

The Field of Vision of War

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REFERENCES

Miriam M. Basilio, *Visual Propaganda, Exhibitions, and the Spanish Civil War*, Farnham : Ashgate, 2013

Philippe Vatin, *Voir et montrer la guerre : images et discours d'artistes en France (1914-1918)*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2013, (Œuvres en sociétés)

Art and Culture in Times of Conflict: Contemporary Reflections, Milan: Mousse Publishing ; Leuven : Museum Leuven, 2014. Sous la dir. de Ronald Van de Sompel

- 1 "No one saw the war, hidden, disguised, on all fours, earth-coloured, the futile eye saw nothing":¹ these words uttered by Fernand Léger on 4 November 1937 reminded a Belgian audience about the altogether new conditions of the First World War. The date is no accident, once one observes during the 1930s, and especially in relation to the Spanish Civil War, the degree to which war memories enjoyed a new upsurge. With hindsight, Fernand Léger's visual intelligence is just the more subtle and acute.
- 2 In recent years, the production, circulation and uses of images in war contexts have been dealt with in numerous contributions aiming to fill in a historiographical void. Some quite new questions have been asked, and new tools have been developed to broach visual data which are complex and varied in nature. The methodological prospects opened up by Visual Studies have won over a certain number of art historians and helped to broaden the field of sources and objects, to be incorporated (or not) in the art historical corpus. More recently, the exhibition *L'Art en guerre, France 1938-1947* (City of Paris Museum of Modern Art, 12 October 2012– 17 February 2013, curated by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac and Jacqueline Munck) marked a decisive turning point in the grammar of large exhibitions, and altered our perception—even among the general public—of the production of images and visual artefacts in periods of armed conflict.

- 3 The panorama of studies on war imagery is being currently enriched by three books which deal with the challenges from different angles and on the basis of diverse materials. In his essay on the 1914-1918 war, Philippe Vatin has focused his research on a quantitatively impressive and highly varied production relating to the techniques, the functions and, lastly, the aesthetic qualities of images. The corpus encompasses all sorts of manual productions—paintings, drawings, prints, caricatures, water colours—by both professional and “occasional” artists over a four-year period. Despite restrictions and losses associated with war, the bulk of the works listed is surprising, and has imposed a choice which has nevertheless enabled the author to concentrate on a handful of painters and engravers about whom various subtle analyses are developed. The “methodological problem [...] of the relation between art history and history”² and the data of the illustrative material are in fact tackled on the basis of artists and their respective stances throughout the war.
- 4 *Voir et montrer la guerre* is organized in three parts. The first (“L’art dans la guerre” [Art in War], pp.21-167) takes us to the heart of the production of images and questions about their functions. Where public use is concerned, the status of the testimony seems uncertain, because censorship keeps an eye on things and the smallest sketch is likely to be confiscated. The challenge here is not to dwell on the impossibility of a comprehensive report of the horror, but to challenge the function of graphic arts. Showing *per se* their fragility and their insufficiency, these latter, on the contrary, find an intensive use in propaganda and an altogether novel utilization in the activity of camouflage.
- 5 Ideological debates and the way they have developed over the years are the stuff of the book’s second part (“Au-delà de la guerre” [Beyond War], pp. 169-322). The iconography of posters for national loans calls upon a heroic imagery which prepares the reconstruction and at the same time draws an image of France united around traditional, rural, patriarchal and other such values. In spite of a certain chronological lapse between the events of the war and the discourse on art, it is precisely during these same years that an idea of classical and “Latin” France was promoted, and not just by Action Française. Architecture—the art of construction, solidity, collective work—swiftly becomes the model of artistic creation, the preferred source of the vocabulary and current metaphors in the post-war discourses. The fact is that it is precisely on this point that we are obliged to point out that the bibliography in this book is, with a few rare exceptions, singularly dated, both in relation to monographic studies and to certain subjects (magazines, ideological debates, social art, etc.) which have marked the history of art in these past two decades. We must, on the other hand, emphasize the extraordinary research undertaken in archives and the considerable work on textual and visual sources. A single example will suffice: in the third part (which, in reversing the terms of the first part, is devoted to “La guerre dans l’art” [War in Art], pp. 323-529), Philippe Vatin provides us with the results of the breakdown of a sample of 5,600 works and 152 different authors. This patient survey leads us to the heart of the bellicose subjects depicted in the pictures, drawings and sketches produced by the artists during and after the conflict, taking into account all the physical, moral and psychological modifications caused by the experience of those years. The most frequent themes are analyzed with a great deal of subtlety: landscapes wrecked by trench warfare, which have become geological data, “an immense confusion between man and the earth”;³ scenes of soldiers’ everyday lives and in particular individual and group portraits; and last of all ruins, disconcerting and

ubiquitous objects on the front line, ruins of houses and factories, schools and churches and cathedrals.

- 6 The fate of religious monuments and the use of the artistic heritage is also one of the subjects broached by Miriam M. Basilio in her book *Visual propaganda, Exhibitions, and the Spanish Civil War*. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was actually fought both on the cultural and visual level and on that of the battle field. Visual materials here often play an important role because of their capacity of reproducibility and their diffusion, as is shown by the posters, post cards and printed matter of every kind addressed to the populace. Art has a not inconsiderable symbolic place here. Works confiscated from the aristocracy are publicly presented by the authorities of the Republic as a heritage reinstated to the Spanish people. The participation in the World Fair in Paris in 1937 was obviously a matter involving the Republican government, but the rebels managed to exhibit in the Vatican Pavilion a *Saint Teresa of Avila* painted by José Maria Sert. After the victory, and swept along by a spirit of reconquest, Franco's supporters celebrated the Catholic religion and the imperial history of the Spanish crown in the *Exposición de la Hispanidad*. Miriam M. Basilio's research has the merit of analyzing Franco's policies which are little known when compared with the programmes promoted in the Republican period, and sheds light on certain topics of debate (including the oeuvre of Francisco de Goya, for example), around which the strategies of both parties converge with the aim of appropriating them for themselves. As the author emphasizes, what is involved here is a very widespread illusion that artistic and visual languages could be understood by the illiterate Spanish public of the 1930s.
- 7 The propaganda of both fronts, and within each one of them, is examined in a detailed manner with the help of heterogeneous textual and visual materials which, however, raise an issue in relation to the use of the press as a source of history and art history in the 20th century. The author actually quotes articles published in weekly journals, but oddly leaves aside the visual data of photo-engraved magazines. These magazines, which enjoyed much success in the 1930s, played a paramount part as vehicles for broadcasting photographic reportages. If the photographs of, for example, David Seymour are taken into consideration by Miriam M. Basilio, nothing is said about the context of their publication, their possible circulation in several magazines, and their layout. Otherwise put, the visual narrative of the exhibitions is entrusted to the reproduction of a few isolated images, with no regard for their use or their relations with other images in the same series: none of the procedures applied for the exhibition *La Valise mexicaine*,⁴ to which Miriam M. Basilio has nevertheless contributed, have been adopted here.
- 8 The symmetrical structure of the book—two chapters devoted to Republican politics ("Figures of the Republic, the Nation and the Spanish Art-historical Tradition" (pp.11-72), "The Culture of Exhibitions: Propaganda, Painting and Cultural Patrimony" (pp. 73-125), and two chapters devoted to the pro-Franco reaction ("Genealogies for a new Spain: Nationalist Territory, 1936-40" (pp. 127-172), "Staging National Spain: Exhibitions and Cultural Patrimony, 1936-40 (pp.173-217))—leads, in the final part ("Recuperating Historical Memory: Contemporary Art and Museums", pp. 219-266) to the present-day problem of the historical memory of the dictatorship. The author presents the initiatives which have given the public access to two places of memory of the Republican Resistance in Barcelona (the Refugi 307 and the Turó de la Rovira anti-aircraft defence site), as well as the Espai Memorial Democràtic, which organized innovative exhibitions before being closed under the pretext of renovation. The controversial case of the new Army Museum

at the Alcazar in Toledo is also shown. But it is the works of five contemporary artists, two of them born in Peru, which show the power of artistic languages in the face of the demands of memory: be it multimedia installations (Francesc Abad), or various materials re-drawn by hand (Fernando Bryce), photographs of excavations which made it possible to rediscover common graves (Francesc Torres), sculptures reproducing traces of the Franco regime (Fernando Sanchez Castillo), or close-up views of objects which once belonged to Franco himself (Milagros de la Torre). The artists have undertaken historical investigations with the purpose of re-creating the Civil War and the dictatorship, and bringing to the fore, once again, the memory of places and events, in the face of the often brutal transformations of the modern period.

- 9 Fernando Bryce also makes the link between the 1914-1918 war and contemporary art: the work commissioned by the M – Museum in Leuven (*To the Civilized World*, 2014) presents a series of images chosen from among tracts and publications appearing in 1914 and re-drawn with ink on paper. The subject of all these images is the destruction of Reims cathedral and the university library of Leuven. The exercise which links the First World War and “German atrocities” to contemporary art finds in these drawings a point of convergence among the magnificent and terrifying photographs of the library after the fire which occurred on 25 August 1914, and the reflections of the artists about present-day conflicts brought together in *Art and Culture in Times of Conflict: Contemporary Reflections*. This book goes hand-in-hand with the contemporary section of the exhibition *Ravaged*, organized at the M – Museum in Leuven. The curator, Ronald Van de Sompel, recalls in his introduction the symbolic value that the destruction of historical buildings and works of art represents in wars past and present. His essay (“Out of the Libraries Emerge the Butchers”, pp. 12-35) helps us to pass through the different histories and individual perspectives of the artists, all involved in a political line of thought expressed through images. Alongside articles devoted to the works of Adel Abdessemed, Lida Abdul and Mona Hatoum, among others, conversations with the artists offer direct access to the thoughts that accompanied the creation of the works: Cai Guo-Qiang, Sven Augustijnen, Fernando Bryce and the ever powerful and poetic Emily Jacir lead us to the core of a political reasoning which finds its means of expression in the languages of contemporary art.
- 10 Fernand Léger’s above-quoted words—uttered during a lecture about colour—reveal the blind man’s condition to which the artist is reduced in the overall somber grey of war. Such is the privilege of history, to rediscover sight. The reflections of the contemporary artists, often fuelled by memories of war and its images, at times seem to remind us of the demand for a rigorous choice in a difficult visual field.

NOTES

1. Léger, Fernand. “Couleur dans le monde” (lecture given in Antwerp), *Fonctions de la peinture*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 206. Edition prepared by S. Forestier

2. Vatin, Philippe. *Voir et montrer la guerre : images et discours des artistes en France (1914-1918)*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2014, p. 13
 3. Vatin, Philippe. *Voir et montrer la guerre : images et discours des artistes en France (1914-1918)*, Op. cit., p. 341
 4. *La Valise mexicaine : Capa, Taro, Chim. Les négatifs retrouvés de la guerre civile espagnole*, Arles : Actes Sud, 2011. Edited by C. Young
- Cf. *Forme e modelli del rotocalco italiano*, Milan : Cisalpino, 2009. Edited by R. De Berti and I. Piazzoni, and *Arte moltiplicata. L'immagine del '900 italiano nello specchio dei rotocalchi*, Milan : Bruno Mondadori, 2013. Edited by B. Cinelli, F. Fergonzi, M.G. Messina and A. Negri.