



IMAGES OF ANCIENT CALABRIAN-SICILIAN EARTHQUAKES FROM A STEREOSCOPIC VIEWER OF THE EARLY 20th C. THE ETHICS OF A NATURAL DISASTERS PHOTO-GALLERY

Franco Foresta Martin (1,3), Silvia Peppoloni (2), Patrizia Tosi (2), Valerio De Rubeis (2), Paola Sbarra (2), and Sonia Topazio (2)

(1) Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia - Sezione di Palermo, Italy, (3) Laboratorio Museo di Scienze della Terra, Ustica, Palermo, Italy, (2) Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia, Roma, Italy

This research was inspired by an old stereoscopic viewer from the early 1900s, containing forty-three glass slides depicting scenes from two ancient and almost forgotten Italian earthquakes. We refer to the earthquakes that struck Southern Calabria and Eastern Sicily in the years 1894 and 1905, causing extensive destruction and hundreds of deaths, but whose memory was blurred by the subsequent, great earthquake of the Sicilian Strait of December 28, 1908 (sometimes quoted as the Messina earthquake) which caused about 80,000 deaths.

The stereoscopic viewer, built on commission as a gift for two young spouses of the Agrarian Bourgeoisie in the Messina province, married in 1904, was placed on a small table in the living room in which they usually entertained friends. It was a taxiphote model, a handcrafted copy of the French Richard stereoscopic viewers, in vogue at the time of the Belle Époque. The instrument consisted of a wooden box equipped with two eyepieces that offered a three-dimensional view of the subjects depicted in the slides: a sort of augmented reality ante litteram.

The sequence of three-dimensional images shown by the viewer gave depth of field to scenes of collapses, debris, and victims, arousing feelings of dismay; nevertheless, the show had the hypnotic charm of the apocalypse and could be replicated at will with a few turns of the dial.

In this work, we describe the taxiphote apparatus; the places depicted in the stereoscopic plates and the seismic phenomena that caused the disasters exhibited. But above all, we investigate the social and cultural aims that pushed to show the effects of local earthquakes through this kind of primitive multimedia mechanism. We exclude that the taxiphote, with its photographic equipment, was merely an instrument of entertainment pour épater les bourgeois. We rather demonstrate that it carried out an educational task. The repetition of the sequence of tragic images of earthquakes through the stereoscopic viewer had the purpose of contributing to give awareness of the looming seismic risk and to accept rationally that nightmare. The contemporary Middle European literature of the early twentieth century, through a page of Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti (1905-1994), offers us the opportunity to prove how the representation of an earthquake in the form of scenic fiction had a pedagogical purpose. A geoethical approach to reducing the seismic risk needs also to rediscover cultural and technical traces in our history to better shape modern and more effective ways to change social risk perception and to improve mitigation actions.