



# Visual Anthropology

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Every image on film is an image of memory.

(Trinh, 2017)

Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *Forgetting Vietnam* traverses time and space of the filmmaker's country of birth, North and South, land and water, sounds and images. The film marks the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War and commemorates its survivors. And yet, in 90 mins., the Vietnam War is felt and evoked though never "seen." That is why the role of images and cinematic representation in remembering and forgetting is one of the concerns of this film, but by no means the only theme nor the subject-matter of the film. While profoundly immersed in Vietnamese life, imagery and history, it also interrogates the power of cinema, seeing and recording, and the relation between inside(r) and outside(r). More prominently than in any of her works—with the exception of *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989), which is the only other film Trinh made that is concerned with Vietnam—the modes and sites of memory and forgetting are central to the film. The film asks, "Who remembers? Who conceals?" and how are images complicit to such movements?

In particular, the movement and role of the sea in Vietnamese history and mythology are captured. We hear the rhythms of water puppet theater; reflect on how the earth remembers; and listen to folk songs and poetry about women and their relationship to water. But the ghosts of war are always lurking, especially in the traces and sounds of war that are barely perceptible and vividly dis-remembered. These stories and memories are woven together through a multi-layered tapestry of images, sounds and voices, overlays, screen wipes, and words moving across the screen. Form and content are interconnected, as are the unknown or unrepresentable with the familiar and the mundane.

Both in Trinh's theorizing about and approach to filmmaking, the *what* and the *how* are always necessarily linked. It is with the editing, framing, and camera movements that the film speaks of leave-taking, returns, disappearance, and recording. *Forgetting Vietnam* thus plays with Trinh's personal memories, family history, and footage of her father and other family members. The personal and the political are intertwined in the acts of forgetting and

remembering, which are not oppositional but, like all other dualisms introduced in the film, they are two elements to hold onto at once and are necessarily entangled. They are the fissures in the every day, between what is neither fully remembered nor forgotten, between what constitutes re-memory and disremembering.

Speaking directly from a European context where this review was written, and as a teacher of media and cultural studies at a European university, I observed how in the last decade Trinh's work—both her books and her films—has been circulating or re-circulating more widely in various disciplinary contexts. Recently, in spaces where visual anthropology is in close dialogue with documentary and post-colonial studies, I have seen how Trinh's films are finding new audiences and can be used to raise, if not new questions, old questions anew. This is most likely because of changes in broader geo-political dynamics where, for example, the issue of "refugeeism" (Trinh 2011) has become more and more pressing, and because of a reignited discussion on truth, facts and fictions triggered by fake-news and post-truth debates. *Forgetting Vietnam* is, therefore, perfect to open several kinds of discussion in visual anthropology classrooms.

In its attention to the everyday and the voices and gestures of ordinary people, *Forgetting Vietnam* speaks directly to the observational mode of ethnographic filmmaking. Much can be said about the film's use of long takes and other filmic strategies akin to observational cinema. However, Trinh has often and adamantly expressed how her filmmaking practice does not belong to those traditions. I suggest that instead of trying to fit Trinh's film into an imagined and fixed ethnographic cinema framework we, as anthropologists, could look at *Forgetting Vietnam* as another compelling invitation to work with our ethnographic observational strategies. We should remain wary of the material history of images and the role we play in (re)producing clear-cut narratives, while focusing on what escapes meaning and the instabilities of our own categories and temporalities.

For example, *Forgetting Vietnam* deals directly with the materiality of images, combining footage taken by Trinh in 1995 in Hi-8 with footage from 2012 in HD and SD video. The history of those visual technologies is addressed alongside that of Vietnam and its contemporary political reality. Images and technologies have their own histories and incompatibilities, so that the way Trinh had to struggle in editing the different formats is juxtaposed with how Vietnam is struggling with old and new, high and low tech. This is one of the many ways the film questions the status of images, resolution, and its own making. In this way, the film can be used in the classroom to facilitate conversations about the relation between reality—and/as history, past and present—and recorded/filmed images, a tension that is at the core of any critical discussion about ethnographic cinema and anthropological knowledge production. Especially in the last few years, with the release of films about (un)forgotten traumas and invisible genocides (e.g. *The Act of Killing*, to name but the most famous; reviewed in *Visual Anthropology*, 28(3): 262–265), the (in)ability of the camera to bear witness to unspeakable cruelty and wars has been a site of discussion in many documentary and ethnographic film conferences I have attended.

Together with some of Trinh's latest books, such as *Elsewhere, Within Here* (2011) and *Lovecidal* (2016), Trinh's film *Forgetting Vietnam* is topical and can lever provocative discussions on the relation between remembering, wars and diaspora, a topic of crucial concern globally today, but especially in a European space where thousands of people are struggling to enter the continent while escaping wars and traversing seas.

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