# Mythologizing the Vietnam War: Visual Culture and Mediated Memory
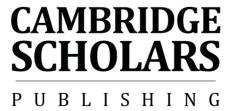
Edited by

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# POSTSCRIPT:
# A PLACE TO STAND

> Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory – part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt.[1]

Who has the right to speak about the Vietnam War and to own its legacy? American veterans? Vietnamese people? Witnesses? Military and political leaders? The answer is surely much broader, because the Vietnam War – or a version of it – belongs to all of us now. Vietnamese-American visual artist Dinh Q. Lê says that his own memory of the war comes from three sources: his personal childhood experience in Vietnam, historical research upon later moving to America and, finally, Hollywood movies, which he calls a "third set of memories".[2] These three layers merge in his 2003 series "From Vietnam to Hollywood", in which movie stills are literally woven together with photojournalistic images using traditional weaving patterns learned from his Vietnamese grandmother. MoMA says of the pieces held in its collection that Lê's work "makes viewers aware of how their ideas about the war have been shaped by Hollywood depictions". It demonstrates that, in America as in Vietnam, cultural memory of the war is filtered by a complex interplay of loaded cultural signs. The visual confusion achieved by the work leaves the viewer unsure which memories are which, and how to focus on the present moment that the artist has created. It is a perfect symbol of the difficulty faced not only by Vietnamese-American people, but by many others, of locating memories of the war and negotiating a place to stand. This place – a subject position from which to speak about the war in the present – is difficult to negotiate. For some, the process is complicated by psychological factors: the trauma of first-hand witnessing and involvement in the war, or personal guilt. For later generations, on the other hand, the complication is caused by the mediation and mythologizing that has been explored here, and also by the politics of so-called "collective memory" and "collective guilt". Perspectives are altered, too, in the light of subsequent conflicts, adding urgency to the project of remembering.

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[1] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 77.
[2] Dinh Q.Lê, APT5 Artist talk, 3 December 2006. Accessed 27 January 2014. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jy7MI_yoN84.

What accounts for the dominance of shared, national versions of events such as the Vietnam War if not collective memory? According to Susan Sontag, the answer is "collective instruction", or propaganda. In many cases the memories we think we share are the products of the culture industry's ideological agenda, carefully designed to appear neutral and self-evident. But as the essays here have indicated, even within individual nations and political movements the Vietnam War defies wholly unifying or dominant narratives; and where projects of collective instruction have been attempted, they have mostly failed. The history of war shows that losing sides are often quick to define a coherent account of their defeat so that it can more swiftly be set aside or even buried. But in America the national account of the Vietnam War has not been settled, and the scars of defeat never successfully hidden. Varying versions of its story are carried forward by military elites and political leaders; "ordinary" GIs; the anti-war movement; and those born later, whose understanding might contradict or overlap with any of the above, developing and turning into totally new versions of events with every cultural reiteration. The kind of collective instruction against which Sontag warns arguably does not apply to the Vietnam War in the same way as it might to, say, the September 11th attacks, the Gulf War of the early 1990s or the two world wars that went before. Part of the originating reason for this is surely that the famed unilateral journalistic access in Vietnam was so revealing and counter-hegemonic. Following this lead, the cultural "processing" of the war (in cinema, for example) has represented a striking range of positions, from the highly patriotic to the deeply critical.

Responding to the Vietnam War, an event that created a deep sense of crisis and brought America's very idea of itself into question, has involved redrawing the lines of personal and national identity. As a group, people in the United States (just as in Vietnam and other nations) have needed narratives. The essays here have identified some of the cultural practices by which these narratives have been and continue to be articulated, as new relationships to the past are negotiated and group identities formed and reformed. This process is obviously as fraught with ideological inflection as that of defining "collective memories". Dominick LaCapra has warned that, while the construction of basic, factual narrative is an integral part of working through and moving forward from such events, there are narratives that can have the opposite effect. His terms for these are "redemptive narratives" or "totalizing narratives".[3] These terms refer to

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[3] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 67.

any attempt to construct a narrative around a catastrophic event that glorifies or ascribes any redemptive moral or meaning to the story. Redemptive narratives are comforting but false. The context of LaCapra's critique is the representation of the Holocaust by those born later: "any restorative narrative of good overcoming evil," he says, "of the triumph of the human spirit, and of the ultimate survival of Europe's Jews despite staggering losses – in short, the culture industry's redemptive version of the Holocaust – would amount to 'false witnessing'."[4] In the Vietnamese context, Nina Hien has noted that photographers were creating such redemptive accounts of the war even as it was still going on, in a tradition of Vietnamese visual representation in which the ugly or bad – *xấu* – is condemned. Even the use of this word itself is taboo: "whereas the beautiful is frequently exclaimed, the ugly goes unspoken. Whereas good photographs are projections and visions of what is desired, bad ones reveal personal and political pasts that need erasing or a present that needs ignoring."[5] Thus the ugliness of the war was redeemed by its invisibility. Huong Nguyen has shown here that the narratives internalized and passed down within Vietnamese society with regard to the war have been more varied than this, though they have also been complicated by state censorship. But it is significant to note that the foundations of a Vietnamese narrative account of the war were laid down at the level of individual images made by photographers working in accordance with (or constrained by) a set of cultural mores that were very different from those of American and European photographers, whose own revelations were frequently brutal and ugly as a matter of principle.

Totalizing narratives have been attempted on the part of the US too. But these have, in turn, been rejected, not only at the level of political and historical discourse, but most forcefully within American popular culture. There will always be multiple standpoints from which conflicts of whatever scale are interpreted by the nations involved, but this one is different not least because those on the losing side have created such a fractured range of mythologies. In America there has been a deliberate turning towards the dark and very unredemptive (or irredeemable) side of the Vietnam War. Through popular music and, again most openly, film, religious or political paradigms that might neatly explain the war are wrestled with, exposed and rejected, usually at the level of the individual American soldier: the unjust corruption of his innocence and his fall into a kind of existential rebellion. In Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*,

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Nina Hien, "The Good, the Bad and the Not Beautiful: In the Street and On the Ground in Vietnam", *Trans Asia Photography Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2013).

to name just one Hollywood example, the use of this plotline can be said to constitute a kind of humility. The film as a whole arguably represents a willingness to face up to the war's moral ambiguity and even absurdity. In another case, *Full Metal Jacket*, director Stanley Kubrick is known to have used Philip Jones Griffiths's photojournalistic record of the war as direct source material, taking the photographer's already scathing institutional critique to another level. This was no simplistic rhetoric of war. Both films, and Jones Griffiths's *Vietnam, Inc.* (though he was not American but British), are radically self-critical analyses of the American position that in the era of the "War on Terror" would be unthinkable. The basis of this self-analysis, most markedly in the case of the Kubrick film, is psychological. The character of Joker, as the Junginan divided ego, lives out the impossible paradoxes of life/death, reason/absurdity, mission/hopelessness. No community can recover from defeat and loss without wrestling with such paradoxes, confronting its own responsibilities and moving forward with self-awareness. "Like traumatized individuals," writes psychologist Judith Lewis Herman, "traumatized countries need to remember, grieve, and atone for their wrongs in order to avoid reliving them."[6] No conflict has prompted such a response within American popular culture the way the Vietnam War has.

Following the post-World War II economic boom, this war corresponded with a period dominated by a forceful ideology of wholesome American family life. My own generation's second- or third-hand cultural memory of the war has in turn been coloured by a poignant combination of American innocence and its violent betrayal, as mainstream American popular culture has retrospectively mythologized this potent contrast. In the 1994 film *Forrest Gump*, and television series like ABC's award-winning *The Wonder Years* (broadcast between 1988 and 1993, but set in 1968–73), both depicting the late 1960s at a twenty-year remove, the Vietnam War becomes caught up in the nostalgic portrayal of this period. In both cases, the contrast between the innocence of young, vulnerable "all-American" men (like Kevin's school friends in *The Wonder Years* and Forrest Gump himself) and their corrupting fate in Vietnam provides great dramatic pathos. Hand in hand with this myth of lost innocence is the parallel, or perhaps consequential, myth of glamorous rebellion: the so-called "rock and roll war". This myth is enacted by the jaded and battle-weary GI, with his inevitably compelling inner angst, and it, too, finds it roots in the war's contemporary reportage. Photojournalists

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[6] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 242.

like McCullin and Jones Griffiths laid bare the existential crisis experienced by the war's American participants, and their cues were later taken up in Hollywood depictions such as those discussed above. This divided soldier self (Kubrick's Joker) had never been visible, in his full complexity, "from the inside" of any other war before. He is part of a broken, wasted and betrayed generation, and the extreme conditions under which he operates, as well as the means of his self-expression – rock and roll, violence, drugs and a new language of deep, dark, existential irony – provide the means for subsequent generations of young people to express the conditions of their own existence. In accordance with the function that mythology has served since the beginning of human civilization, they claim their own "memory" of the Vietnam War not primarily to understand the past but to make sense of the present.

Some of the contributors here have spoken of "national narratives" or pervasive collective memories, but each comes from a different perspective. This is one reason for the use of mythology (according to Roland Barthes, a "meta-language", or a secondary system of signs amounting to "the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*"[7]), rather than collective memory, narrative or propaganda, as our framing concept, and it is also why this particular aspect of the Vietnam War is worth addressing through a collection of essays from different generational, national and disciplinary viewpoints. It is hoped that, as well as tackling the complexity of the Vietnam War's mythology, the combination of these varying accounts has also preserved this complexity, honouring the tension between the need to speak and the instability of the ground on which they stand to do so.

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[7] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2009), 11.