



Dedicated to Henk Rabau (1966–2017)

Henk, may you ever float amongst the colours of Pamir, which you always said was heaven on earth. Your smile was real. Thanks for everything, dear friend. Without your energy, your creativity and ingenuity, our film would never have happened. Sleep tight.

Pieter-Jan

پادشاهان افغانستان

Kings of Afghanistan

Pieter-Jan De Pue

The children of *The Land of the Enlightened*

LANNOO









Foreword

Pieter-Jan De Pue – better still: ‘PJ’, as he is known – is the most ‘healthily curious’ person I have ever met. When you get to know him, he initially comes across as a kind of contemporary explorer. Classic explorers would travel to all four corners of the globe in order to improve and civilise people in Europe’s image. When Marco Polo, Vasco De Gama and finally Stanley departed for far-off lands, theirs was not a cultural mission, but a political and economic one wrapped in a veneer of culture and religion. They travelled to other parts of the world to improve them, to civilise them in their own and our image, and above all, to derive economic profit from them along the way.

PJ learnt about Afghanistan from the News of the Flemish state funded channel VRT. It was journalist Jef Lambrecht’s (1948-2016) excellent stories and reports that awoke his fascination for this mysterious country. PJ was able to question Jef in depth, and it was he who set him on his course.

Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China together span an area of six hundred and fifty thousand square kilometres. There are thirty million Afghans, 80% of whom are Sunnis and 19% Shiites. Half of them speak Dari, a variant of Farsi from Iran, and 35% speak Pashtu. Following attempts by England to impose colonial rule on Afghanistan, it has taken first the Soviet Union and then the United States (and their allies) half a century to work out that a contemporary colonisation of Afghanistan is impossible. Afghans are a poor but proud people in a rich, monumentally beautiful country.

The world premiere of Pieter-Jan’s docufiction *The Land of the Enlightened* was at the Sundance Festival in Salt Lake City in 2016, where he was immediately awarded the prize for Best Cinematography. After that, the film was screened at multiple foreign festivals and he won numerous

international prizes. In 2017, Pieter-Jan received the Flemish Culture Prize for Film. The title of this book, *The Kings of Afghanistan*, pays homage to its main characters, the Afghan children who, through romantic dreams and creative pragmatism, manage to survive in this gigantic, mercilessly beautiful country.

Pieter-Jan graduated from the RITS in Brussels in 2006 as a filmmaker, but he first discovered Afghanistan as a photographer. In exchange for travel and accommodation expenses, he photographed the country for NGOs. It was during these trips that his plan to create a docufiction developed. *The land of the Enlightened* was created between 2007 and 2015, a period of more than eight years. Afghanistan is a country that does not come with an instruction manual. Some places are accessible on horse-back, others only on foot or by helicopter. PJ records the deep gazes of the Afghans and the boundlessness of their landscape. Nothing in this trip, in these photos or in this film was entirely anticipated.

As well as researching, preparing and making his film, PJ also continued to take photographs. His photos are portraits of people and landscapes, as are his diary entries. A recurring theme is his huge admiration for the country, its spectacular landscape, and the resourceful children for whom survival became the art of living.

It was never PJ’s intention to make a political film. He does not judge and he never condemns. He refuses to take sides, unless it is that of his natural allies for the film: a group of Afghan children. They became his friends and shared their secrets with PJ. A Soviet army vehicle graveyard is a fabulous playground for them. A ten-year-old who has already lost one leg speaks softly to the mine that he is prising open in order to sell the still-usable explosive to those working in the Lapiz Lazuli mines. Via a

story that unfurls in between reality and imagination, in between the dreams and the actions of small smuggler-soldiers, PJ tells us the tale of his Afghan king and the princess to whom he promised the Palace in Kabul.

The story in the film is a fiction that makes the facts easier to comprehend. Every image hovers between fiction and reality. Like the Dadaist image of the man with the horse and the bed with the rolled-up mattress in the middle of nowhere. This is not a staged composition, but the photo of a resting place for a horse and its rider somewhere on a journey in Afghanistan. PJ's photos and film are an ode to patience. He likes to talk about the gallons of tea that he drunk with village elders. In this highly feudal country, you have to show respect to all the petty rulers. Everyone wants to be acknowledged and this acknowledgement is primarily expressed in time. Time is a mark of respect.

Time is also an essential component of quality, certainly when it comes to the creation of these images. All credit to producer Bart Van Langendonck who (... sometimes through gritted teeth ...) accepted yet another delay and 'understood' yet another budgetary deviation. During the making of the film, the distance between reality 'on the ground' in Afghanistan and the interpretation and knowledge of the facts by the production team in Brussels was immense. Bart Van Langendonck has never been to Afghanistan ... because he did not want to witness 'the dangers' at first hand. He feared that more information might have convinced him not to continue with the project because the risks for staff were too great.

The Land of the Enlightened is also the story of a strong team. Sound engineer Henk Rabau (1966 - 2017) played a crucial role in winter 2014 during the final, most difficult shoots in the Pamir Mountains. This is the most important part of the film with the children surrounding the main character Gholam Nasir. Henk was more than just a soundman. His flexibility, practical intelligence and empathy made him the ideal camera assistant who also kept track of the script. He was also aware of the metres of film that had to be shot every day. He took care of the food supplies for

both humans and animals, as well as the fuel for the Land Cruiser and the generator. He charged the batteries and repaired technical defects. He both rewrote and rethought the script with PJ if this seemed necessary. Without Henk, the shoot in 2014 would not have been possible following the attack on the team by the Taliban in 2013. This is why PJ dedicated the Flemish Culture Prize for Film posthumously to Henk Rabau.

The Afghan team members also deserve a special mention. Wais Amiree was the production manager in and around Kabul. His calmness and smart approach to the negotiations with the numerous authorities did wonders, and made it possible to film in sensitive places. The assistants Najib Sahil and Aman Mohammedi were very faithful allies. Camera assistant Quasim Housseini was on exactly the same wavelength artistically. Today, he continues to work as a director in Afghanistan.

Bram Celis was the sound engineer during the filming with the American army in 2010. With his humour and daring, he made the dangerous moments lighter and more bearable. Sound technician Boban Bajic Slobodan and camera assistant Brice Dujardin made a valuable contribution to the shoot in the Lapiz Lazuli mine. Grégoire Verbeke, director's assistant and a good friend, was the perfect sounding board during the last two years of the production process, both in Afghanistan and during the post-production in 2014 and 2015. With the making of the film *The Last Omelette*, he created an authentic and sincere record of the film's genesis. In 2015 the project reached its conclusion with a trip to Pamir, together with Grégoire, to screen the film for the children and the group of people around Gholam Nasir in the high mountains. It was the first time after years of collaborating they saw themselves on screen, realizing they were part of a film. This projection was the finale of eight years in Afghanistan.

I got to know PJ via choreographer Wim Vandekeybus. I spoke to him just before his second departure for Afghanistan and promised to organise an exhibition at deBuren in Brussels of the photos that at that point did not



yet exist. PJ fills you with confidence. deBuren exhibited the first images in 2008. In 2011 the photos travelled to the Biermans-Lapôtre Foundation in Paris and in 2016 they were exhibited at Gallery C41 in Antwerp.

PJ's images – both film and photos – come about as a result of a slow process. The landscapes with caravans of people and animals taken from the helicopter show the silence of Afghanistan. Despite the presence of thirty million Afghans, the country is, above all, empty.

The people and especially the children that PJ depicts are the country's magicians. They have been hardened by the capricious climate in which they live. The 'actors' that PJ introduces in his docufiction are all facing a camera for the first time. The fact that PJ presented their film on an improvised screen in an exclusive screening beneath the Afghan sky is a tribute to the warm atmosphere and to the great respect that he has for these debutants. *The Land of the Enlightened* is thus also a film about a relationship between a very attentive Westerner who directs images with enormous care, and happy, grown-up Afghan children who want to be viewed heedfully and with love.

Afghanistan is a 'farming country' with a highly specialised agriculture. Afghanistan is a 'country of conflict' with complex geo-political interests and a rich, still-to-be exploited subsoil. With these images, PJ has shown that Afghanistan is also a country of smart and exceptionally talented people. In Afghanistan, the forces of nature are the most dominant feature. But the Afghans inspire admiration. With new rituals, the men, women and children of this country are on the road from antiquity to modernity, but it is they themselves who will determine the rhythm and speed of their history.

With these photos - and his film - Pieter-Jan De Pue gives us a lesson in contemporary diplomacy. It is a privilege to gaze through his lens with him. He teaches us to see more and to look more attentively.

Dorian van der Brempt

former managing director of the Flemish/Dutch Center deBuren

5 DECEMBER 2017

“This is the Land of the Enlightened. Soon our visitors will go home. Some of us will continue working with the caravans. Some of us will grow up to be soldiers. We won’t all fight for the same side. But at the very end everybody will have the same aim as I have. I will never be a soldier. I will be a Khan and live in a castle.”

Gholam Nasir, *The Land of the Enlightened*



وقتیکه خداوند جهان را خلق میکرد پیامبر اش از مردمان تقاضا نمود تا جهت توزیع زمین در یک صف بایستند. انسانها از تمام گوشه های دنیا آمدند تا قطعات زمین های شان را تقاضا نمایند هر کس میدانند که مرد افغان کوچک و مودب است. او هیچ کسی را با بازویش بر کنار نمی زند بدین لحاظ نصرالله، نماینده افغانها در آخر قطار یا صف قرار گرفت. وقتیکه نوبت نصرالله رسید، خداوند متعجب نگاه کرد؛ من یک اشتباه کردم، او فرمود من هیچ زمینی برای تو نمانده ام". نصرالله شروع به گریه نمودن کرد. و هر که میدانند هرگاه یک مرد افغان گریه کند خداوند نیز همرايش می گیرد. خداوند دست اش را به سر شانه مرد افغان گذاشت و گفت؛ "این همه گناه من است". اصلا یک توته زمین را مانده ام که آن را برای باغ ام تخصیص داده بودم مگر از اینکه این چنین یک اشتباه بزرگ اتفاق افتاد همان باغ خود را به تو میدهم. این سرزمین نورانی خواهد بود". در دنیا هر کدام حسرت سرزمین ترا خواهد خورد، تو مهمانان زیادی خواهی داشت در مقابل شان سخاوتمندانه برخورد کن.

نصرالله بسیار ثروتمند شد. وطن او پر از گلهای مملو از شربت و شربانهای آبی با سنگ های گران بها بودند. پادشاه نصرالله یک قصر مجلل اعمار نمود و آنرا با سنگ های آبی پر نمود. تمام دنیا میخواستند با پادشاه نصرالله معاملات تجاری داشته باشند. حتی چنگیز خان جنگجوی مقتدر. مگر نصرالله میخواست که تمام ثروتها را برای خودش نگهدارد. او نماینده چنگیز خان را به قتل رساند. چنگیز خان لشکراش را فرستاد تا فرد افغان را بکشد. نصرالله امر کرد تا یک پشک سفید و یک پشک سیاه را بیاورند. هرگاه پشک سیاه برنده گردد، چنگیز خان. پیروز خواهد شد. پشک سیاه برنده شد. نصرالله وحشت زده شد و از افغانستان فرار نمود. چنگیز خان بدون پادشاه شان ضعیف بودند. چنگیز خان همه شان را از بین برد. از آن روز بدینسو لشکرهای بی شمار باغ خداوند را یکی بعد دیگری به غارت بردند. افغان ها هنوز هم منتظر پادشاه شان هستند.

When God created the world, his messenger called on up the people to line up so he could distribute the lands of the earth. From every corner of the world people came to claim their lands. Afghan men are not big. They are very polite and do not use his elbows. So, Nasrullah representing the Afghans, found himself at the end of the line. When it was Nasrullah's turn, God looked surprised: "I made a mistake," he said. "I don't have any land left for you." Nasrullah began to cry. And everyone knows that when an Afghan man cries, God cries too. God put his arm on the shoulder of the Afghan man and said: "This is all my fault". "Actually, I do have a piece of land left. I was going to keep it as my garden. But because I made such a big mistake, I will give my garden to you. This will be *The Land of the Enlightened*. Your land will be the envy of the world. You will have many visitors. Treat them generously.

Nasrullah became very rich. For his new land was full of flowers with ever-flowing sap, and blue veins with precious stones. King Nasrullah built a magnificent palace and filled it with blue stones. The whole world wanted to do business with King Nasrullah. Even the powerful warrior, Djenghis Khan. But Nasrullah wanted to keep the riches for himself. He murdered Djenghis Khan's envoys. Djenghis Khan sent his army to kill every Afghan. Nasrullah ordered a white and a black cat. He let them fight. If the black cat won, Djenghis Khan would prevail. The black cat won. Nasrullah was terrified and deserted Afghanistan. Without their King, the Afghan warriors were weak. Since that day, army after army has plundered God's Garden. The Afghans are still waiting for their King.





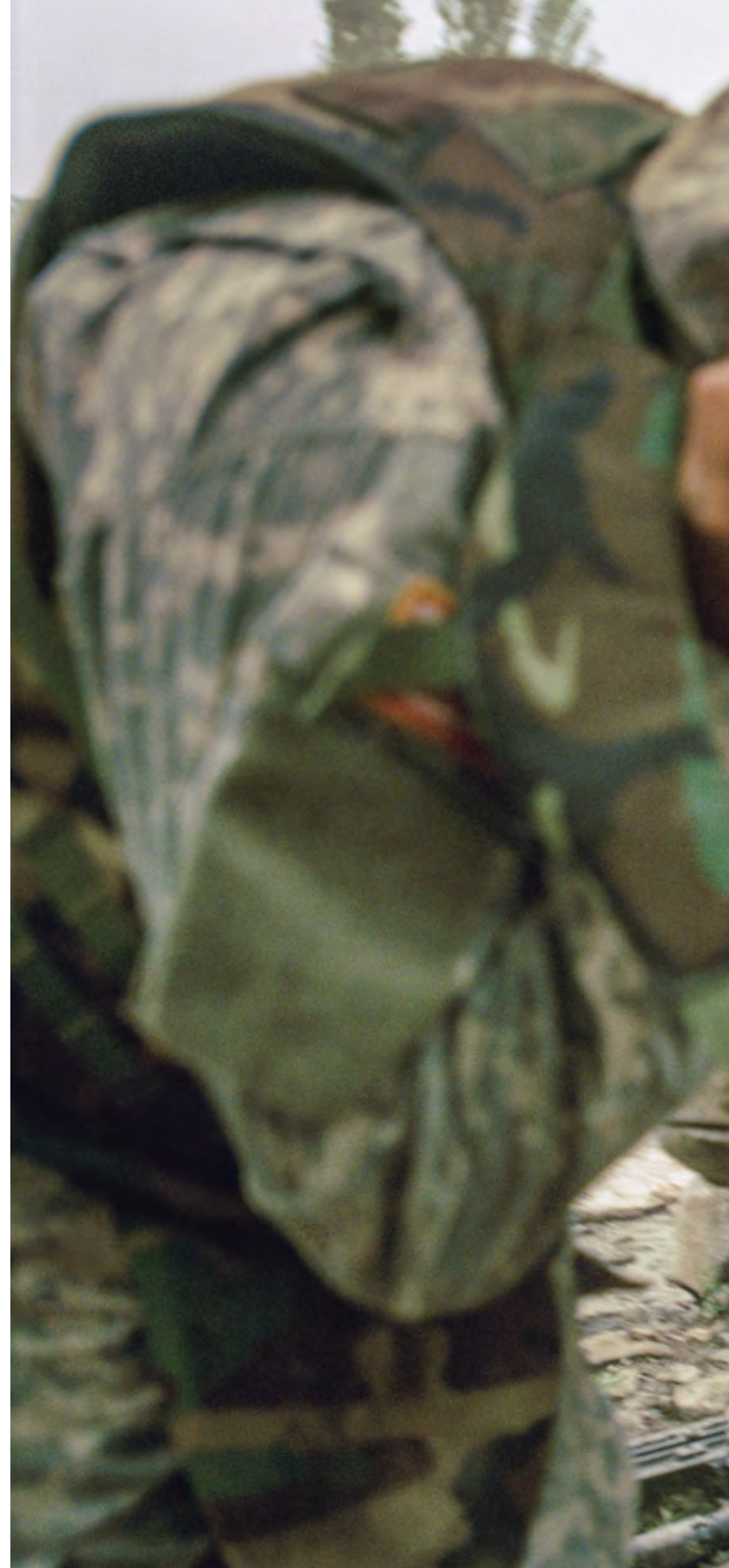






“Don’t look for the sweet life on earth”

Yuri Kirsanov, Soviet veteran in Afghanistan





“My goal is to have this place completely safe. But I need your help. Why is it when I am driving on the road, no Taliban is coming out? If there are 250 fighters in Ghaziabad, where they are at? Can anybody tell me? Where they are at? You know what, they are cowards! They hide behind hills. While you are teaching your kids, they use them as cover. How does a grown men use children as cover to attack Bari Alai? How does a man sit on the ridgeline of Gewi, shoot from there, knowing that we’ll probably gonna drop a bomb there. How does that happen? Don’t call us cowards, I am here to help. Because you are all my brothers.”

Maj. Charles V. Slider - Bravo Troop 1-23 cavalry – SFAAT 101st Airborne,
The Land of the Enlightened

















“I don’t understand why they want to conquer our mountains. Why are they important to them? They are empty and cold. Only we know them.”

Child in Nichimgam, Northern Kunar, *The Land of the Enlightened*





















PAGE 143:
Mountain climber and guide Amruddin Sanjar is preparing his garden for the summer. Amruddin and Malang Darya were the first two Afghans who reached the highest mountain peak of Afghanistan, Noshaq. (Khandood village, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Spring 2015)



PAGE 144–145:
Robinat, the daughter of mountain guide Malang Darya, harvesting the wheat. (Qasideh village, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Fall 2016)



PAGE 146–147:
The end of the road, the beginning of the horse. (Sarhad de Broughil, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 148:
Malang Darya is trying to cross the melting ice of Chaqmaqin Lake. (Chaqmaqin Lake, Little Pamir, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Spring 2011)



PAGE 149:
A game of 'buzkashi', the national Afghan sport, is being organised on the plains of Khandood village, close to the Tajik border, to celebrate the Afghan new year 'Nau Ruz'. (Khandood village, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Spring 2015)



PAGE 150–151:
Wakhjir valley, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. (Winter 2012)



PAGE 153:
Shepherd Qasim preparing a sheep offering at the memorial of Langar settlement. (Langar valley, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Summer 2013)



PAGE 154–155:
A Khyrgyz girl is doing the laundry. (Ghash Kosh summer camp, Little Pamir, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Summer 2007)



PAGE 156–157:
Three Afghan border guards on horseback returning from a border patrol near the Chinese – Afghan border. (Langar settlement, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Summer 2007)



PAGE 159:
The migration of the livestock from the summer fields towards the winter fields. (Torres Pass. Fall 2009)



PAGE 160–161:
Lunch in the snow after a film shoot for *The Land of the Enlightened*. (Langar valley, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 162–163:
Gholam Nasir and his 'right hand' Khyrgyz Baj are listening to the radio about the US army withdrawal, while enjoying a warm-water bath. (Ararkar Hot Spring, Little Pamir, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 164–165:
A Khyrgyz Khan is smoking opium. Since there is a lack of any kind of medicines in Pamir, opium is widely used as a replacement. (Karchyndy village, Little Pamir, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 166–167:
Gholam Nasir offering a medal to his future wife and princess, Marbet. (Bozai Gombaz, Little Pamir, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 168–169:
Koko Ewas sharing a package of sheep fat for breakfast, before continuing towards the Roof of the World, Pamir. (Wakhjir Valley, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2012)



PAGE 170–171:
A Khyrgyz yurt in the middle of the remains of a former Soviet army outpost. (Bozai Gombaz, Little Pamir, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 172–173:
Koko Ewas has loaded his camel caravan and is saying goodbye to his family. The women are blessing the caravan by throwing flour over the men and animals. (Sarhad de Broughil, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 174–175:
Koko Ewas and his caravan on their way towards the Roof of the World, Pamir. (Sarhad de Broughil, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 176–177:
The main characters of *The Land of the Enlightened* crossing the frozen Panj River towards Deh Khan Khaney. From left to right: Deh Khan, Band Ali, Barsh, Khyrgyz Baj, Fais Mohammed, Mohammed Isa, Askar Khan and Gholam Nasir. (Sarhad De Broughil, Wakhan corridor, Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 178–179:
Gholam Nasir and his gang galloping through the snow during the film shoot of *The Land of the Enlightened* on the plateau of near Langar settlement. (Langar valley, Wakhan corridor, Badakhshan province. Winter 2014). Photo by Henk Rabau.



PAGE 180–181:
Gholam Nasir and his group are waiting beside the former Soviet army outpost 'Broughil' for a caravan coming from the Pakistani border. (Deh Khan Khaney, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



PAGE 182–183:
A test shoot for the ending scene of *The Land of the Enlightened*: Gholam Nasir and his group galloping towards the destroyed Darlaman palace in central Kabul. (Darlaman Palace, Kabul. Winter 2014)



PAGE 184–185:
The main hall of the destroyed Darlaman palace. (Kabul. Summer 2010)



PAGE 186–187:
Shoot of the final scene of *The Land of the Enlightened*: Gholam Nasir and his group entered the destroyed palace and are overlooking Kabul (Darlaman Palace, Kabul. Winter 2014). Photo by Grégoire Verbeke.



PAGE 188–189:
Cinema Pamir: Gholam Nasir, his friends and the villagers of Sarhad de Broughil who collaborated during several years on the production of the film, are watching *The Land of the Enlightened*. The open-air screening was taking place on one of the main locations of the film. (Sarhad de Broughil, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. September 2016)



PAGE 192–193:
The core crew during the shoot of *The Land of the Enlightened* in Pamir. (Bozai Gombaz, Little Pamir, Wakhan corridor. Badakhshan province. Winter 2014)



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