

## GAZING BACK

### Ahmed Radi

Bernard left Bordeaux for Marrakech with the firm determination to enjoy the place, and more importantly to immortalize it into dozens if not hundreds of photographs. Recent innovations in the audiovisual industry have granted immense powers to individuals interested in seizing and fixing images of nature, habitat and people. With the enthusiasm of a young man who had just graduated from L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris, he filled his suitcases not with clothes, but with various equipments specialized in the art of taking pictures: digital cameras, long –distance zooms, useful for bringing into the frame anyone and anything from a safe position, a stock of films, up- to-date magazines on the visual, and a map with specific references to the most interesting, or more precisely the most exotic locations. As a professional, he seemed not to be concerned with individuals with feelings and histories, but with their geometries, shapes and forms. Through habit, he does not see them, but looks at them as triangles, squares, half-circles, shadows, a series of similarities and contrasts.

It is with these formal obsessions in mind that he reached destination. Before landing he had a vast overview of Marrakech from the comfort of his seat, and felt some strange power in dominating the city, making it easily accessible to his machine and his gaze. Later, back home, he would cut it and edit it into some fragments, pictures. He was waiting impatiently for the medina to be within sight in order to have a few sharp shots before it fades away. His excitement reached its zenith when the real thing emerged like in a dream: compact, homogeneous, as if built of similar houses, a block; in fact, a red big spot stretching in all sides.

The flatness of the space facilitated the smoothness of taking pictures, and this Marrakech as it first offered itself to him, like a gentle and passive bride, would remain for ever his property, his object of visual scrutiny. His father once blamed him for dissecting geography and people the way a doctor dissected patients' bodies: "My son, your mastery of techniques is superb, but you seem to show little sympathy for those poor folks on the other side of the camera. Photography is a matter of the heart." A basic, if not an unbridgeable opposition took shape in his mind between the white-coloured and spacious Bordeaux, and this exclusively red-coloured Marrakech surrounded by some green plantations. Though fascinated by its charm and beauty, he had an undefined feeling of revulsion that he could not explain; as if from the unconscious, he perceived or rather guessed at the lack of intimacy, of privacy in the shapeless, unlimited juxtaposition of houses, one near the other, one after the other. In this overcrowded conglomeration how could people develop their individualities? He asked himself. He also wondered how these people who are famous for their *pudeur* live in such closeness. As he saw the city as one huge unit, he saw its people as one big community. One photo of an individual Marrakchi is representative of all Marrakchis.

His drive, then, was typology; his method was presumably scientific since it excluded individualities. Once he would get at the hard core of the city, its essence, he would be able to photograph it accurately, and also much later to talk about it with confidence and authority as if he knew it for times immemorial. In addition, it should be presented aesthetically; he imagined himself presenting members of his family, his friends and colleagues an object of beauty, a well-wrought urn, something pure, cleaned from any social reference. He also saw his own identity-card photo as well as his photo of Marrakech on the page on culture with the suggestive headline MYTHICAL IMAGES FROM MARRAKECH.

His first contact was with the hotel receptionist. Impressed by his *babouch* and *tarbouch*, Bernard invited him to pause for a few minutes, which, in fact, turned into long sessions of photography. A ten-dirham tip was enough to make him unable to ask questions about the right to privacy and the destination of his photo, his identity. Like in a fashion show, he was led to stand, sit, turn around, change positions, smile, look stern, look afar... As he was the object of this formidable attention, the receptionist felt proud of being suddenly important in the eyes of this stranger and the center of his interest. Throughout the year he was oblivious in the eyes of his countrymen because of his not so high position and profession. "One more picture?" He asked the photographer. The tone of his voice betrayed the need for more.

Bernard was most happy to come across this figure representing eternal Morocco, *le Maroc profond*. The way this figure is dressed seemed to dominate photos of Morocco in newspapers and splashy magazines, parliament in its big session, authentic music like El Malhoun, all ceremonies and rituals from marriage feasts to burial rituals, and Friday prayers. He thought that it was a national dress, almost compulsory, but never asked questions about its practicality. His trip was too short to allow him to ask questions about culture and background. His desire was to fix more moments of this kind in the frame of his camera. For him, it is only by fixing and freezing that memory can play a vital role in remembering.

Driven by this compulsion to produce pictures, he was unaware of life in and around the hotel. His attention focused exclusively and intensely on small fragments of the architecture of walls, pillars, ceilings and chandeliers. As if autonomous, the camera recorded faithfully the infinite number of details. Strangely, he did not take enough time to see and appreciate the things he photographed, connect and communicate with the people he framed. Necessarily, these persons and these things must have something behind: a story to be told, a history to be recorded, absent communities, cumulative experiences, some kind of civilization.

Proud of his technical professionalism, of being rooted in his contemporary culture which celebrates living in the present, he finished quickly his fast-food sandwich and embarked on his visual exploration of Marrakech. His bag resembled a rucksack, full as it was with all forms of small technologies that captured the real and transformed it into virtual beauty. Armed with his camera, ready to seize any opportunity that offers itself to his sight, he wandered slowly and prudently in the medina. Carefully, he photographed from a distance water sellers, monkey and serpent entertainers, henna designers and story tellers. He took all his time to gaze at them, to place them into the frame, and have a shot. He selected those features which he thought were most unique, bizarre, folkloric, and suggestive of something archaic. A sense of joy and happiness seemed to overcome him, for taking pictures is more than a passion; it is his *raison d'être*, a profession. He got more excited and started to approach more closely and more boldly his subjects: sellers of all kinds; orange juice, dry fruit, and *djellabas*.

All of sudden, out of nowhere, a figure, perhaps a young man in his early thirties, began to approach the photographer as if to say something to him. He seemed to be Moroccan, slightly dark-skinned, with something in his eyes that Bernard could not decipher or decode. Some form of threatening resoluteness, quite different from the receptionist's submissiveness. Wearing jeans and a casual tee shirt, he could not be categorized as either from the West or from the East. Perhaps he was familiar with both of them. This was not the

kind of person that the Frenchman was interested in photographing as he said nothing about Marrakech in his appearances. He was more of a banal character in any city of the world.

At first, Bernard thought that the young Moroccan guy was looking at someone or something in his vicinity; that is why he moved his eyes around to make sure of the nature of the object of the gaze. To his surprise, the young stranger seemed to be looking fixedly at him; in fact, his slow-paced steps were progressing towards him. A sense of fear became apparent on his features, mixed with some kind of embarrassment, and the inability to come to terms with a most bizarre situation. In a twinkling of an eye, the native of Marrakech took in a rapid gesture a camera from his bag and began in a series of shots to take pictures of Bernard: one, two, three, four....from the front, from the back, from the two sides....from different angles ...close up...zooming.

Bernard was unsettled; he felt he was naked in a public place, watched and mocked by thousands of eyes. He hid his face in a gesture of despair in order to protect his privacy. "Stop it please!"