

«I'VE NEVER SEEN SUCH STRENGTH IN PEOPLE»: AN INTERVIEW WITH PHOTOGRAPHER
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Jérôme Sessini
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«Я ніколи ще не бачив такої сили в людях»: інтерв'ю з фотографом
Жеромом Сессіні

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Валерія Шульга

Жером Сессіні – французький фотограф, член *Magnum Photos*, у своїх роботах висвітлює одні із найважливіших історичних подій останніх 30 років. Записала інтерв'ю Валерія Шульга студентка кафедри історії мистецтв Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка.

У першій частині інтерв'ю Жером розповідає про початок своєї кар'єри в якості фотографа-аматора та людей, які його надихали. Він почав займатися фотографією у віці 23 років, а наразі є провідним фотожурналістом, приєднавшись до *Magnum* у 2012 році, став його повноцінним членом у 2016. У об'єктиві Жерома політичні потрясіння, соціальні бунти та людська боротьба. Роботу в якості фоторепортера він розпочав у 1998 році, коли по дорученню фотоагенції «Gamma» висвітлював конфлікт у Косово. Відтоді був занурений у деякі з найважливіших подій останніх років, включаючи війну в Іраку, повалення президента Гаїті Жана-Бертона Аристіда в 2004 році, захоплення столиці Сомалі Могадішо ісламськими бойовиками, війну в Лівані в 2006 році та конфлікт у Сирії. Його роботи мають одну спільну властивість – вони оминають засобів сухого документування, заглиблюючись у окремі історії звичайних людей, для того щоб показати світу соціальні трагедії у мікро-масштабі.

У другій частині – фотограф пояснює чому Україна є для нього найважливішим проектом і ділиться своїм досвідом документування подій сучасної української історії. З 2014 року Жером Сессіні почав висвітлювати події в Україні від Революції гідності. Після подій Майдану фотограф протягом декількох років подорожував Україною. Те, що він побачив, всі історії зламаних війною людських життів він зібрав у своїй книзі «*Inner Disorder*», яка була опублікована у 2021 році. Його робота *Final Fight for Maidan* стала переможною на *World Press Photo Awards* у 2015 році. У інтерв'ю Жером Сессіні ділиться історією створення цього знімку. Через декілька днів після початку повномасштабного російського вторгнення в Україну в 2022 році Сессіні почав роботу над документування цих подій, створюючи серії фотографій для таких видань як американський щотижневий «*The New Yorker*» (Pritchard 2022).

Жером Сессіні говорить про свій підхід, як фотожурналіста, до створення цілісного наративу у серіях його фото. Жером завжди намагається кумунікувати із людьми, яких він фотографує. На думку фотографа, єдиний спосіб донести щось до своєї аудиторії – відчути та пережити кожну історію.

Ключові слова: Жером Сессіні, *Magnum Photos*, фотожурналізм.

I. Becoming Photographer

Valeria Shulha. When and how did your path as a photographer begin?

Jérôme Sessini. I started when I was 23-24, maybe, as an amateur photographer.

I'd been taking pictures of the people around me, my family, and the landscapes of my village, and at some point, a friend of mine gave me some books on the history of photography. I discovered American documentary photographers from the fifties, sixties, and seventies like Diana Arbus, and Lee Friedlander, and the one who made the biggest influence on me was Mark Cohen, an American photographer who's still alive now. I understood that photography was not just a way to record, but also a way to express your vision and your feelings. So that's how I started. And 3 or 4 years later I came to Paris. I was supposed to stay there only for 4 months, while studying at a sort of photography school, but I'm still in Paris, and that was 20 years ago. I started photographing protests and political issues here in Paris. It was way far from my initial intention, but at some point, the war between Kosovo and Albania started. I had been working as a freelance photographer for an agency at that moment and they sent me there. They gave me a little bit of money and films, and I went to Albania first, because Kosovo was not possible to go inside. In total, I spent 6 weeks there and got an assignment from an important magazine. This is how everything started. So, I didn't really choose to go to the conflicts or war zones. But I'd found myself in the middle, and I realized that it was something natural for me to document such situations. I felt at ease. And I had something to tell about what was happening with those countries.

V.S. And about Robert Frank? Was he your inspiration as well?

J.S. Robert Frank is the master for me. He was one of the first photographers whose work I studied and, of course, he influenced me even if it's not conscious. But if you look at my works, my photography is way the opposite of Robert Frank or Diana Arbus, I am shooting in color, mostly and I'm covering events like armed conflicts. So it's different. But maybe there is an influence on my work.

V.S. In your opinion, is photography a more powerful tool than video in terms of telling stories and touching your public's conscience? And why?

J.S. I'm a bit idealistic, but I think if the photography was done with a certain purity of soul and will it's way more powerful than the video. Maybe not at the first sight. You may look at it and feel nothing at first, but it will remain forever in your memory. The video is very powerful to communicate and it seems more powerful at the first sight but it doesn't remain in your memory as a still image does. Photography remains longer in the memory not just of a single person, but also in the collective memory of society.

V.S. So, it allows the viewer to answer some questions. Some people may perceive it in one way while others in another...

J.S. Exactly. Again when it's a good photograph it doesn't give you all the keys, you have to look at it and search for your way of understanding. What do you want to see? You have to answer this question as well.

V.S. And when did you join the Magnum cooperative?

J.S. It was 11 years ago in 2012. I entered as the nominee in 2012 and became a member in 2016.

V.S. Working as a Magnum photographer did that give you more abilities to cover the events or to express your creative energy?

J.S. I don't think so. I mean Magnum is great, for one thing, is that there is a great diversity of photographers out there. Photojournalists and artistic photographers you work with. So, of course, when you look at your colleagues it inspires you. But when I entered Magnum in my 40s, I already knew what I wanted to do. I don't know if Magnum helped me in a way, but I've been doing everything on my own, without asking. And I'd always been very focused on what I wanted to do so Magnum didn't change my way of photographing.

II. Covering the events in Ukraine

V.S. Talking about your projects, you've been covering events in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Ukraine. But is there any project that is the most important for you personally?

J.S. Yes. Definitely, Ukraine. During the Maidan uprising in 2014, I came to Ukraine for the first time. And I knew nothing about Ukraine at that time. I was supposed just to cover the protest in Maidan. But something caught me and 4 years later I was still working in Ukraine. My book about Ukraine was published in 2021. So 2 years ago almost. I thought I was done with Ukraine. But with the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I said to myself: «I can't just watch the news on TV. I definitely need to go back and continue my work there». So, Ukraine is the most important project for me. It's also because there I've learned a lot about humanity and the power of people fighting for something they love.

V.S. Maybe there's something remarkable for you, what do you feel about the Ukrainians you're picturing?

J.S. What I've witnessed is the incredible courage and strength of the people of Ukraine. I remember mostly in Borodyanka and Kyiv, where I made a series of photos for the New Yorker Magazine. I saw apartments completely destroyed by missiles and their owners. They'd been working their entire lives to buy an apartment and they lost everything in one night. And a few days later they were coming back to their apartments to collect their belongings. I've never seen such strength in people. Everywhere missiles were shelling the cities and just a few hours later firefighters, police, volunteers, and civilians fixed everything. Life starts again.

V.S. And how did the owners of the destroyed apartments in Kyiv for example react to the fact that you were taking pictures of them?

J.S. They were very open. Because I didn't just come there to take pictures. I was talking to them, establishing a connection by asking simple questions: «When did you buy this apartment?», «How much did you pay for it?», «What is your average salary?». Just to understand what people were losing. So, people really accepted me and were open to telling me their stories.

V.S. So your way of covering the events is like telling the whole story, not just one image. Is it always a long process for you to approach people before taking pictures? Do you need to gain their trust to tell the story?

J.S. Every situation is different. For this series of photos of destroyed apartments of course I needed to introduce myself at first, introduce my approach, and get to know the people I was photographing. But in Irpin, for example, where people had been evacuating under the shellings of the Russian army, there was no time to speak. Everything was in action, quick and dangerous. I remember I took a series of photos of a family running under the shellings, carrying a baby in their arms. At that time I didn't have time to talk to them, because they were running away. Because it was extremely dangerous. Everything depends on the situation.

V.S. How do you feel being in this kind of danger? How do you understand what needs to be covered in a moment of danger? Is this some kind of an instinctive feeling?

J.S. For me, it's pure instinct. I know how far I can go and when I have to stop. In Irpin there were two other photographers with me: Ukrainian and Italian. We were working together. My colleagues had been feeling danger at one point, they told me: «Let's leave». But I felt like I needed to stay because something was about to happen. And didn't feel like it was too dangerous. So, you have to evaluate your experience to understand when it's time to stay or leave. This is your own decision. Nobody can tell you to stay or not. I believe that this is about an experience, you develop some kind of instinct. I've been lucky so far.

V.S. How did you decide to come to cover the events in Ukraine last year with the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion? And how was your arrival organized?

J.S. I arrived 6 days after Russia invaded Ukraine last spring. When I first heard the news it went straight to my heart. I'd been staying in Mexico at that time, and right away, I called my agency. I said: «I need to get the ticket and come to Ukraine right now». So, I dropped my work in Mexico, came to Paris, and then to Poland. And then 2 days later I arrived in Ukraine. I had the strongest feeling that I must be there.

V.S. What was the atmosphere in the country at that time?

J.S. There was extreme tension, you could feel it everywhere. I was even arrested by the police. They'd been looking for Russian saboteurs, so I was arrested by accident. I spent a few hours in the police office and realized how tense the atmosphere was. I saw refugees in Lviv, and the strongest feeling of fear was everywhere. As well as in Kyiv, I knew the atmosphere of this vibrant city before, but at that time it was completely different. It seemed to me that the feeling of fear used to be common for the country at the very beginning of the full-scale invasion.

V. S. Maidan Uprising: Can you tell the story behind the photo from the Maidan that was taken by you and won the World Press Photo in 2015 of an Orthodox priest, blessing protesters on a barricade?

J. S. It was taken on Instytutska street, one day before Yanukovych fled Ukraine. I arrived at around 9 a.m. at Maidan square and it was completely empty. Right behind the hotel «Ukraine» I'd joined the small group of protesters, and realized that somebody was shooting at the protesters. They were shooting from everywhere: snipers and the police. Few hours after this priest came literally from nowhere. He was like an angel. Standing in the middle of the barricade he'd blessed the protestors and then left. Even a year after the events when I'd come back on the anniversary of the Maidan's events I questioned a few protestors that were there that day. Nobody could tell who the priest was. None of them saw where he came from. I'd been trying to find that priest for a year to interview him, but I couldn't. So, I don't know, maybe he was an angel (laughs).

V. S. Being a witness of the event in Ukraine, you undoubtedly have your own opinion as a person, but how exactly do you manage not to emphasize your thoughts and not to bring them as the subject of your photography?

J. S. Well, I don't know for sure but I have always tried to spend at least one week with the people I'm photographing, and then convey what I see. In my opinion, the photographer must be close enough to take a good image.

V. S. What do you think is the main aim of your work as a photojournalist and photographer in general?

J. S. When I want to show something to the world I need to feel it myself at first. If I don't have any feelings or empathy for the people I'm photographing I'll never be able to give something to the audience. Thus, very selfishly, my opinion is that it's only about me, the people, and the situation I'm conveying. If I connect with the people I'm photographing the image will touch the audience, and the message will reach them. If it's only 10 or 20 people I still will be happy because in this case, I'm bringing more understanding to the world. I'm showing its people struggle. If people in the other part of the globe understand and feel what's going on at this moment in Ukraine, for example, then my work has meaning.

V. S. If you're asked to summarize the experience of capturing the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in what few words would you do it?

J. S. That's a very good question, because I'm planning to go back to Ukraine in February 2023. I want to spend 2 months there to make my second book. I'd been thinking about the words that I could choose as the name for it, but I haven't found them for now.

V. S. What do you think about building war-times memory in history? Because looking at Soviet propaganda, for example, we don't see the horrors of the war, only the heroes of it. This could be a trap for future generations if they are grown up with the delusional perception of the war as something good and heroic from one side. This leads to what is happening now and what creates an imperial mentality (Hutchison 2004, pp. 306–313)

J. S. If you're being honest with yourself and your audience - the war is nothing but darkness, sadness, and losses it's just evil. Sometimes even the editors of different magazines ask me why my pictures are so sad. Because this is what I've witnessed. This is reality as it is. No matter if you like it or not. And as a photojournalist, I'm not going to make a nice picture to please the magazine. There are too many cliches for them. It's another way of modern world propaganda for blind people that do not want to accept reality. What I'm trying to create is a universal language of feelings and emotions, so that my audience of different countries and nationalities can understand it.

V. S. About the universal language what advice would you give to beginner photographers? How to create it?

J. S. I like the comparison with the Japanese katana. To make the best one it takes 5 years. And then you need 5 more years to get to know how to use it. The same with photography. You need to find your way with discipline, honesty, and humanity.

And then you have to find out how to use your skills to bring something to the world. If you can manage that, maybe you'll be a good photographer.

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«I've never seen such strength in people»: An Interview with Photographer Jérôme Sessini

Jérôme Sessini is a French photographer, and member of Magnum Photos, in his works covers some of the most significant historical events of the last 30 years. The interview was recorded in January 2023 by Valeriia Shulha, a student of the Art History Department of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.

In the first part of the interview, Jérôme talks about the beginning of his career as an amateur photographer and American documentary photographers as his big inspiration. He started photography at the age of 23 and now he's a leading photojournalist, having joined Magnum in 2012 and becoming a full member in 2016. Jérôme's lens covers political upheaval, social uprisings, and human struggle. He started working as a photojournalist in 1998 when he covered the conflict in Kosovo on behalf of the Gamma photo agency. Since then, he has been immersed in some of the most important events of recent years, including the war in Iraq (from 2003 to 2008), Aristide's fall in Haiti (2004), the conquest of Mogadishu by the Islamic militias, and the war in Lebanon (2006). His works have one common feature – avoiding dry documentation, they're picturing stories of ordinary people, to show the world's social tragedies on a micro-scale.

In the second part of the interview the photographer explains why Ukraine is the most important project for him and shares his experience of documenting the events of modern Ukrainian history. In 2014, Sessini began covering events in Ukraine since the Revolution of Dignity. After the Maidan's events, the photographer traveled throughout Ukraine for several years and gathered in his book «Inner Disorder» all the stories of Ukrainian's lives ruined by the war. The photo book was published in 2021. Jérôme's work Final Fight for Maidan won the World Press Photo Awards in 2015. Sessini shares the story behind the creation of this image. A few days after the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Sessini arrived in Ukraine, working on a series of photos for magazines such as «The New Yorker». Jérôme Sessini explains that the main aim for him is to create a coherent narrative in his works. The photographer always has been trying to communicate with the people he photographs. According to Jérôme, the only way to convey something to his audience is to feel and experience what you're photographing.

Keywords: Jérôme Sessini, Magnum Photos, photojournalism.

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