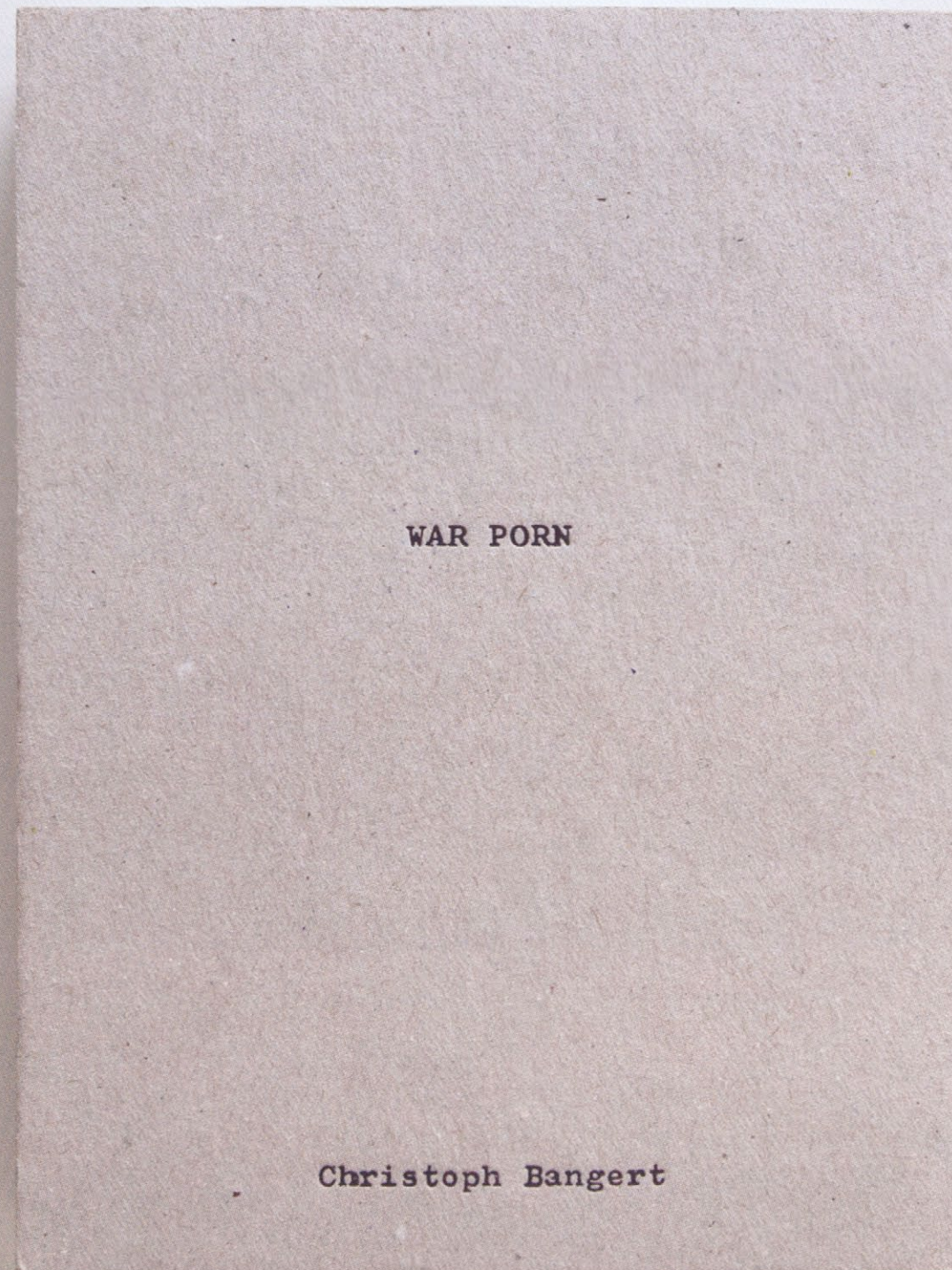


the disheartened photographer

by **Manuela Cigliutti**



It happened in 1972: the snapshot of a little girl on the run, naked and weeping after her village had been bombed with napalm circulated all around the world and contributed to impact on the public opinion so badly that shortly thereafter the war in Vietnam came to an end.

Kim Phuk, who took the picture, won the Pulitzer Prize, and Kim, the little girl has become today an ambassador of Unesco and is at the head of a foundation that protects the children in warzones. We can see today pictures that in terms of cruelty and suffering are by far much more dreadful than that one.

These pictures tell us that there are millions of persons who are not comfortably sitting on a chair, reading or writing, as we are doing now. These photos and snapshots come from the most diverse places and from wars scattered all over the world, but when we watch them, very little happens inside ourselves. The attempt to stir our conscience through the disclosure of pictures and news seems to have become less and less effective. Readers seem to have become accustomed to the pain of the others and to the wars they look at without really seeing. What's about the social function of photojournalism? And why do we see these terrible pictures more and more rarely on the official press, and more and more often, instead, on the social networks, though without any in-depth analysis?

Facebook or Twitter do not spare us any detail: from the cut-off heads of the kidnapped reporters to the tormented children of Syria and Gaza and to all the men and women who are suffering at all latitudes. A handful of seconds on line, and these pictures slip to the bottom of the screen replaced by other pictures related perhaps with slick gossip news, and make our brain incapable to memorize and process events. So, contents lose their strength and impact, our indignation lasts only few minutes and fades, and the photojournalists' work, which does not only consist in taking pictures, is denied and invalidated.

Their efforts limit themselves to be the evidence of a crime and

not the starting point for giving a boost to considerations on what happens in the world. All this becomes even more regrettable in front of the evidence that today, reporters are quite often pawns, instruments that produce images, overlooked and neglected when they are on site, acclaimed when they are killed or put to death, and their death is used by all media to fill pages and TV screens, the information of which is dirtied by political manipulations or by people's stance. It is a disheartened job. In this section, we closely examine the book "War Porn" by Christoph Bangert (published by Kehrer Books). The author, who is a photojournalist, gathered a collection of his most crude pictures, those that are so terrific that newspapers and magazines do not publish, but nonetheless we almost morbidly long to see. He obliges us to choose whether we really want to open or not the pages of the book that are sealed together, and obviously we open them. Bangert wonders, as we do too, why publishers use to discard the most dramatic and truthful photos.

Other section include the photo-reportage of Paolo Patruno, who has gone back to taking pictures of the problems related to maternity and births in Africa, and intends to go on doing it. Patruno has provided for many years documentary evidence of what has also become one of his personal causes: to tell us that to come into the world is absolutely not to be taken for granted. Foreign newspapers and organizations have spoken of his project "Birth is a Dream", which however has neither been disclosed nor published in Italy so far. We do it now because we want to join with the things he believes, and because photojournalism supports itself by telling us not only great but also – and particularly – minor stories, those that usually are not shown or displayed, and cannot be done up in order to become more attractive. It is possible to conceal the pictures but not the persons and their pains and problems. Thanks to Christoph Bangert, to Paolo Patruno, and to all the photojournalists who show us every day that "the others" do really exist. ■

pictures and texts by Christoph Bangert

War Porn

You were not supposed to see these images. Non one was. Most are unpublished. Many I don't recall ever having taken, as if someone had pushed an erase button in my head. You wake up in the morning and you can't remember your nightmare. But you know it was there. I'm the one who took all these pictures. I know it.

These are not my best pictures. I have beautiful, dramatic, well-composed pictures from war and disaster zones. Landscapes, portraits, details; the boom and the bang. But this book is not about the drama of war or the phony myth of the heroic war photographer. I'm just trying to start a conversation about how we deal with-or don't deal with-images of horrific events. It's an experiment: What's happens if I switch my self-censorship mechanism off?

We all self-censored. I do. Picture editors do, their usual refrain being, "Unfortunately, this goes beyond

what we can publish." and you do, too! Our brains try to protect us by preventing us from looking. We are afraid that we might be afraid. We worry that the act of looking could be morally wrong, exploitative, even voyeuristic. This self-censorship mechanism, often wrongly confused with piety or respect, sounds like a good, honorable thing at first. Self-censorship can be extremely dangerous not only on a collective, but also on a very personal level. My grandfather, who served the Nazi regime, chose to forget what he had seen. We remember in still images. Not in video, not in text. If we don't allow our selves to look at horrific images, how will we be able to remember events comprehensively? We have to remember! because if we don't, these events did not take place.

At time there is anger. The invasion of Iraq made me angry. Our many failures in Afghanistan make me angry.





CHRISTOPH BANGERT

Born in a rural area of western Germany in 1978, he worked in Palestine, Darfur, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Pakistan, the United States, Lebanon, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Iraq where he spent nine months in a mission for the New York Times. His images have been published on the leading international publications. He is currently working on a long time term project about the Fukushima nuclear disaster. His book, War Porn, was published in May 2014.

<http://warporn.christophbangert.com/>

But people who tell me that they can't look at my pictures make me angry, too. I'm a polite person. I always say, "Oh, no problem, I understand. It's a dilemma". But that's a lie. Deep inside, I'm screaming at the top of my lungs, "You can't look at my pictures? Well, try harder! You softy first world whiners" Wake up! Those are real people! If you can't stomach it, get the hell off this planet! You HAVE TO look at it!" But as I said, I'm a polite person. I don't talk like that. It wouldn't be fair, either. It takes a lot of guts to look at some of my images it's not easy at all. Some say, "What's the point of showing these things? We know that wars and disaster are horrible events." But are we really aware of just HOW horrible they are? Yes? Why are we so shocked by these pictures, then?

What you see in this book is my personal experience. And in a way it's yours, too, because these things happened in your lifetime. You and a viewer are complicit. You're the one who bears the greatest responsibility, because you have the power to make a conscious decision about what you want to see. There are pages in this book that are closed. You can easily open them with a knife or a letter opener. It's up to you. Deciding if you want to self-censor or not is an active thing. Sometimes you may even have to force yourself. And it can require a knife.

Most of my colleagues who work in war and disaster zones have plenty of pictures like mine. All these images are sitting on hard drives, unseen. It would be too easy to blame this state of affairs, the evil of self-censorship, on "the media." I am part of this constantly mutating media organism most of the images in this book were shot for the New York Times but so are you: the person who

reads, absorbs, and pay for information. Unfortunately, there is no conspiracy. "The media" is made by people.

Horrorific images have the ability to shock and dehumanize, just as pictures of sexual pornography do. Much has been written about this aspect of war photography, as well as about the aestheticization of violence, voyeurism, and the weird attraction we all feel toward images of other people's suffering. I'm leaving all these clever thoughts for others to discuss. I'm a photographer. I feel I have an obligation to publish my images. If I don't, I've failed. I'm not claiming to be morally superior than, say, the young soldiers are rebels that I spent time with. And it does not matter to me what you call what I do. Call it war porn, if you like. I believe that it is impossible in horrorific images entirely, just as it is impossible to avoid the exploitation of the subject dilemma, at least to a certain extent. OF COURSE photographers exploit their subjects! OF COURSE it's war porn! These are wonderful excuses not to publish horrorific images. But there's one problem: these pictures are non fictional, unlike the ultra violent Hollivood movies we so readily consume, or the gruesome video games we play. They document and interpret real events. How can this work possibly be meaningless or insignificant? How can we refuse to acknowledge a mere representation a picture of a horrorific event, while other people are forced to live throught the horrorific event itself?

Ultimately, this book is my insurance policy for the day that my grown grandchildren ask me what wars and disasters are like. I won't talk about horses. I will have to pull this old book from the shelf and say, "This is what it was like for me. This is what I remember. Look."