

Clarion Voice for Women  
Alice Schwarzer in Vienna

*The legendary German feminist was a guest lecturer at the University of Vienna in May*

By Ana Tajder

Students of the University of Vienna are used to many things – like having to arrive at lectures an hour early to get a place to sit! Otherwise it's the floor. But what they are definitely not used to are TV-crews, mics, flashes and cameras taking over their lecture halls.

For Alice Schwarzer's visit, however, that's just what they got. The living legend of Germany's feminist movement was in Vienna in May to teach at the Institute for Communications (*Publizistik*) and at the School of Applied Arts (*Angewandte Kunst*). The interest was huge. At the University's main building, the hall was completely filled: young women students, a few young men, scattered groups of middle aged women, and many, many journalists, were sitting on window sills, radiators and all over the floor. At the *Angewandte*, where the classroom was located on the ground floor, the students were even standing out on the street, listening to the lectures through the open window.

Alice Schwarzer has been at the fore front of German public life for a very long time. Having begun as a journalist in 1969 writing for leading German magazines and newspapers, like *Düsseldorfer Nachrichten* and *Stern*, at the same time, she became increasingly involved in the fight for women's rights in Germany and France. Her book *The little difference and its huge consequences*, was published in 1975 and became Germany's first feminist bestseller. Soon, however, her urge to write about women's topics closed many doors in German media; she was simply too threatening. So she went her own way, writing books, and founding her own magazine Emma, launched in 1977, which soon became a leading voice in German public life.

Schwarzer became the most prominent figure of "second wave" feminism in Germany. She won various awards, wrote 20 books and made Emma into an established success. She has been loved and hated, supported and fought against – but she has always stayed in the spot light, fighting for the rights of women. Her last book *Damenwahl*, is a history of women's right to vote and a portrait of German female politicians and their professional paths.

At the *Publizistik*, Schwarzer talked about the importance of seeing the critique of one's writing as a chance to develop. She spoke extensively about the difference between journalistic attitude and opinion: Attitude is great, she said, but the more attitude a journalist has, the better researched the stories have to be. Pure opinion, she believes, should be avoided. She also warned against the current trend of psychoanalysing, especially when reporting about crimes, which takes the focus away from the crime and turns the criminal into a victim: "Journalists are not therapists," she said.

She is also deeply concerned about media ethics. "Always stay a human being first (and a journalist second)," she told the students, "and respect other human beings" – the best defence against unethical decisions. In her final lecture, she talked about interviews, which are "an art form" rather than just a document.

"Keep the person's individual tone, use their concrete examples, keep the questions short and respect the interviewee," were the most important lessons.

Although feminism was not the original topic of Schwarzer's lectures in Vienna the discussions quickly lead to women's issues. For one older journalist in the room, it was both great and sad to see that today, feminism, women's emancipation and gender equality are still burning topics, just as they were hundred years ago. But as Schwarzer made clear, it is not that we have made no progress, it is that the issues themselves continue to evolve.

At the top of the list in the Vienna lectures was pornography, which Schwarzer defines as “combining sexual desire with torture, violence and humiliation.” But her audience -- both students, and the media -- wasn’t so sure. “Today, one cannot generalise when talking about pornography,” a journalist countered. “There are even pornographic films made by women for women.” Schwarzer, however, was so deeply rooted in the beliefs springing from the history of her own time – still using a 40 years old film *Deep Throat*, as an example – that no further discussion was possible. The audience was left wondering if, at least in this case, she knew who women had become.

For the dangers of pornography, she used the shooting in the school in Winnenden: Tim K. had only shot women. Later, police found more than 200 pornographic pictures in his computer. In the most recent issue of *Emma*, a young man who had considered a shooting spree at his school, talked openly about his wish to shoot female students and teachers. Schwarzer connected this phenomenon with what she sees as the forced *pornographication* (“Zwangspornographisierung”) of our society, where small boys are forced by peer pressure to watch pornography, and where media is saturated with images that hover on the edge.

The rise of violent computer games too plays a part, Schwarzer said, as well as men’s fear that their manhood is endangered by the growing emancipation of women. As a result, she claims, young men nurture a violent hatred of women and cling to a virtual image of a woman as a sexual object. We are witnessing confusion between the sexes: “Women are not yet where they wanted to be, but men have slipped downwards.”

She asked the “third wave” generation, which she calls “wellness feminism” not to fight the second wave feminists but to climb onto their shoulders, using their achievement as a base. “Once women become slower, it is over,” she warned.

Whatever the topic was, Alice Schwarzer taught her audience many valuable lessons. In contrast to the usual dry and theoretical lectures at the University, hers were made of flesh and blood. She transported the importance of passion and consistency, of the importance of courage, of staying human, responsible and joyously alive. Standing there, self-confident, and happy about who she was and what she was doing, she was her own perfect example.

On the way out, it was clear that the students felt empowered, ready to make the world into a better place. But each time they reached the sunny entrance of the university building, they would bump into a big group of uniformed “Burschenschaftler,” Austrian conservative fraternity brothers.

“Contrast-Programme!” someone said with a smile. There is still a lot of work to be done.

Schwarzer’s newest book *Damenwahl* (2009) about the history of women’s right to vote is available in German only.

Available in English:

*The little difference and its huge consequences* (1975)

*Simone de Bouvoir Today* (1984)

*After the Second Sex: Conversations with Simone De Beauvoir* (1984)