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"Horror and Humanity. Pictures as Media of Social and Political Conflicts in North American Art from the 18th to the 20th century"

Vortrag im Rahmen des Kolloquiums "Actualité de la recherche"
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Raum 021, Bâtiment des Philosophes 22, boulevard des Philosophes, 1205 Genève

This lecture will examine the relationship between horror, violence and humanity on the basis of examples from North American art that bear reference to war and social unrest. The starting point is John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), a painting exhibited in London in 1778 at the height of Britain's war with the American colonies. The analysis is twofold, focusing, on the one hand, on the rescue of the white boy under attack by a shark, an endeavor that appears to be hopeless, and, on the other, on the role and figure of the African-American who tries to save him. A line will then be traced from Copley's painting to Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). In *Jaws* the summer guests of the resort are not the only ones threatened by the white shark. The beast also interferes with the Independence Day celebrations, commemorating the July 4, 1776. The film also alludes to a trauma of the American Navy, namely the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis*, the very vessel that delivered the nuclear components for the Hiroshima bomb.

Copley's painting and Spielberg's movie, the latter depicting the shark as a killing monster and as the main character for the first time in the history of film, both seize, within the tradition of their respective pictorial medium, upon a dimension of horror which is at once societal and political. Director George A. Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* also lets his deadly threat reside within human society, thus revolutionizing the genre of the horror movie. This movie was especially relevant before the backdrop of two tragic historical events – the murders of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, who, shortly before his death, had paved the way for the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In the conclusion of the lecture, Romero's interpretation of the black hero's role will be compared with the figure of Copley's African-American main character and his relationship to his white companions. Indeed, none of the three examples explicitly depict a historic event of national significance. The general validity of these works lies in their presentation of a pathos formula that illustrates the overcoming of deep-seated human angst in favor of humanity and solidarity in specific political and social conflict situations.