

**21<sup>e</sup>/<sub>th</sub> Festival  
International  
du/ of photojournalism  
photojournalisme**



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*Since last year's Visa pour l'Image, in 2008, the Los Angeles Times and Chicago Tribune have filed for bankruptcy protection, the Boston Globe is likely to close down in the near future, and the French press is in a dire state. Do you think that press photographers can survive this disastrous situation?*

**JF Leroy** I'll be blunt: No! And I am not speaking as the ranger protecting an endangered species, and Visa pour l'Image will not be there to display the fossils when they become extinct. Yet the facts are there. I can see tangible evidence of this as I prepare the Visa festival for 2009. It has been incredibly difficult to find the stories and reports to fill the programs for the evening screenings and set up thirty exhibitions. It's sad and it is the first time this has happened in the twenty-one years of the festival.

*Yet there have been plenty of news events this year, both national and international. Why aren't there enough good reports?*

**JF Leroy** These days, when photographers go off on an assignment, they rarely spend more than three days in one place. So they bring back about ten decent photos. That's certainly enough for a four to six page spread in a magazine, but not for an exhibition with forty photos or for a screening with fifty shots. Every year I have seen the same disturbing situation with magazines producing very little. These days, any in-depth reporting working out in the field is more likely to be funded by NGOs than by the press.

*Magazines still produce reports*

**JF Leroy** A report published in a magazine is not necessarily produced by that magazine. Over the last three weeks, we have seen plenty of good reports in periodicals; for example Philippe Cottin's report on Afghanistan in the weekly VSD. That's all very well, but it's not a report produced by VSD. That guy went off with his backpack on his own, then his report was bought when he got back. The work Jérôme Sessini did on drug deals in Mexico was published in the Figaro Magazine, but once again it was not an "in-house" production, but simply speculation. Fortunately things do get published from time to time! But when you see photographers from leading American magazines – which will remain nameless – being told "You won't do Iraq any more, no more Afghanistan, no more Middle East, no more Africa," what does it mean to have photographers guaranteed payment? When you see a photographer under contract with a leading American magazine calling his editor on December 28 to say "I'm off to Gaza" and being told "We're not interested in Gaza" – and that's a true story – then you can draw a clear and straightforward conclusion: photographers can no longer make a living from the press.

*There is one thing which is very clear: the Web may not have money, but it can offer new prospects for photographers to have their work seen, which is no longer an option with the printed press.*

**JF Leroy** That's true, and we have a plan at Visa pour l'Image to set up a Web documentary award, in partnership with the TV news channel, France 24. For years now I've heard people saying "Visa isn't multimedia," "You're stuck in the past" and so on. I have always refuted this, saying that we were open to all sorts of things. But if you take fourteen photos and turn them into a slide show with Vivaldi's Four Seasons as the sound track, that doesn't mean you're producing multimedia. There's a whole area that needs to be invented. Samuel Bollendorff's Web documentary on miners in China was a genuine piece of journalism, proper photographic work and a totally original venture featuring an interactive interface with Web users. I'm not going to mention any names, but there are some well known sites allegedly presenting multimedia, and the photos are atrocious.

*Surely Visa pour l'Image has a role to play initiating and commissioning work in this new area, setting up a proper framework of rules on the use and Webcasting of photojournalism.*

**JF Leroy** This is a real issue we have to think about, and the idea of establishing a prize for the best Web documentary, in partnership with the TV news channel, France 24, will help us develop our ideas.

*For example, what do you see as the essential criteria for a good Web documentary?*

**JF Leroy** They're exactly the same as for a good printed photo report, i.e. quality and demanding standards for both substance and presentation. You need good photos, good video, good sound, good interviews, and, most importantly, something to say. It's all very well to provide multimedia scope and format, complete with sound, video and commentaries, but that's not enough. If you have nothing to say, the story will end up being worthless. I receive multimedia files every day: arrangements with a dozen photos strung together, without any rhyme or reason, and a soundtrack with "appropriate" music or a commentary packed with clichés and platitudes. Not only is it boring, it is also meaningless.

*Will Visa pour l'Image attempt to set the scope for multimedia journalism?*

**JF Leroy** This has always been the basic idea of our festival. We have always said that content is more important than form, and I shall keep on saying it. Take Patrick Chauvel's photos, for example; they are not all technically fantastic when you look at the framing and composition, but they are outstanding journalistic documents and deserve to be shown in Perpignan. Content, whether for video or still photos, is always more important than form. So Visa pour l'Image should be the place where new standards are set for the Web, and that's an interesting challenge.

*If there is a multimedia counterpart of Patrick Chauvel, will you present the work at Visa pour l'Image ?*

**JF Leroy** Obviously I will. For example, I've asked Samuel Bollendorff to come to Perpignan this September to present his Web documentary, because I think his work looks interesting and opens up paths for discussion, to explore ways of setting rules to be devised for the Web. I'm repeating myself, but we've been doing multimedia in Perpignan for the last twenty years. The evening shows at Campo Santo are multimedia. Do you remember the retrospective on the year 1968 around the world? That was multimedia.

*Plenty of photographers in France and around the world who find it difficult to sell their photos to the printed press, are now trying to invent a medium half-way between photography, radio, and television. Visa pour l'Image is seen as a purist, defending printed press photojournalism, so what will the attitude to this new phenomenon be?*

**JF Leroy** We're remaining open on this. The photos have to be good; the reports have to be good. Once again I can cite the case of Bollendorff – sorry to mention him yet again, but for the moment he is the only one; he has really thought about it and has ideas for presenting and broadcasting his reports. It's both exciting and gratifying to see that the Website of the Monde daily newspaper registered some 100 000 visits, of an average of 12 to 18 minutes, and has generated more than 1.5 million hits with this work. This means it really attracted a very broad readership, including people who are not necessarily newspaper readers, and who discovered photography and enjoyed it this way. But let's tell the full story. Bollendorff will probably lose his press card and end up classified as a film director, or as a casual performing artist, just so that he can keep on working as a journalist. That is just crazy. What we don't want is the "easy option." Everyone gets annoyed when I say that digital technology means we have more and more people taking photos and fewer and fewer photographers; and now it's the same for multimedia We must be demanding.

*Will there be a special Web venue at the next festival in September?*

**JF Leroy** Yes. One area will be turned into a screening area for multimedia productions. We wanted to try this last year, at La Poudrière, but unfortunately, because of the heat and problems with air conditioning, it never came about. It will be done this year. We will decide on the programming and apply our criteria. If I say "Visa pour l'Image has opened a multimedia venue," then anyone who turns up with a hard disk will plug it in and screen the work. No! It's the same as for the rest of the festival programming, we will have the same demanding standards. I do not wish to see Perpignan become a multimedia venue just because multimedia is considered a must. It's not so much a question of fashion as a question of the survival of photographers.

*You have to admit that the equipment manufacturers, such as Canon, are revolutionizing the world of photography, either deliberately or unconsciously, by producing still cameras that also do video recording. Why?*

**JF Leroy** At Visa pour l'Image we need to have exactly the same policy on these emerging technologies as we did with developments in photography when the digital era began. As I said, we have always been interested in quality journalism. A photographer with a video camera isn't necessarily a good video artist. Digital technology is all very well, but it's a trap. So is video. There are guys who have Xpress installed on their Mac and are convinced that they're Brodovitch. They get iMovie and a video camera and reckon they're the next Spielberg! Now you don't turn into Cartier-Bresson and Kurosawa wrapped into one just because you use a Canon 5D Mark II.

*Do you think that video might ultimately kill photography?*

**JF Leroy** No. In just one hour I could list 500 photos which are part of our collective memory, yet if you put them together, it would be impossible to produce twenty memorable videos, with the exception of 9/11, the first man on the moon, and little Mohamed who died in front of the cameras in Palestine.

Photography did not mark the end of drawing, television didn't spell the end of radio, and video will not mean the death of photography. There is an accumulative layering of developments. But we still need to be very careful. With a still camera these days, it is difficult to get a back-lighting effect, or poor exposure, or a picture out of focus because the camera adjusts everything automatically, by itself. But then if you take me and Stanley Greene, Stanley will always be better because he has such a good eye, and I don't. For television, if I film the same event as a professional cameraman, he'll be better because he has a real understanding of what a sequence is and how to edit a story. It's a professional job.

*Let's get back to photographers who do not want to do a video version of their reports, who don't want to produce work for the Web, and "just" want to keep on doing their job. Do you think that the purist attitude is likely to be an even greater threat for them?*

**JF Leroy** No. The decision to stick to still photography is not the real threat. I've never seen such poor work as this year; and I have never felt such gloom amongst photographers, because they are just dying to get out on the job, and they can't find the funding needed to produce and develop reports, to tell the stories with all the pictures. This is what we've noticed in the course of discussions with photographers who work out in the field, e.g. Jérôme Sessini, Philippe Brault and Dominic Nahr. Of course, in certain parts of the world, photographers are doing better. Bénédicte Kurzen, for example, is based in Johannesburg and gets regular assignments to cover stories in South Africa and Zimbabwe, because it doesn't cost much to send her there. This year, fewer than ten photographers have been sent on assignments for magazines to provide a proper news coverage and with decent conditions, which means that they can afford to pay the rent and bills.

*How about local agency photographers? Aren't they just as good as international photographers who, in the past, would come in as war reporters, based in Paris, New York or London, and who are now getting fewer and fewer assignments out in the field?*

**JF Leroy** The news cover in Gaza of the Israeli operation "Cast Lead" is a good example of this change. The Palestinian photographers there during the events in Gaza were very good; that's true. At the beginning they were the only ones out there in the field as the Israeli forces would not let any foreign reporters cross the border. This year's Visa pour l'Image will feature a special tribute to the photographers from Gaza, similar to the one we had for the Iraqi photographers three years ago. Local photojournalists have really improved, and that is because foreign photographers who came over to do reports in their countries trained them there. But the quality of their work is no recent discovery. During the war in Lebanon, in the early 1980s, Lebanese photographers took some fantastic shots, although at the time they were competing against photographers sent in by the western press which still had money then. In those days, French photographers such as Yan Morvan with Sipa would be on assignment in Beirut for six months non-stop, working for Newsweek and getting \$500 a day.

*Could that happen today? Would someone be sent off on a six-month assignment at \$500 a day? Do you know any paper or magazine that has sent someone off on an assignment like that this year?*

**JF Leroy** National Geographic is the only one still sending photographers off on long-term assignments in the field. Michael ("Nick") Nichols who had an exhibition on elephants in Africa at last year's Visa pour l'Image worked on it for nine months.

*But that's not current affairs news. What weekly magazine these days would give a photojournalist a long-term assignment and the financing to go with it?*

**JF Leroy** For a 100% news story? Not one of them. They just don't do it any more. OK, there are the agencies, the ones we used to call wire agencies – AFP, Reuters and AP – which have built up networks of absolutely brilliant correspondents over recent years. And it's amazing to see how quickly the stories are filed these days. That's one of the main reasons. Then there's the press (and too bad if I upset some people with this comment) which, twenty years ago, was run by journalists, but nowadays papers are run by "bankers." Then there are the photo-only agencies, well some of them, and they are really and truly digging the grave for the whole industry when they sign contracts for package deals at flat rates. A French news magazine recently signed contracts with two agencies, and this is the deal: "You can take whatever you like from us for 3000 euros a month." How can photography survive that? Another agency, specializing in illustration work, has devised a different system that causes real damage: you can download a photo from the site for 50 euros, i.e. it's a flat rate, whether printed in thumbnail format, as a double page spread or on the cover! How can anyone compete with rates like that? If you follow that line of argument, the men in suits running the papers will say: "I maintain that this shot is just as good as the one you're suggesting that costs 3000 euros or dollars." There you have just two examples to prove the point. This is the end of one world and a new regime has taken over, the main rule being to cut costs as low as they'll go, a regime where news is standardized, where photography as such, i.e. reporting and pictures, has been stripped of value and esteem, a regime enforced with no consideration for the work done by the photographer, for the risks run or the difficulties encountered producing the story.

*Do you think this move to find the cheapest deals, particularly on the Net, is making the position of photographer even more insecure?*

**JF Leroy** I'll tell you a story. It's the story of a young photographer who entered a competition and won a prize. An advertising agency contacted him, saying: "Your photo that won the prize is exactly what we're after for one of our clients – just the right colors, graphics etc. We'll buy it from you for 9 500 euros." The young photographer said: "Let me make a couple of phone calls and think about it." For 9 500 euros, everybody obviously told him to go ahead, that it was a gift from heaven, so the next day he called the advertising agency and was told: "We've changed our mind." He asked why. What had happened was that he'd previously put his shots online with an agency offering free access, free of copyright. So while he'd been thinking about the offer, in less than 24 hours, the advertising agency had found the photo on the site and downloaded it for one euro! So that guy lost 9 499 euros. Well, I say "You got what you deserved! If you think that you'll get your pictures published in National Geographic or Geo by putting your photos on a free Website, if you think that people will call saying 'You're fantastic, we'll send you off to Borneo to do a 15-page spread and the cover as well!' then you're mistaken, because your photos will be downloaded for a fee of one euro."

*What can be done to prevent this? Shouldn't the photographers, unions and professional associations get their act together and do something?*

**JF Leroy** But they are already! The ANJRPC and FreeLens, to name only two, are fighting like crazy. Inter-agency meetings have been held, with management present to reassure the photographers, swearing to God that they would never accept package deals at flat rates. But behind the scenes, behind these grand promises, the deals are going on.

*How can Visa pour l'Image have a role to play when the situation is so grim? Listening to your side of the story, we could easily think that there will be one last festival in September and that will be it!*

**JF Leroy** One thing is very clear for me: if there comes a day when I don't enjoy doing this festival, I'll stop. I have no intention of being the guard protecting the extinct species. Visa pour l'Image will never become the sanctuary for the fossilized remains of an extinct species. No way! But look at what's happened: ten years ago, we worked on the exhibitions and programs for the evening screenings, and had to refuse some 300 reports which were good but could not be included because there just wasn't the space. That is no longer the case today.

*Are the choices for the 21st festival going to become more radical? Will your reaction to the situation make the festival more targeted, with more advocacy defending the integrity of the work done by journalists? Or will the prevailing doom and gloom in the world of photojournalism change the way you organize the exhibitions?*

**JF Leroy** I'm going to be blunt, and I keep coming back to the basic requirement which is quality. In the course of the year, I receive 4000 reports and 3000 are worthless, worthless as photography, journalism, technique or investigation. I still get reports on Cuba with shots of a pink Cadillac and girls rolling cigars! You just could not believe the number of reports I've been sent on transsexuals in Thailand, or Cuba, or anywhere – photos where you can't see anything and you don't learn anything. Then there are stories that are just hopeless. A photographer recently sent me a report together with an explanatory text: "I have done a report on the increase in cases of tuberculosis affecting Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala." So you think maybe that's an interesting story, and we don't know about it. You put the CD in the computer and there you have 50 photos, all close-ups of guys wearing surgical masks! You don't see the hospital, the doctors, no context, nothing! Now that photographer had better find himself another job. And if he can't make a living from that, it's because he's not a journalist. There was another one who sent me sixty photos of tractors in Finland; it was a story on the role of the tractor in society. He'd be just the right person to work at Massey Ferguson, and I am obviously not going to start doing Finnish tractors to fill up the thirty exhibitions; and no transsexuals or women rolling cigars either. The answer therefore is yes, I would like my choices to be more radical.

*If you end up one day with nothing more to exhibit, will you give up?*

**JF Leroy** If I get no more enjoyment from discovering photographers, I'll stop. I believe that the real strength of Visa is the in the demand for quality and discovering something new. And we have made a lot of discoveries over these 21 years. Last year, Munem Wasif from Bangladesh was definitely a discovery – an international revelation! He has had a lot of pictures published and has received a number of awards since Visa pour l'Image. Last year (or any year), while wandering around the different venues, at the Couvent des Minimes and the Eglise des Dominicains, I could feel the quality in the program presented. There are also photographers we rediscover too, for example David Douglas Duncan and Horst Faas last year, and that's wonderful as they are living lessons in photojournalism.

*Year after year, the general public – the same people who, so we are told, will only buy magazines if there are pictures of celebrities – can be seen in ever larger numbers, visiting the exhibitions and attending the evening screenings in Perpignan. And every year, all the professionals in the world of photography join together to celebrate photoreporting. Are you exasperated by the fact that the media only show an interest in photojournalism once a year, for one week?*

**JF Leroy** A few years ago I wrote in my festival editorial that it was time to stop saying that what we do in Perpignan is fantastic, and to start buying it and publishing it. We've been saying the same things for years. Some twelve or fifteen years ago, a report presented at Visa pour l'Image was picked up and published in the press – three, four, eight times, and that is certainly not the case today.

*In recent years, we have discovered two or three highly talented photographers in their twenties, who did not sit around waiting for newspapers to offer them assignments, but set off on their own, covering some difficult terrain. Do you think photographers are still willing to run risks as part of their job, and in the current context?*

**JF Leroy** This goes back to what we were saying earlier. Ten years ago, a photographer who financed his/her own assignment and came back with a good story could always find a paper or magazine to publish it. But that is no longer so.

*Is the press the sole culprit responsible for the scarcity of good reports you have been complaining about?*

**JF Leroy** These days you need to have guts to go off on your own without any backing from an editor to produce an in-depth feature report, and even if it is bought subsequently. Look at Jérôme Sessini and his report on drug traffickers in Mexico which was published in the Monde 2 and the Figaro Magazine; he still hasn't covered his costs. The rates paid are only 25% of what they were ten years ago. Even for celebrity reporting, a story that was bought for the equivalent of 30 000 euros ten years ago, now goes for 8000 euros. They're the facts.

*Do you think there's a trend towards easy options, or even self-indulgence?*

**JF Leroy** As I said earlier, a story is only a story when set in context. It's like the TV stations at the time of the earthquake in Italy, broadcasting the same reports over and over again, the human interest tales, showing close-ups of people in tears because they had lost their niece, cousin, home or whatever. These individual experiences are not a news story. And the same arguments apply whether they're moving pictures or stills. How can Yuri Kozyrev manage to show us pictures of things happening in Iraq which we don't see on TV? Because he has a good eye and because he is a journalist.

*And because he had the rare opportunity of spending five years on the story.*

**JF Leroy** OK, but he has a good eye and he realizes that you cannot have a story on Iraq with nothing but portraits of soldiers, even if the magazine he works for asks him to do it. Sessini didn't spend five years with drug traffickers in Mexico, but he did a full report, giving both the story and the issue in context; he didn't just churn out a string of portraits. In 2007 I made similar comments on the story on the group in Paris called the "Enfants de Don Quichotte" who set up tents in the streets for the homeless. It was a remarkable social issue to report on, to cover the full story about and around the homeless. I received 153 reports and not one was worthwhile. In that case, it was not a matter of the financial risk when covering a war on the other side of the world! I'm just talking about wandering about, thinking and analyzing a situation. Look at what Stanley Greene did on heroine addicts in just three weeks in Afghanistan, which is about as tough as it comes. He managed to bring back 54 photos (I selected 54, and I could have taken 90); they depicted a real situation, and told a real story. He didn't just end up with a portrait of a guy with his kalashnikov. What I'm getting at is that when you're there on the spot, there is a way of working – it's professional journalism.

*If a very young photographer were to turn up in your office to announce that he/she intends to embark on a career in photography, what advice would you give?*

**JF Leroy** First I'd try to suggest something else. The job has become incredibly difficult. But at the same time, when I look at the work that Massimo Berruti has done on Pakistan, I am just bowled over. It's classical, effective and powerful. He's not even thirty, but his visual maturity is amazing. He is exactly the type of photographer that Visa pour l'Image should support and wants to support. Last year it was Munem Wasif, today it's Berruti, so you can see that I can still hope, and believe.

*Is this the end of news reporting?*

**JF Leroy** It is, at least through photography. We all realize that the press we loved and defended no longer exists, that we are at a critical turning point and will have to find other ways of using photos. Something must be done, urgently, to find ways of developing a new economic model so that photographers can continue to produce pictures. Unfortunately a certain era is now definitely past, and I don't think that journalists will ever retrieve the management positions in the press. I became a bona fide pessimist when I saw the management teams of newspapers and magazines calling for financing plans and schedules for the forthcoming year. You may be able to have forward planning for the Cannes Film Festival, the Tour de France and the French Open, but how can you plan ahead, complete with budget, for whatever date in the year, factoring in financial provisions to send a photographer, with a budget to cover costs, to Somalia, Iraq, Zimbabwe or Afghanistan?

*Are you really as gloomy as you appear to be?*

**JF Leroy** If I were that grim and pessimistic, then I'd stop, but I'm going on, so I still have faith, and say that we have plenty of grand years ahead of us. Thank-you, Berruti. Thank-you Wasif. Thank-you, Zalmai. They have faith, as do so many others. And I am certainly not going to prove them wrong!

*Jean-François Leroy, interviewed by Caroline Laurent & Lucas Menget (May, 2009)*

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