

## Le Miroir, une revue photographique

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Waist-deep in mud, men dig and die in the trenches. At the sound of the whistle, they leap out of their makeshift shelters, screaming, to do battle. Machineguns crackle, bodies are stopped dead in their tracks, fragments of shrapnel fly, cries of pain resound. As far as the eye can see, the wounded and the dead are trapped in the same muck...

The harsh reality and sheer horror of the trenches obliterated all other visions of the 14-18 conflict. These images of industrial and mechanical warfare will remain forever embedded in western memories, through the popular icons created by Barbusse, Dorgelès and Abel Gance, reducing World War 1 to the marshes of the Somme and to the massacre of Verdun.

However, it is a little known fact that the press of the times reported on other events, less significant perhaps, more anecdotic and daily, but always spectacular to satisfy the expectations of its readership. Le Miroir, the “fully photo-illustrated weekly” since 1912, testified to the new reality of modern warfare: the internationalization of the conflict. Founded by Jean Dupuy, owner of the Petit Parisien, Le Miroir followed in the footsteps of the Anglo-Saxon illustrated press and its unprecedented photographic approach. In August 1914, now savvy in photographic, text and image layouts, with a strong sense for topic prioritization, the weekly attracted a large readership with its original format and thorough reports. Its unique network of worldwide correspondents enabled the weekly to cover international news<sup>1</sup> through photojournalism that had never been seen before in the French press.

When the war broke out, Le Miroir was able to draw on its experience as an asset for national propaganda, supported by its wide audience.

The images published in Le Miroir are not there to inform: they serve to certify and justify the righteousness of the combat between Civilization and Barbarism. Le Miroir is an illustrated creed, conducting a factual trial, beyond dispute. There would have been no originality to propaganda without the fully illustrated layout of the magazine and its radically new discourse, targeting a specific audience. In the throes of the war, one million issues were distributed in rural areas in all the provinces, with the objective of bringing the reality of war into households. The magazine played an essential role at the request of politicians and the military: it “illustrated” the unacceptable and incomprehensible reports of soldiers on leave, to dispel the misunderstanding between the warfront and war-free zones, between soldiers and non-combatants.

The making of an illustrated weekly requires a full and constantly renewed stock of pictures. Le Miroir’s originality resided in the fact that it organized competitions between amateur photographers including combatants.<sup>2</sup> The round of competitions was launched in August 1914, announcing that the magazine “*was prepared to pay any price for war documents of particular purport*”. With readily available hand-held, easy to use cameras, such as Kodak’s Vest-Pocket, combatants were able to take pictures despite the reluctance of Chiefs of Staff. The practice spread through the ranks of the military, forcing leaders to accept its reality.

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<sup>1</sup> In April 1914, *La Vie mondiale* attempted to compete with *Le Miroir* on the market of international news. It was unable to survive its 4<sup>th</sup> publication.

<sup>2</sup> *For photographing the Christ at Dompierre. - I don't understand. - Nobody does, general. (...) I even send them to the newspaper. Oh, it's nothing serious, it's just to eke out my army pay (...) - What have you sent them, for example? - Let me think, a photo of Faval, who has made a cross-bow as we don't have any light mortars in the trenches (...) - What else? - A photo of Bikoff, a Russian who camouflages himself in the trunk of a tree, a few mines exploding, views of a bombardment, photos of old corpses caught in the barbed wire(...). I think that's about all...*

Blaise CENDRARS, *Lice* translated from the French *La main coupée*. Paris, Édition Denoël 1946. English translation: Peter Owen Ltd, 1973.

In addition to this new source of information, other images were supplied by the Photography Department of the Army, by recently created press agencies and by foreign documents.

The combination of these sources provided over fifty original pictures on 16 pages, in full-page, half-page and quarter-page formats: a colossal achievement on a par with the ideological challenges at hand.

Le Miroir is comforting: nothing better for the morale than to glorify leaders. Like its competitors, *L'illustration*, *J'ai vu*<sup>3</sup> and *Pays de France*, Le Miroir printed laudatory photographic reports on high-ranking officers, to offset the lack of trust, the uncertainty of initial battles, and to humanize the chain of command. Reassuring faces, more like paintings than pictures, strong mustached and decorated gentlemen in determined poses are the epitome of clairvoyant leadership. The conflict seems endless and bad news pours into the cities and villages of France, because death is random. Should it be revealed? Avoidance strategy: animal carcasses are shown first, then the bodies of other animals, the enemy (Krauts)! The bodies of our « own dead boys » will be shown much later. The same debate will agitate the international press throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conflict after conflict. How to publicize the death of our own? Is this the admission of weakness or a call to battle?

War is depicted in a series of rotogravure prints on paper, the tool of the modern media. Photography's major contribution rests on a simple postulate: strong potential and original insights. Aerial photography reveals new points of view with panoramic pictures that flesh out the impression of representation. Photography is essentially the illusion of presence, movement and closeness.

The printed pictures make it easy for everyone to compare clothing or the shape of graves. They attest to Barbarism and its destructions. When appropriate, Le Miroir, an expert in the modern narrative, chooses a lighter tone: showing the funny trappings of the *poilus* and emphasizing their creativity. Drawings and engravings are no longer simple illustrations of improbable and un-photographable situations. The eagle eye of Le Miroir provides global coverage, through esthetic layouts and coordinated titles, images and captions, from naval warfare to the first air battles, from the Russian front to the Chemin des Dames.

It is impossible to measure the impact of the magazine on French populations without further analysis. The only quantitative information is the number of issues, evidencing its wide distribution and large readership. French populations could thus understand the words of the soldiers on leave. They were awed by the apocalyptic landscapes and broken cities. They were able to personify the anonymous heroes of the trenches, to view the determined expressions of our faithful allies and amalgamated the enemy in a single entity, the Kraut and his spiked helmet. Did these authentic images contribute to the war effort; did they raise the awareness of the horrors of industrial warfare, of the reification of the world? The only certainty is the originality of the illustrated weekly. Le Miroir laid down the foundations of the modern press, materialized later at the end of the 1920s by « VU », as the perfect object. And beyond, the magazine brought to light the issues of conflict representation. Between propaganda and morality, between information and showmanship, it is in fact the relationship between the paper press and the mechanical image that is in question.

**François Cheval, Chief Curator of the Museum Nicephore Niépce.**

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<sup>3</sup> *J'ai Vu*, founded in July 1914, will continue to be published until June 1920.