

Book review for Early Popular Visual Culture

Réveiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale: Photographies et écrits de Gaston Chérau correspondant de guerre en Libye (1911-1912), by Pierre Schill, Grâne, Créaphis Éditions, 2018, pp. 480, € 35 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-2-35428-141-0

Pierre Schill's *Réveiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale: Photographies et écrits de Gaston Chérau correspondant de guerre en Libye (1911-1912)* – Awakening of the Archive of a Colonial War: Photographs and writings of Gaston Cherau, war correspondent from Libya (1911-1912) (my translation), is a timely and engaging historical undertaking that poses a number of uncomfortable questions about Europe's colonial past, its legacy and the responsibility of contemporary researchers in unearthing unsettling past narratives.

The book is produced within a wider context, spanning from the author's 'discovery' of Gaston Cherau's archive in 2008, Pierre Schill gathered a team of artists researchers who in their own right engaged with the material which resulted in a broader project: 'À fendre le coeur le plus dure' (to break the toughest of hearts – my translation), a quote taken from one of Cherau's letters to his wife. Invited artists included dancer and choreographer Emmanuel Eggermont, writers Jérôme Ferrari and Oliver Rohe, and visual artist Agnès Geoffray. Each of them created their own responses to some aspects of the collection, which were in turn included in exhibitions, performances and publications. Their work in this project is also outlined in the second part of the book, through the contributions from Caroline Recher, Smaranda Olcèse, Mathieu Larnaudie and Quentin Deluermoz, respectively.

Gaston Cherau's archive, the central object of this project, consists primarily of the material he produced as a war correspondent for a French daily newspaper, 'Le Matin', during the Italo-Turkish war in Libya (Tripolitania) in 1911 – 12. Cherau's employers, as open supporters of the Italian cause, sent him to Libya with a clearly set agenda. His brief was to report on the conflict between these two colonial forces, one an empire on its last legs, trying to hold on to its territories, and the other, a relatively new kingdom, that comes very late into the race for colonies. As a writer, rather than a professional journalist, Cherau produced a body of work that testifies to the atrocities of war and the complex political manoeuvring between Africa, orient and occident.

The archival collection consists of 229 photographs, both published and previously unpublished, published articles, correspondence with his wife, Edmée Cherau, and a literary text, written in 1926, as a reflection on some of his experiences from Libya. All documents/archival materials are introduced and analysed by Pierre Schill, they are meticulously organised, reproduced in their entirety, thus making the book a valuable historical document and a great point of reference for further research. I was especially drawn to the high resolution photographs, and their excellent quality as photographic artefacts, both in terms of their aesthetic value and the technological processes (of production and reproduction in the media at that time).

The archive acts as a useful case study for Pierre Schill and his team of artist-researchers to test the variety of ways in which the contemporary world deals with the unsettling past. This comes within ever growing concerns for decolonising knowledge and challenging singular, monolithic historical narratives, as sole interpreters of the past. In this context, multiplying the voices invited to interpret the archival records, produces an interesting effect, signalling that there are multiple stories that can

be told about the past, and that the same stories can be told in different ways. However, in this multitude of voices, there still seems to be a voice that is very obviously missing – that of the colonised. As the authors also note (p. 416 for example) there is still the question of the Libyan perspective on this story. Despite meticulous research and strong efforts to include the names of the Libyan victims who could be identified, the whole study still seems centralised within a French cultural context and potentially developed in such a way to support a very similar power structure to the one that it seemingly sets out to critique.

In conclusion, Pierre Schill's book is a very useful resource for anyone interested in French and Italian colonial past. It produces a good balance between showing and telling, reproducing the entirety of Cherau's archive and meaningfully framing the materials within a relevant historical context. The true value of the wider project within which this book originated, is in the opening up of the archive to a team of artist-researchers. It could be of interest in the context of interdisciplinary practice research (practice-as-research) or any other discourse that aims to promote knowledge sharing and query our approach to meaning making. In an effort to decolonise our understanding of the past, an obvious next step would be to invite a greater multitude of voices, especially those of the people who were most affected by Europe's colonial appetites.

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