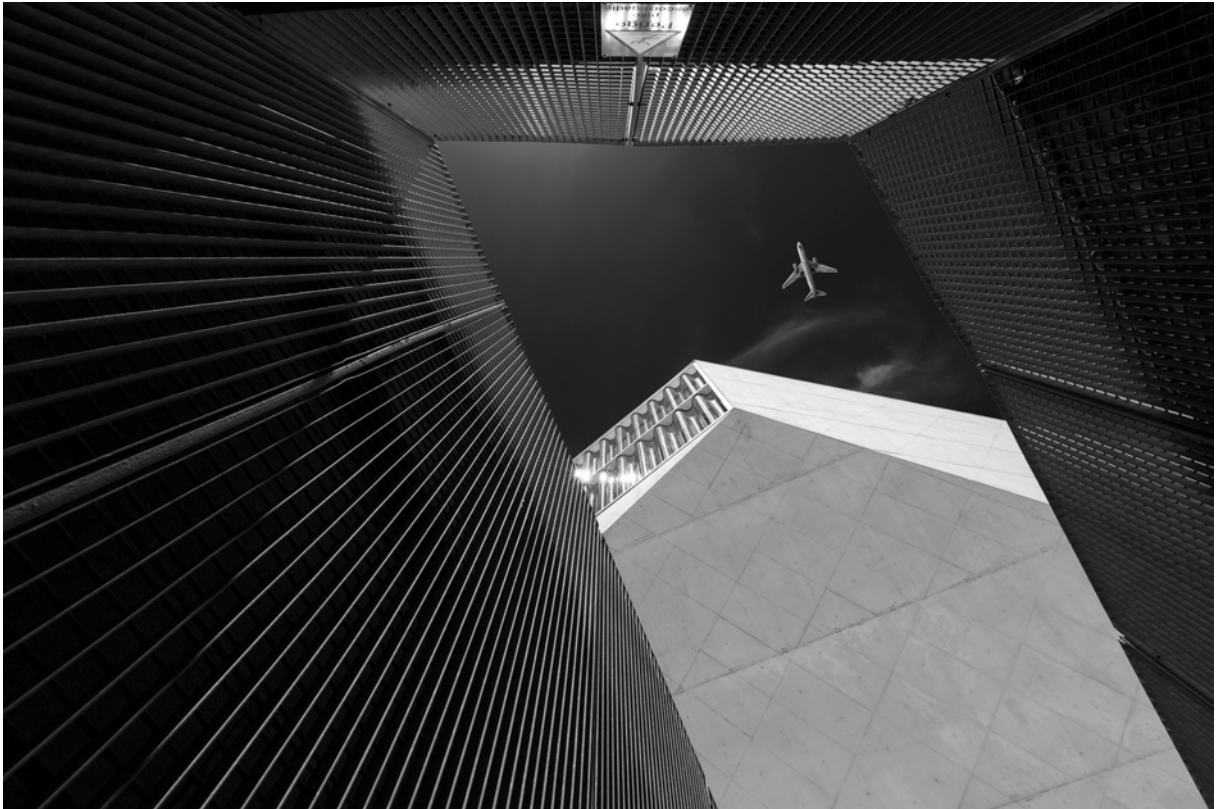




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
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THE SADNESS OF THE EARTH AND THE VOICE OF IMAGES

Felipe Cammaert

In the art of post-memory, artists often revisit the colonial past to re-interpret striking historical archives which have been silenced or forgotten by recent generations. One of the subjects that has elicited a series of profound artistic responses is the archival trace of the severing of hands; a particularly horrifying episode of the colonial period in the Belgian Congo, when colonizers cut off the hands of African people, especially children, as punishment, and as an assertion of authority.



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Among the various works of art that have critically re-staged this history has been the exhibition by the French-Algerian artist Adel Abdessemed, [Le chagrin des belges](#), in the DVIR gallery in Brussels, between the 1st and 14th April 2018. That exhibition was perhaps one of the most powerful and poignant examples of the reappropriation of colonial history by art. In a series called “[Feux](#)”, Abdessemed reproduced images of severed hands, exposing the brutality and force of this colonial practice. On one side, in six lime wood doors, the artist reproduced historical images of mutilated children. The engraved images were then charred and burnt. On the other side, the same work included a set of 84, life-sized wooden hands, also charred and laid on the floor, in a clear allusion to the colonial period. Making up the rest of the series, and bringing a certain kind of relief to the viewer of the exhibition, were two large blackened spheres more than two metres in circumference. They recalled two universes (the Western and the African?) totally consumed by the same fire that reduced the victims of the severing of hands to charcoal.

If in the visual arts the effect for the spectator is frightening, so too in literature can the episode of the severing of hands be chilling. In his book [Congo](#) (2012), the French writer Éric Vuillard starts from detailed historiographic and documentary research to trace the origins of the colonial domination of this African territory while critically describing the practices and abuses of colonial exploitation (1). However, as is the case in all of his books, what interests the writer is not official history, but the details of the specific context in which things took place. His critique of history consists in making great figures ridiculous, exposing them for what they publicly lacked: the merest speck of humanity (2).

In *Congo*, Vuillard (who has no biographical connection with Belgian colonization) approaches the European colonial memory through an imaginary portrait of behind-the-scenes politics at the pivotal moment of the Conference of Berlin in 1884 (3). Historical figures like king Leopold II, the mercenary explorer Stanley, and Léon Fiévez, responsible for establishing the practice of severing hands, are represented with the utmost cruelty. “I bring them to life to show them off like monkeys in a circus, great victorious monkeys in an ocean of misery”, writes the author in a prefatory note (p.9). In this way the French writer creates a universe that is at once real and false, in which the memory of colonialism is the object of an *a posteriori* judgement. The central chapter of *Congo* is called “The sadness of the Earth”. In it, Vuillard



refers to the geographical conference that king Leopold II organized in the Laeken palace in 1876, which resulted in the creation of the “International African Association”. This entity, that theoretically had philanthropic ends, was in reality nothing more than a tool for the most barbarous colonialism.

In formal terms, this chapter works as a kind of collage of images relating to the former colony, in which the author seeks, through writing, to twist the thread of colonial history. In one of the few moments when the narrator draws back from his ironical portrait of the protagonists of this sad history, and gives himself scope as a writer, we read:

... however, if I want to put a black Congolese man alongside these dressed-up geographers, if I want to put a basket on the seat of the carriage, and put into the basket some of the small, mutilated hands that I have seen in the most shocking photographs the world has known, who can stop me? And what if I want to screw up the portrait of General Wahis, the governor general of the independent State of Congo, and just below him, like a shaft of shadows, nail the photograph of those mutilated children that I saw in a book [...] ? (p.70-71)

Starting from documenting silenced historical archives, Vuillard makes writing the place for creating another narrative. There, through the imaginary scope of fiction, a “false” private memory of the exploitation of the African continent erupts into the story. In fact, the writer’s real motive is to do justice to the victims of colonial atrocities:

Looking at these photographs of severed hands, bodies, little baskets full of knuckles and piles of palms, we are gripped by dread. Dread, but above all an immense sorrow, and that sorrow is what brings together the medals and the stumps. It is that sorrow that demands to see the carriages, the theatre boxes and all those trinkets in all those legendary photographs so that they can devour them whole (p.71)

Yet, the sorrow that the narrator feels in front of images of torture functions, in the logic of the text, as a justification for writing a different history. In his account, he counterposes these brutal images to the illusory felicity of official photographs, such as the portrait of General Wahis that he mentions. From this moment on, the writing creates a non-chronological reality, in which two types of pictorial archive co-exist in fictional space: archival images are superimposed on Vuillard’s collage of hands and medals that, in 2012, recall the Belgian colonial past.



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However, Vuillard is perfectly aware that his effort comes too late. It is impossible to erase the inherent violence of these historic photographs. Speaking of the children who were the victims of the horrors of Belgian colonizers, he writes:

But little children do not devour images of the past. The images remain as they are: irresolute, trash. And they look at them, indifferently, through their paper eyes. And their paper eyes make us feel something so strong inside, something at once stifling and liberating, something that declares that our smallness is capable of enormity. (p.71-72)

Vuillard's lines about the victims bear a cultural and social culpability that the writer shares with his readers. Still, it is these "paper eyes" of the mutilated children that makes the narrator of *Congo* decide to concentrate his account on one of the children identified in the photo, a boy called Yoka:

Head down, little Yoka screams in silence so that we tell him another story, so that we tell him, perhaps, that all this did not happen, that the Congo does not exist, that Fiévez does not exist, and that he will return at last to the river. But it can't be like that. He is still standing, in his photograph, head lowered, for a hundred years. And for a hundred years he's been waiting to be called, Yoka. He has been waiting for his name to be said out loud and the curse to be broken and to return to see his mother (p.72-73)

What Vuillard is describing is not simply the dialogue between an artist and an archival image, but above all the attempt, through fiction, to write a different history of colonization. In other words, it is the perspective of post-memory that makes the heirs of the European colonial past look at their archives; here the photographs of severed hands. In the final account, both the charcoal of Adel Abdessemed and the fiction of Éric Vuillard break the curse of the hundred years of silence that both speak of. And, in the same way, these new stories, through the revisitation of images from colonial history, in the end give a voice to Yoka, the child in the black and white photograph.



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- (1) Éric Vuillard, *Congo*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2012. Translations here by Archie Davies.
- (2) The author has already commented on this book in the [Jornal MEMOIRS](#) in 2018.
- (3) The Congolese ballerina and choreographer Faustin Linyekula recently adapted Vuillard's book for the stage. The piece was to be presented this year at the [Kunstenfestivaldesarts](#) in Brussels, but the event has had to be cancelled due to the current pandemic.
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Translated by Archie Davies

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