

## An eye on the world

Interview with *Reza*

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“War and peace correspondent”. This phrase, for which Reza has a particular fondness, perfectly encapsulates his view of the world, a view full of optimism in an ocean of suffering, hope under the rubble, humanity behind the madness of mankind. But revealing all this is not enough for Reza. Since the beginning of his career, the photojournalist has never ceased to use his profession and his fame to solve the problems he encounters on his reportages. No doubt because he sees a little clearer than the others...

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*Humanitarian Alternatives – 2019 will mark the fortieth year of your career as a photographer. But in some ways you have always managed to juggle photography and humanitarian work.*

**Reza** – That’s true. I started out as a professional photographer in 1979 during the Iranian revolution. I left my country in 1981 because I had become persona non grata for my photographs: the Islamists wanted to kill me. In 1983, when I was working for Time Magazine, the editorial board asked me to go and do a reportage in Afghanistan, giving me barely a month to do so. That was nothing for such a big country, and I would have to spend some of that time in Peshawar, Pakistan preparing for the journey, as it was from there that you entered Afghanistan at the time. But it was also where all the refugees were to be found – political groups in exile, journalists and writers who were part of mujahideen groups but not fighters. I told myself I would never have the time to cover this immense country in the time I had been given. That’s what gave me the idea of teaching photography to a few refugees before they went back to their country. I went to the market in Peshawar, went round the shops, bought five cameras and some rolls of film, and gave my first lessons in the refugee camps. In some respects it was there in Pakistan that my vision and my approach to my work as a photographer were born, work which has always gone hand in hand with my work with the populations themselves. Obviously, I went off to produce my own reportage, but as I left my pupils I told them that, even with the basics I had taught them they could still take photos and bear witness, in short, that there would always be some trace. To tell the truth, I heard very little from them, as it was difficult to keep in touch in the circumstances and because at that time we did not have the same means of communication as we have now.

It was only much later, again in Afghanistan, that something amazing happened to me. It was in the early 2000s, just after the Taliban had fled, I was in Kabul where I had just founded Aina, an NGO which provides training in information and communications through the development of educational tools and media. Aina was becoming the rallying point for all the journalists who went to Kabul. But there was still a woeful lack of electricity in the city. Whenever it was turned on it was only for the hospitals, the United Nations or government buildings. And only the mayor of Kabul had the power to decide where to allocate it. My friends at Aina asked me to go and see him to try and get this access, a necessity for the journalists. I arranged a meeting with the mayor and when I went to see him he gave me a very warm welcome indeed. I was surprised,

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but I told myself that they must know that I was a friend of Massoud... So I explained why I had come, he listened to me at length and carefully, and then burst out laughing! I was very annoyed, I didn't know what to think. He said to me: "Do you know why I'm laughing?" "No", I replied.

— "Because you haven't recognised me!

— Sorry, but this is the first time we've met.

— No, it's not the first time – it was you who taught me photography in the camp!"

All of a sudden everything changed, he was my pupil from 1983 again, but the relationship was no longer the same. When I asked him where his camera was, he told me that he no longer took photos but that it was thanks to the camera I'd given him that he'd been able to meet people and take interest in lots of things he didn't pay attention to. "And then I became mayor of Kabul!"

*H.A. – Afghanistan is very much present in your life story. It reminds me of Kipling who regarded this country as the nexus of world history because it was here that Russia and Great Britain played their "Great Game" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I get the impression that this country plays a similar role for you, the role of "nexus", sanctuary, refuge even. What actually happened between you and Afghanistan?*

**R.** – There are two things. The first, and without doubt the most important, is what happened in this country in the 1980s, an incredible, historic time and movement, a battle between two extremes. On one side the Russian army, the biggest army at the time, the most powerful and also the most brutal. On the other, a nation of peasants straight out of the Middle Ages whose best weapons were Brno rifles, Czech hunting rifles from the Second World War. What fascinated me was this meeting of brute force and the strength of will of an entire nation. The second thing, is that it is a country which shares common history with Iran. We have the same culture, the same language and we know the same poets. It's the same civilisation. For me who had to flee Iran, my own country, a country to which I could not return – and still can't – I found in Afghanistan what could, on a human level, become my second home. Every time I go there, it's a bit like going to back to my roots, it's a country that is familiar to me, where I like chatting to people and, obviously, making myself useful.

And there's one other thing about the Afghans: that pride, that nobility even, which makes them capable of getting themselves killed in order to protect you, without asking anything in return. It was during my first trip, in 1983, that I experienced this. On the way to Kabul, I was accompanied by 15 mujahideen and we had a long walk through the mountains. But we always walked in a group, the 15 fighters very close to each other and me. With my limited experience of war, I took the liberty of telling the commander that it would be wiser to keep a few metres apart in case we were fired upon. The commander thanked me politely for this advice... and for the three weeks we walked, would you believe it, but the men stayed close by me. I even got angry about it, telling the commander that he wasn't looking after his men, always giving him the same advice about distance... Back in Peshawar, I took advantage of the calmness of the hotel to tell him again that even though everything had gone well, he had still made several mistakes by not respecting these basic safety rules. I shall never forget his reaction: "Basically, you are correct", he said, "but I'd better tell you the truth. We passed close to Russian positions on several occasions and we formed a wall to protect you: that way, had they fired we would have taken the bullets". And when I asked him why he hadn't told me that, he replied: "Because we didn't know you, we were frightened that you would panic if we told you the Russians were there: we didn't really know what experience of war you'd had. But on the way back, after seeing how you had behaved during the battle in Kabul, you will have noticed that we held back a little..."

**H.A.** – *You mentioned Massoud. How did you meet him?*

**R.** – I should have met him that same year, 1983. For this first reportage on Afghanistan, originally we were a group of three of us photographers, and when we allocated the tasks I was the one who had to go and see Massoud. And I had the hardest task because everyone had something against him: most secret agents wanted to find him... and the others didn't want us to find him. Strangely, the night before I left, when I got back to the hotel after being invited out to dinner by fellow photographers, I fell seriously ill – I was the only one affected. Seriously, I almost died. No doubt I had been poisoned, although we never knew who could have had done it. Result – I didn't go to see Massoud during this, my first trip, and one week later, recovered, I was able to set out with the group of mujahideen to Kabul. It wasn't until two years later that I finally got to meet him. In 1985, Massoud was still being pursued by Russian, Afghan and Pakistani secret agents. It was a real manhunt. I was told that I'd never find him, and then, after three ambushes from which I managed to escape, I finally reached him.

**H.A.** – *Afghanistan in the 1980s also saw a sharp increase in humanitarian work, particularly by French organisations. I imagine that you often came across NGOs in the field?*

**R.** – Yes, but I had already seen humanitarian organisations in other conflicts. My first contact with them was in Iran, during the war with Iraq. My hand was injured by shrapnel from a mortar bomb. At the hospital they told me that they'd have to cut my hand off as it was impossible to get the pieces out. I didn't want them to cut my hand off. So I fled the hospital by jumping from the first floor. I'd heard that there were some French humanitarian workers in the area and I managed to meet up with two doctors, Bernard Kouchner and Francis Charhon [former Chairman then Director General of Médecins Sans Frontières, member of the Steering Council of Alternatives Humanitaires – Editor's note], who confirmed that there was no need to amputate. I managed to send an x-ray of my hand to Paris and, in return, a letter from a French surgeon confirming that he could operate allowed me to flee Iran and save my skin as I was being increasingly threatened by the authorities. At the same time I enrolled at Paris 8 University to continue my town-planning studies – I had trained as an architect. That's how I was able to leave Iran and reach France in 1981.

**H.A.** – *And in 1983 you were teaching photography to Afghans in Pakistan. But you didn't stop there...*

**R.** – I carried on with this in South Africa in 1985. I really wanted to cover apartheid. As I had no accreditation as a journalist I entered the country as a tourist, as ... an "elephant hunter"! When I arrived in the country, I realised that whenever the army and police wanted to conduct an operation in a township they declared the zone out of bounds for journalists, just like the Israelis do today. They set up checkpoints and if you try to get through, you are either expelled or sent to prison, depending on whether you are a foreigner or live there. I once hid in a coffin to get into one of these zones where the police had killed 17 young people: they had banned journalists from attending the funerals. I managed to get round the ban by coming to an agreement with the coffin maker who could enter the township.

It was then that I told myself that, once and for all, the people concerned had to be trained. Once again I bought a camera and gave it to a young man who lived in one of these townships; I

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trained him and he became a photographer. My idea was always the same, be it with Afghan refugees in Pakistan or young people in Cape Town: you have to train the people who are living through their own story.

I continued in 1986 when I was in the Philippines to cover the revolution against Marcos. I realised that there were quite a few Filipino photographers, but they had very little experience. So, at the same time as I was working as photographer for Paris Match, I was organising workshops with local photographers: every day I would look at the photos they'd taken, review them, give a few tips and take it from there.

I applied this concept in France in 1992. A friend who was working in the rundown suburbs – he ran a local mission – told me that the young people were smashing everything up, and asked me if I could do something. So I started another photography course, a long-term project which is still running and has now spread to the poorer suburbs of Buenos Aires in Argentina. What interests me is how photography can help young people in the suburbs and the suburbs themselves. It's not simply a case of training a few young people, but of seeing how, by having them work on different themes and organise major exhibitions, events and conferences, we can make city people see what life is really like in these places and that they are not the inhuman no-go areas we are led to believe but places where young people talk about art and culture and that reflect their humanity.

In Avignon, I adapted this concept for fifteen or so young people who had gone through difficult times – drugs, prison – by asking myself how I could use photography to help them find work. Again, I trained them up in photography and reportage whilst trying to find out what their dream job was – because every youngster, everyone, has their own idea of what a dream job is, be it dustman, gardener, printer etc. So over three months I asked them to produce a reportage on this job. With the local mission, we found companies and individuals who agreed to allow these young people to come and produce a photo-reportage. And they were so motivated that they were the first to arrive and the last to leave. In short, they were curious and threw themselves into it. And then they were given a job! The aim was not that they become photographers – if they did, then great! – but to see how, with a camera, they could become part of society, find work and come out of their shell.

*H.A. – Therefore, you are working on and with culture to fight not just the breakdown between France's cities – or foreign cities for that matter – and their poorer suburbs, but also the spread of the culture of war in countries in conflict? In short, photography is a kind of medium...*

**R.** – Absolutely. For me, it is always an opportunity to experience something new, and build social and individual relationships that can help people. For example, the organisers of the famous World Press Photo told me that they would like to launch a photography training course in various countries around the world. I did the first two sessions in Bangladesh and China. Two or three times a year for three years I went and trained young people who went on to become professional photographers. It's not without reason that there has been an increase in the number of Bangladeshi photographers in recent years: nearly all of them are people I trained, and some are now trainers themselves. They are keeping the adventure alive. It's the same scenario in China where some of my pupils have won World Press Photo awards. I support all these projects on a voluntary basis, taking time out from my photography work, and I frequently meet humanitarian aid workers from Médecins Sans Frontières, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), Médecins du

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Monde and Unicef. Over the course of my training projects, we have created links of exchange, and sometimes of collaboration, with the humanitarian actors. Whenever I can I give them some photos or give a talk.

**H.A.** – *It sounds as though a real mentoring system has been created here!*

**R.** – Absolutely. I have always maintained my links with humanitarian organisations. We exchange information. For example, I remember chatting to Francis Charhon in 1992/1993 about Rwanda and Burundi and he told me that something terrible was happening, as we were already witnessing the massacres. So, six of us photographers went with RSF to document all this and show the world what was happening. We had organised a press conference for 6 April 1994 to condemn what we were convinced was happening, i.e. that the country was on the verge of genocide. And it was on that very day that the plane carrying Rwanda's President Habyarimana was shot down – the signal for the horror... Some months later, after an exodus of tens of thousands of survivors to the Kivu region of the neighbouring country then known as Zaire, Unicef and the Red Cross told me that they had launched a project to reunite tens of thousands unaccompanied children with their families, but were having difficulty completing the project given the sheer enormity of the task. On my own it would have taken months to take pictures of the 12,000 remaining children concerned. So I suggested training four or five refugees to take the pictures. I had as many cameras as required and hundreds of rolls of film brought in from Paris. They took the 12,000 pictures and made five copies of each that were displayed in five camps. And by inviting families to look through them, we helped 3,500 children find their parents.

In short, every time I identify a social or humanitarian problem or any another crisis, my first question is: can photography play a part? And by dint of the fact that I am in contact with humanitarian organisations in refugee camps and countries at war, I can often see what's missing. Something had already clicked in my head in 1982/1983: around the same time that I was in Pakistan for the reportage I've already spoken about, I read in a newspaper that there had been a shooting at a school in the United States, and that immediately after the police and doctors had been sent in, dozens of psychologists were sent in to talk to survivors. I started to think about the trauma and the idea that if psychological support is needed it means that people feel the need to talk in such circumstances. Of course, but what about countries that have been at war for years, where children are born and then grow up with bombs exploding all around them without this psychological support? How can we help them overcome these traumatic events? I thought at the time that I couldn't be the first to ask this: the United Nations and the humanitarian organisations must have thought about it... But that wasn't the case. In any case not enough to offer a quick and concrete help. I gradually realised that these wars and conflicts generate two completely separate and distinct types of destruction. The first is material, physical, visible: destroyed buildings, roads, schools, hospitals, dead and injured people. But the second is invisible: trauma, "wounded souls" as they say. I gained an even greater understanding of all this when the Russians left Afghanistan and the United Nations asked me to be director of their operations in the north of the country for a year. I really was at the very heart of the United Nations system: I was in charge of distributing aid and I met all the NGOs. That year really allowed me to understand the role and functioning of humanitarian organisations from the inside. And it confirmed my idea that these stakeholders simply repair the physical and material destruction, which is fine, but there is no mental reconstruction. But what can you do in a country that is constantly at war, like Afghanistan? You cannot find 300,000 psychologists who, in addition, do not speak the language or know the history of this country and its people!

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It reminds me of a young 12-year-old Cambodian boy I met on the road one day. I was with Serge Moati when we saw this little fellow walking along, tired, a rifle loosely carried on his shoulder, wearing clothes that were three times too big for him, a terrible sight. I took a photo of him, called him over and asked him what he was doing. His name was Chang and he told me that he'd become a soldier to avenge his father. We were in touch with a very good local NGO who looked after orphans and street children, so we took him there: he was washed, given good clothes, and as he liked music, I bought him a harmonica. We managed to find his mother who was obviously very pleased to see her son again. Two days later he fell ill, and in his feverish state he constantly repeated "I want to avenge my father". We told ourselves that this would pass, but a few days later we learned that he had fled, leaving behind everything he had been given except for the harmonica: we never saw him again. He's not the only child to have seen their parents dying in a war; others have seen their homes destroyed, but what can you do with these children if all of them want revenge? That was when something else clicked in my head.

### *H.A. – How to stop the cycle of violence...*

**R.** – Yes, because there's no end to it. Humanitarian organisations rebuild houses and put up tents, attend to healthcare and provide food, but if the only thing these children have in their heads is the idea of vengeance, then they are helping to put avengers back on their feet. It is difficult to explain this to humanitarian organisations who regard it as a criticism. But I am convinced about my idea, and when I ask myself who could replace these psychological crisis units at country level the first thing that occurs to me is women, as they are the best family psychologists. Women, mothers know how to talk to children, and even to men too. And which group of women could play this role if not journalists, actresses, intellectuals. I stood by my idea: that women – and men too, of course – speak to the people through the media. It was so obvious: we had to create groups of women and men, train them and give them the means to produce newspapers, radio and television programmes that would reflect this concept – that the media and culture can help lift people out of their trauma just like a psychologist who comes and speaks to everyone one-to-one. Except that here, we would be addressing millions of people. It was this idea that I implemented in Kabul when I founded the NGO Aina in July 2001 – three months before the fall of the Taliban regime. And the first thing we did was to set up a radio station in Kabul... with the voice of a woman. Can you imagine that – the voice of a woman!

From that point on, we started to train hundreds of women and men to become cameramen and camerawomen, journalists, presenters and actors or actresses. We ran television programmes and a mobile cinema project for two years. This project came about from discussions with humanitarian worker friends who told us that they had to get messages across to the populations, messages about a particular virus or a malaria epidemic in a certain region. I remembered that we used to campaign like this by distributing posters or even putting on plays. I said: "Why not use the cinema?" It's much easier. Once the film is made we just need some good 4x4s that can reach the villages and carry screens and projectors. The most important aspect is, of course, content and I did not want to show a doctor in white explaining what this particular disease was, or what needed to be done etc. because that wouldn't work. So I took up the idea of the stories that grandmothers used to tell and adapted it to the messages that Unicef and MSF wanted to get across. And it worked. For me, after Florence Nightingale and MSF, this is almost like third-generation humanitarian work: how the media and culture can help humanitarian organisations help an entire nation get back on its feet by using films like these, and children's books and magazines. That's the idea behind Aina in Afghanistan...

**H.A.** – *And you are currently developing it elsewhere...*

**R.** – Absolutely. I'm thinking, for example, about the work we are doing in the refugee camp in Kurdistan where children are taking photos of their day-to-day life. Because we, the other professional photographers, have been wandering through the camps for years and everyone has seen my photos or those taken by Salgado, but no-one has seen real life as photographed by the people themselves. And everyone who has seen this exhibition or the book produced by the children looks at the subject in a different light. But more than anything else, thanks to this work, all the people who live in the camps feel recognised... one of the mothers of these children said something to me one day that really touched me: "Thanks to your project, the camp is smiling again".

**H.A.** – *One journalist has said that you are not a photojournalist but a Sufi who takes photographs. Listening to you, a great sense of optimism always comes through. In the situations of war or social conflict you have experienced, have you ever felt indignation or even hatred?*

**R.** – There is a difference between indignation and hatred. Indignation I still have, all the time, constantly. But hatred, no. And never any sense of giving up either.

*Translated from the French by Derek Scoins*

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