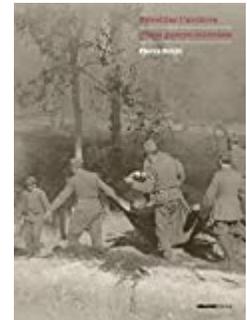




**Pierre Schill, ed.** *Réveiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale. Gaston Chéreau, correspondant de guerre, 1911-1912.* Ivry-sur-Seine: Creaphis éditions, 2018. 478 pp. EUR 35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-2-35428-141-0.



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**Published on** H-Italy (July, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Matteo Pretelli (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

## New Archives

Pierre Schill's book *Réveiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale* revolves around the fortuitous discovery of the documentation of the war correspondent Gaston Chéreau, sent to Tripolitania between 1911 and 1912 for the Parisian newspaper *Le Matin* during the first months of the Italo-Turkish War. Chéreau arrived in Tripoli on November 26, 1911, when the war had already begun. He was not the only correspondent of *Le Matin* on the war front: Louis André, the newspaper's first reporter, had arrived in the city at the beginning of hostilities. The decision to double the number of correspondents from Libya had been taken by the newspaper following the battle of Shara Shatt (October 23-26): for the decisive phases of the conflict, the editorial staff of *Le Matin* was looking for a new figure who could ensure the newspaper a leading position in news coverage. At that time, in fact, Chéreau enjoyed certain notoriety on the French literary scene—he had been a finalist for the Goncourt Prize in 1906. His involvement as a war cor-

respondent was also a sign of the increasingly mediated dimension of early twentieth-century conflicts—conflicts described, photographed, and reproduced on film according to a dynamic of diversification of the information tools that went hand in hand with the transformation of the professional status of war correspondents.

During his stay in Tripolitania, which lasted approximately one-and-a-half months, Chéreau wrote nineteen articles for *Le Matin* and took more than two hundred photos, some of which were intended for publication in the press. Alongside his professional work, we also have the private correspondence with his wife and a literary text entitled *Sur le trésor des caravans*, which appeared in 1926, the only narrative work by Chéreau relating to his experience of the Italo-Turkish conflict.[1]

Thanks to careful research, Pierre Schill has reassembled this complex corpus of sources, tracing records in various archives and reconstructing the

multiple connections, actors, and dynamics that contributed to its production. The writer returned to France on January 10, 1912, having been prevented by the Italian military authorities from continuing his reporting in Cyrenaica, where Arab-Berber resistance was most intense.

Pierre Schill's intention, with regard to the collected documents, is clear from the title: to "reawaken" an archive—the one composed of Gaston Cherau's written and photographic accounts during his stay in Tripolitania—through multiple viewpoints, which does not reserve solely for the historical discipline the task of confronting the heuristic potential of a war account. The book is in fact the result of the encounter between historical work and artistic creation: only after meeting the dancer and choreographer Emmanuel Eggermont in 2011 did Schill decide to carry out a historiographical investigation into the group of photographs found (without date, author, or place) in 2008, some of which showed a public hanging. The attention paid in Eggermont's work to the relationship between artistic performance, photographic images, and the tensions of history was the starting point for the construction of a shared historiographical and artistic path of research into the violence depicted by the discovered images (images that would later be attributed to Cherau). Over time, other artists have joined this project: the writers Jérôme Ferrari and Oliver Rohe, authors in 2016 of a literary text built around the figure of Cherau and his photographic reportage,<sup>[2]</sup> and the visual artist Agnès Goffray, with the works *Les Gisant* and *Les Regardeurs*. Eggermont himself created the performance titled *Strange Fruit*. The results of this collaboration have been collected in the exhibition "À fendre le cœur le plus dur. Témoigner la guerre / Regards sur une archive," held in 2015 in Sélestat (Alsace) and in 2016 at the Centre photographique d'Île-de-France (CPIF) in Pontault-Combault.

Reawakening an archive and addressing the historical issues it brings with it is a complex oper-

ation that cannot be limited to the publication of found documents. Pierre Schill has, first of all, decided to show the documentation and return it to readers, without concealing the mechanisms involved in the historian's laboratory; he has also chosen to make it available to society at large, placing it at the center of a collective reflection, beyond the borders of academic knowledge. The work of the artists involved in the project has therefore had to deal not only with an already defined historical narrative—this is the interesting perspective of the book—but also with an archive "in the making." The result is a deconstruction of the "historical product," to which the artists are called upon to contribute with respect for their work and their individual sensibilities (even if a shared process would have been just as interesting for overcoming disciplinary boundaries).

At the core of the book, which is divided into two parts—the first dedicated to Cherau's documents and the second built around the encounter between historical work and artistic works—there is, therefore, a "multiplication" of the "historical" perspective. Not only is Cherau's war experience interpreted through different methodological and disciplinary tools, but historical observation itself aims at reconstructing the plurality of dimensions that characterize Cherau's experience as a war correspondent.

The French writer is not only a reporter, carrying "une instance d'énonciation de la guerre" (p. 17), and indeed his work, articulated in a double register of expression, is subjected to a dual mechanism of control: that of the Italian military authorities and that of the mediatic system, with its rules, its sociability, and its logic of competition. Cherau appears in the book, through a combined analysis of public and private sources, above all for his experience as a witness to the war, an experience in which professional practice, adherence to the issues imposed by the Italian propaganda, discovery of Africa, exoticism, and awareness of the brutality of the colonial war are mixed together.

On the whole, the hybrid dimension of Cherau's experience and of his positions clearly emerges: the positions expressed in the articles denouncing the barbarities of the Turkish-Arab forces and celebrating the courage of the Italian soldiers, in line with the pro-Italian orientation of the newspaper *Le Matin*, generously funded by the Italian embassy in Paris; the more private views entrusted to personal correspondence, photographs, and literary writing, revolving around the normalization of the brutality of Italian "justice." There, the lyricism of war is questioned through the constant confrontation with images of death and violence (hanged bodies, decomposed bodies, imprisoned bodies, exhibited bodies).

Cherau's articles, photographs, and letters are observed through a careful analysis of the materiality of their process of production and by examining the conditionings that occur in their constitution: the shots, the reports sent to *Le Matin*—Schill warns—are nothing but the result of a series of "opaque transactions" to which the practice of the war reporter was subjected.

Cherau's shots are thus analyzed by observing both the material conditions of wartime photographic practice and the forms of their circulation within the press. Pierre Schill not only places the photographs in a historical context but also questions their position within the mediatic system of "Belle Époque" journalism and the role they play in the "dispositif de persuasion" (p. 363) set up by Italian propaganda. It is also interesting to note Schill's decision not to divide the photographs on the basis of theme but to reflect on the moments surrounding the photographic gaze: those of violence, those of preparation and waiting, and those of investigation and observation.

If the reconstruction of Cherau's war account could perhaps have been accompanied by an even broader reflection on the context in which it took shape (not, therefore, the account of a colonial war, but an account of that late colonial conflict that was the Italo-Turkish War), the volume *Ré-*

*veiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale* is a solid and rigorous investigation that broadens the panorama of studies on the mediatic dimension of the campaign for the conquest of Libya,[3] the first Italian conflict to be covered extensively by the press, through a systematic recourse to images as a vehicle for war propaganda.

#### Notes

[1]. The paper was published in 1926, as part of a collection promoted by Georges Bourdon, reporter for the daily *Figaro*. Georges Bourdon, *Une heure de ma carrière. Souvenirs et interviews* (Paris: Éditions Baudinière, 1926), 41-47.

[2]. Jérôme Ferrari and Oliver Rohe, *À fendre le cœur le plus dur* (Arles: Babel, 2016).

[3]. See, in particular, Alberto Angrisani, *Immagini dalla guerra di Libia: album Africano*, ed. Nicola Labanca and Luigi Tomassini (Manduria: Lacaita, 1997); Antonio Rosati, *Immagini delle campagne coloniali* (Rome: Ufficio Storico Stato maggiore dell'esercito, 2000); Nicola Labanca, *Un nodo: immagini e documenti sulla repressione coloniale italiana in Libia* (Manduria: Lacaita, 2002); Antonio Schiavulli, *La guerra lirica. Il dibattito dei letterati italiani sull'impresa di Libia (1911-1912)* (Ravenna: Allori, 2007); Isabella Nardi and Sandro Gentili, *La grande illusione: opinione pubblica e mass media al tempo della guerra di Libia* (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2009); Annalucia Forti Messina, *La guerra spiegata alle donne. L'impresa di Libia nella stampa femminile 1911-1912* (Rome: Biblink, 2011); Gabriele Bassi, Nicola Labanca, and Enrico Sturani, *Libia: una guerra coloniale italiana* (Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra, 2011); Giorgio Bertellini, "Dramatizing the Italian-Turkish War (1911–12): Reports of Atrocities, Newsreels, and Epic Films in Italy and the USA", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 14, no. 2 (2016): 131-54; and Luca Mazzei, "L'occhio insensibile. Cinema e fotografia durante la prima Campagna di Libia 1911-1913," in *Fotografia e culture visuali del XXI secolo*, vol. 2, ed. Enrico Menduini and Lorenzo Marmo (Rome: Roma Tre-Press, 2018).

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**Citation:** Costanza Bonelli. Review of Schill, Pierre, ed. *Réveiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale. Gaston Chérau, correspondant de guerre, 1911-1912*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. July, 2021.

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