



# Algerian reflections on a Swiss vision of a civil war

UMAM Documentation and Research's Hangar opens its 'Algerie: Photographies d'une Guerre sans Images' show

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**B**EIRUT: It's hard not to feel some sympathy for Michael von Graffenried, especially if you're a "local foreigner" – those peculiar creatures who live overseas for years and mutate into something neither local nor foreign. The role is all the more equivocal if your chosen locale is the MENA region, and you find yourself employed as a journalist. No, not spy, journalist.

The predicament is not unlike that of Wesley Snipes during his inspired performance as the eponymous "Blade" (1998). After he commits some act of preternatural derring-do, Blade's (human) love interest glares at him and hisses, "You're one of Them, aren't you?" "No," he lisps back. "I'm something Else."

Enter Michael von Graffenried. This much-lauded 51-year-old Swiss-born photojournalist has worked in this region for nearly two decades. He has a special relationship with Algeria, where he first shot photos in 1991 and returned to shoot the country's agonizing and bloody decent into civil war.

Von Graffenried's Algerian work is the stuff of "Algerie: Photographies d'une Guerre sans Images," the exhibition currently on show at The Hangar in Haret Hreik. A meta-exhibition, it features both a sample of the photographer's riveting work alongside "War Without Images: Algeria I Know That You Know," Mohammed Soudani's 2002 documentary about Von Graffenried's work. The Hangar is playing the film in a loop alongside the photos.

The premise of Soudani's documentary seems straightforward enough. Von Graffen-

ried returned to Algeria in 1998 bearing copies of "Inside Algeria," his then-new book of photographs, retraced his steps and met with some of the people whose pictures he'd taken.

Soudani's document of Von Graffenried's travels provides an engaging profile of the state of "post-civil-war" Algerian society, while simultaneously interrogating the veracity of foreign representations of the local.

Soudani takes part in the photographer's interviews with a wide range of Algerians and supplements the vision of the Swiss with some images of his own.

He talks to men, chats with the youth and most of all, he seeks out women. Poor women – like Wahiba, a girl from the village of Rais (where 740 civilians have been killed in civil violence) who survived the GIA's massacre of most of her family – middle-class women – an apolitical woman who lost her leg in a bomb attack – and elite women – at one extreme, a political activist presiding over a meeting of the Algiers Women's Association, and, at another, models and gaping consumers at a fashion show.

If there is a motif running through these testimonials, it is that – contrary to what liberal Europeans and Americans would wish – the walking wounded who have lived through Algeria's violent recent history have little interest in forgiveness. As Wahiba puts it, "I don't want vengeance, but I can't bear living alongside" those who murdered her family. Soudani himself is diffident about casting blame, but leaves little doubt that at least as much blame belongs at the feet of Algeria's military as it does with the GIA.

As he is the co-star (and co-director), Von Graffenried has ample opportunity to share his thoughts on photography, Alge-



ria and their inter-relationship. Though you never hear Soudani's questions, the photographer's monologues seem to be responses to critical questions.

As if in response to suggestions that his international reputation rests upon the miseries of Algerians, for instance, Von Graffenried says he first traveled to Algeria "in a moment of great enthusiasm" and press freedom, just before the 1991 parliamentary elections. When civil war

and mass terror subsequently overcame the country, he says, he had to learn how to deal with it just as the Algerians did.

Later, in his Paris darkroom, Von Graffenried tells Soudani that he never strove to be commercially successful. He wasn't assigned to Algeria, he says, but went on his own. When the magazines decided they needed images from Algeria and did hunt him down, he contends, they disliked his wide-angle, black-

and-white images because they were hard to lay-out.

Today, he observes, "we're flooded with images ... in such quantities that the real ones have vanished. There are no more images that take a stand, that really show something. They're simply illustrations. I try to find a niche. A place to show slightly more complex images."

Later, Von Graffenried explains how he came to develop techniques of taking people's photographs without being noticed. "I'm a militant," he says. "I believe taking a picture is a collaboration ... I'm against taking pictures of people who don't want ... I practiced this for years until I came to Algeria. It didn't work. My friends told me to take pictures of people without asking."

Because Soudani's film revolves around people's responses to Von Graffenried's photos of them, it explicitly addresses the photographer's published remarks about Algeria being the most photophobic country he's ever experienced.

If the tone of ennobling self-justification in Von Graffenried's monologues seems at times strained, some of the Algerian reactions to his work question any claims he makes to unbiased representation.

Naturally, some of these criticisms are more convincing than others.

The most cutting remarks come from the unnamed Algiers Women's Association activist. When she met Von Graffenried in Algeria, she recalls, she thought him courageous and pleasant. Then, in Hamburg, she saw his work and was bewildered because he chose to portray only that side of the country that was most-unlike Europe – FIS demonstrations; stern, bearded men; veiled women.

Those parts of Algeria that resemble Europe – active members of civil society like herself, "the Algeria that pulsates, the biggest part of Algeria" was missing. "Michael has a deforming prism for Algeria," she says. "He looks through his prism, seeing things from one standpoint ... I told him he had a mercenary attitude."

The film's twin concerns with Algerian society and its European interlocutor come together in a climactic exchange between Von Graffenried and an Islamist named "Rachid," whose surreptitiously-taken photograph appeared in "Inside Algeria" – and whose face Soudani keeps carefully indistinct.

Rachid objects to Von Graffenried's assertion that Islam is a religion without images. "Photography isn't shunned," he argues. "You're shunned because you come here in an abnormal context, one that people don't trust. There's fear too. Many were persecuted because [their photos] were seen in books or magazines."

He says he agrees with Von Graffenried's notion that in Algeria the satellite dish is competing with the minaret. "The state encourages one and represses the other," he says. "Let's each work with maximum freedom and we'll see who wins."

Though some of his ideas are alien to Western mores, Rachid is sympathetic enough to this point. Then he opens his copy of "Inside Algeria" to reveal that he has taped pieces of blue paper over the images he finds offensive. Von Graffenried expresses his bafflement with this – though he doesn't remark that it contradicts Rachid's earlier pronouncements about level playing fields.

Rachid explains that, as in Sicily, the family is sacred in Algeria. "This book is in my

house, I someone wants to look at it, I'd like him to see what I want him to ... These pictures," he says gesturing to an expurgated page, "are unhealthy."

"This," Von Graffenried fires back, "is a wedding!"

"They're unhealthy," he repeats and asks why Von Graffenried chose to juxtapose a photo of "our sisters" standing on the street in full hijab with "an unhealthy photo of Muslim women in Algeria celebrating a wedding half-naked? ... I can understand that you want to show a contradiction, but people won't see that ... They'll say 'This way or that, it makes no difference.'"

The two men exchange their differing views on why a woman's body is a provocation, even terrorism, to Rachid but his Islamist beard isn't.

"Couldn't [the full hijab make a woman] more interesting?" Von Graffenried suggests. "It's like a package. It makes you want to see what's underneath."

"Look at the book," he opens "Inside Algeria" and gestures to one of Rachid's censored pages. "Doesn't it make you want to see what's underneath?"

Rachid gets up to answer the telephone and the film jumps to the denouement at the filmmaker's family home.

Soudani's jump cut from this still-inconclusive conversation leaves you in complete agreement with Von Graffenried. In this film, as in Rachid's censored book, you're left wanting to see more of what's underneath.

Michael Von Graffenried's "Algerie: Photographies d'une Guerre sans Images" and Mohammed Soudani's "War Without Images: Algeria I Know That You Know" are up at The Hangar (UMAM Documentation and Research) until April 20. For more information ring +961 553 604