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Thy Phu's *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* is a brilliant, elegiac study of what it means to see under and around images whose lives and afterlives intersected with the Vietnam War. The book moves between the worlds of iconic, political, artistic, and personal images and image making with great nuance, illuminating a diversity of visual cultures grounded in Vietnamese imaginations of the conflict. This summary description, however, does not do the book justice. It is a work of scholarly justice as much as it a work of scholarly recovery. In reading and reconstructing the ways in which images were created and circulated, contested, and valorized, Phu foregrounds entire constellations of photographic production and existences of photography surrounding wartime Vietnam—and the postwar world transformed by it—intimately connected to competing national identities and diasporic memories. Phu's work breaks new ground in how scholars and readers should interpret the genre of “war photography” and visualities of the Vietnam War from Vietnamese perspectives. She asks us to look far beyond widely circulated iconic images (known by titles such as *Vietnam Monk Protest*, *Saigon Execution*, and *Napalm Girl*) that reified particular political visions for American and proxy non-Vietnamese audiences while rendering invisible Vietnamese visualities rooted in the war's many national and communal dimensions. In critiquing and departing from stock representations over-internalized by generations of international audiences, Phu shows us how parallel, multilayered experiences coalesced around cultures of photography. She explores camera deployments and visual interpretations that uniquely intersected with the lives of Vietnamese photographers, politicians and propagandists, elite and activist women, refugee families and diasporic communities—categories that often overlapped and evolved across time.

*Warring Visions* asks the reader to engage deeply with three major questions. How do we, as viewers, navigate iconic and non-iconic images and image making in history, given tensions between overly weighted popular photographs and hitherto lesser-known (to non-Vietnamese audiences) visual cultures? How do the specific agencies of photography and the afterlives of images map onto complexities of experience and memory, especially when vernacular and professional image making represent a multiplicity of war-related perspectives? And finally, what are the forces and resistances that interact with pho-
tography to shape politics and emotions in fragmentary historical trajectories?

The book begins by shattering the mythos of the adventuring, authoritative US photojournalist, whose globally visible icons of the war simultaneously co-opted and erased those of Vietnamese image makers, subjects, and audiences who were embedded in the conflict’s repercussions, and whose insights extended beyond black-and-white political existences and armchair diplomacies fostered by US-centric media. The recovery of these Vietnamese ways of seeing—and the sensitivity and nuance with which Phu constructs this analysis—runs against the grain of long-standing intellectual critiques by Susan Sontag, Allan Sekula, and other visual theorists who “rather than admiring and revering images … looked at images only to look away from them … espous[ing] a hermeneutics of suspicion that mirrored and perpetuated the global Cold War’s pervasive mood of fear and paranoia” (p. 9). Instead of reciprocating this skepticism, however, Phu explores the generative effects of professional and vernacular photography in a spectrum of local and transregional representation. Her analysis links the national and the personal while exploring slippages between these categories, with multiple visual cultures constructed in parallel with (or contrast to) various forms of identity-making.

Phu provides new ways of thinking through these approaches, with contexts ranging from public, political images to the haunting qualities of private, orphaned visual material. The book is divided into two halves, echoing the division of Roland Barthes’s classic work on photographic semiotics, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) while also recalling the dichotomy of Barthes’s “studium” and “punctum” which Phu deftly weaves into her analysis. Part 1 of the book, “Socialist Ways of Seeing Vietnam,” explores the processes by which Vietnamese wartime photography constructed specific political visions, focusing on the interplay between ideological production and ground-level visual practices. Part 2, “Refractions,” examines emotive afterlives of this visual culture in photographic reenactments (nostalgic imaginations and artistic representations of wartime legacies) alongside diasporic memories and materials, in which fragmentary images confound singular ways of looking backward as much they as they narrate present and future realities.

In chapter 1, Phu examines socialist ways of seeing as they “emerged in response to local photographers’ nationalist aspirations and to photo editors’ ambitions to reach the masses within the embattled nation through this mass cultural medium … respond[ing] to site-specific material conditions, even as its chief architects sought to appeal more broadly to sympathetic antiwar organizations worldwide and depended on Communist Bloc allies for support by importing technical equipment and exporting images” (pp. 37-38). This close attention to both ideologies and photography as processes of creation and negotiation illuminates the performances, technicalities, and contingencies behind making wartime photographs—while also making photographs political. Crucially, Phu’s analysis here and throughout the book moves skillfully between the creative experiences of photography, emphasizing technical conditions and networks of materials that shaped such actions, and interpretations of visual products as representations. While many studies focus on one or the other, and not always successfully, *Warring Visions* succeeds in both aspects—telling stories that take seriously the technologies and agencies of photography without falling prey to technical determinism or privileging products over processes. The fraught experiences of photographers and their equipment—the making of images intimately connected to supply chains and wartime spaces—remind readers that all photography demands the interconnected presence of both image makers and apparatuses. Moreover, the spaces in which images were created and specificities of technology guided these human-machine relationships as crucially as any creative or political prin-
principles. Vietnamese war photographers improvised nighttime exposures by the flash of weapons fire and recycled cast-off materials to supplement meager equipment, while also negotiating jungle conditions as a double-edged sword; the environment provided cover to develop photographs while also threatening the imaging devices and materials with damage from heat and humidity. Moving from processes to products, the second half of the chapter explores the ways in which the created images (embodying debates over bourgeois beauty and revolutionary goals) “reconcile[d] the contradictions of aesthetics and ideology” (p. 58). It examines how color publications during the war and postwar retouching of photographic materials revealed fissures between documentary visions and political or cultural mythologies.

In chapter 2, Phu expands upon categories introduced earlier in the book—namely, the body as resource and signifier in photographic narratives, and the negotiated aesthetics of nationalism—to offer multiple perspectives on Vietnamese women as a revolutionary symbol. Most importantly, Phu examines this gendered symbolic representation—often cast as a monolithic political trope—across multiple domestic and transnational political polarizations, “focus[ing] on the contest for control over its meaning among opposing groups in Vietnam and its subsequent appeal for members of the North American women’s antiwar organizations” (pp. 89-90). She traces how varying public visual representations advanced by female leaders such as Madame Nguyễn Thị Bình and Madame Nhu (Trần Lệ Xuân) spoke to North and South Vietnamese political agendas. In doing so, Phu demonstrates that symbolic views of female agency—and parallel debates over women’s emancipation, militarism, and gendered self-representation that coalesced around them—were crucial to multifaceted imaginations of Vietnam at war and transpacific activism. Complicating one-dimensional views of these approaches, Phu explores how both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese groups appropriated the image of the revolutionary woman to suit their own ideals, sometimes in exoticizing or reductive ways. In doing so, she highlights the political and racial tensions in global mobilizations of the symbol at the expense of the Vietnamese women whose individual and collective existences undergirded it.

One topic that remains unexplored relates to ways in which female photographers potentially negotiated visualizations of (and their relationships to) the revolutionary woman as a symbol. Although Phu discusses An-My Lê’s 1999-2002 reenactment photography in chapter 3 as “project[ing] a Vietnamese perspective through the embodied presence of the photographer” (p. 132) and briefly narrates the amateur photography and refugee experiences of Mrs. Luong Lu-Thai in chapter 4 (pp. 181-182), one wonders how female photographers (Vietnamese, foreign, or both) specifically framed revolutionary women and symbolism in their own visual practices surrounding the war. With the close attention given to male photographers’ experiences elsewhere in Warring Visions, this topic seems ripe for further exploration.

Chapters 3 and 4 follow the afterlives of images in (and as) the war’s legacies. Looking at the ways in which diasporic Vietnamese photographers wrestled with fragmented communities and the invisibilities that accompanied dislocation, Phu shows how imagination and time play out in photography’s temporal mobilities. Chapter 3 traces the ability of postwar photographs and photographers to construct alternate realities, mapping image making and manipulation onto intimate ways of wrestling with loss, nostalgia, and the aesthetics of wartime violence as visualized after the fact. Phu carefully dismantles the idea that image manipulation and reenactments for the camera are artifices to be uncritically (if not judgmentally) condemned. Instead, she situates such practices in the experiences of survivors, witnesses, and descendants touched by the war—caught between attempting to order and evoke the past
and “the impossibility of this desire to return to [it]” (p. 137). Relatedly, chapter 4 brings these themes full circle in a poignant narrative that situates Phu as both a refugee participant-subject and viewer-collector of personal images. This chapter powerfully demonstrates how images (and their makers, subjects, and audiences) are also emblems of diasporic knowing and unknowing, seeing and unseeing. In some cases, they are artifacts around which state and nonstate negotiations of identity take place (in the case of refugee ID photos), as well as private visualizations of the Barthesian “what has been.”[1] By examining photographic materials as sites of meaning making or deconstruction, Phu illuminates how individuals and communities displaced by the war sought to recover their past(s) or refashion their identities in the face of tremendous pain. Such experiences were embodied in the accidental or deliberate destruction of photographs (replacing material presence with memories and imaginations of loss) or the silences of orphaned albums—politically and geographically “unhomed,” as Phu describes, like the people associated with them. In linking the fragmentary materiality of personal photographs with their ability to elicit (and frustrate) viewers’ desires to see and know more, the chapter and book conclude with an elegy to the wonder and pain embodied by such visual materials. Phu puts to words the aching feelings and fraught possibilities faced by both scholars and descendants of Asia’s Cold War diaspora—including me—in encountering similarly mystifying photographs and their afterlives.[2]

Warring Visions is an essential reading for anyone, within or outside academia, interested in the Vietnam War and its complex visualities, histories of photography in Asia, and global visual culture. It is beautifully written and deeply researched, speaking to the reader with a rare blend of analytical rigor and personal narratives.[3] Above all, the book is a call to empathy toward the diverse visibilities and invisibilities of lived experiences in global conflict. It challenges us to care-

Notes


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