

Tendrils of Memory

A Journey Through Vietnam's Landscape

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The noise of the whirling fan and the silent flicker of the television screen, still turned on but with its audio off, gave a purposeful beat to the melodic tones of the mandolin. Not a four-stringed Dan Ty Ba, the traditional mandolin known in Vietnam for over eight hundred years from the time of the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225), but the European eight-stringed Neapolitan instrument. To my Western ears, the melody sounded very Vietnamese. A weathered hand slowing caressing the steel strings, body gently swaying to the music, eyes closed; the mournful and hauntingly beautiful sounds seemed to echo in the small front room of the not-very-old, two-storey, terraced, Vietnamese house, on the outskirts of Vung Tau in southern Vietnam.

Earlier that day we had been invited to have dinner with Nguyen Dong Chuyen and his family and now found ourselves reclining self-consciously on soft couches in the main room of their house. On the coffee table before us were still laid out the remnants of tea, served in elegant European style cups and saucers. A fruit platter together with sweet delicacies completed the setting. As Chuyen finished playing the mandolin, a smile of recognition crossed his face. Not able to speak



Figure 1: Nguyen Dong Chuyen at his home playing the mandolin
(photograph: Les Horvat)

English, he translated through his children, how pleased he was to have Australian visitors as his honoured guests. The front room of his house served at various times as lounge room, family room, dining room, and garage for the family collection of motorbikes, and confirmed that the space was an integral component in the life of its occupants. The clutter, the functionality, the decoration, blended together in this one room and in the mix spoke of contentment. Not perhaps contentment shared by all its occupants, but contentment contained in the house itself through its structure and its form. Each member of the Nguyen family would of course have their own view of their achievements, their desires, their dreams, their futures and their past. Each member would have their own narratives—both lived out and yet to come. But what was interesting to this observer was the manner in which these narratives were signified to the world and made tangible to others.

In its many forms, this issue had accompanied me on my travels throughout Vietnam, and led me to the seaside city of Vung Tau in Vung Tau/Ba Ria province, one of the main centres of Australian military operations during the US–Vietnam conflict over three decades ago. I spent time in late 2008 travelling, observing and photographing some of the spaces and landscapes upon which significant narratives had been played out in the turbulent period of the 1960s and 1970s. At the heart of

these observations were two central questions. First, what is the role of memory in our understandings of landscape and through the landscape our understandings of lived experience? And second, how can a photographic interpretation of the landscape further that understanding? In this article I argue that photography has an important role to play in bringing meaning to cultural history, not only by recording place as an historical marker, but through the interpretation of memory, and its relationship to landscape.

—LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY

Landscape is never static as both the past and the future underpin its present. We not only inhabit the landscape, we construct and often re-construct it, thereby altering its essence along with its physical structure, and in so doing we construct meaning through its form. Historian Simon Schama argues that 'before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'¹ Foucault has even suggested that although space and time are closely interconnected, it is space that is pre-eminent.² The spaces upon which we live determine our responses to the world, in so far as they act as the platform for our experience; implying that in terms of our mediated understandings, place can be said to have phenomenological significance. He argues that:

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.³

Since the middle of last century, landscape and place have begun to engage broader debates in scholarly thinking, especially around the connections between culture and human memory. Historian William George Hoskins was a pioneer in this regard with his assertion that 'landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright is the richest historical record we possess'.⁴ Geographer Carl Sauer was one of the

earliest to establish the connection between landscape and culture, and his ideas assisted in the formation of the discipline of 'cultural geography' through the establishment of the Berkeley School of Geography.⁵ However, it was the writings of Jackson (who established the journal *Landscape* in 1951) and Hoskins, which together shaped the connection between landscape and culture that resulted in it being given serious consideration by scholars.⁶ Meinig further developed the debate when he claimed that 'landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds' which led to the landscape being seen as a subjective artefact of our construction, rendered meaningful by our interpretations.⁷ For Meinig and his like-minded peers, landscape was 'the unity we see, the impressions of our senses rather than the logic of the sciences'.⁸

Landscape could thereby be viewed as something to be understood, interpreted and 'made sense of'. This begs the question, that if landscape can reflect the actions and ideas of people, society and culture, how can we best interpret the manner by which landscape study is able to enrich our understandings? Thirty years ago, American geographer P.F. Lewis set out a number of ideas for doing just that. Among the seven axioms Lewis put forward are three of particular relevance to this discussion: (1) ordinary 'run-of-the-mill' things humans have created and put on the earth provide strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in process of becoming; (2) nearly all items in human landscapes reflect culture in some way; and (3) elements of a cultural landscape make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (that is, locational) context.⁹ While Lewis's first two axioms, mentioned above, reinforce the notions already discussed in this essay, it is the last point that highlights the question: is it possible for us to use the photographically represented landscape as an opportunity to interpret place outside its locational context? I put forward the view that it is possible, enabling us in a much broader sense to recontextualise engagements involving meaning, landscape and memory through the photographic image. Indeed, as further suggested by Pinney, 'photography's mimetic doubling becomes a prism through which to consider questions of cultural and self-identity, historical consciousness, and the nature of photographic affirmation and revelation', thereby giving rich substance to the discourse underpinning the temporal character and unique nature of the still image.¹⁰

The power of story telling, long accepted within most cultures, is now recognised as a means of creating and, ultimately, sharing meaning. Fisher expressed the view that meaning derived from narrative is shareable only if it is accepted as a function of its social and cultural context.¹¹ If the shared meaning of narrative is not mutually known or is not familiar through social structures available to the audience, it lacks comprehension.¹² The cultural framing necessary for any shared, lived experience to be meaningful seems to have an outcome that is of an even more fundamental nature. Humans live in a social world and do not have a purely individual relationship to the culture in which they are immersed. As Barker reminds us, the stability of social and cultural life can be thought of as a temporary stabilisation, influenced by cultural norms, where identity is influenced by the ebbs and flows of cultural realities.¹³

What role has creative practice in this domain? Representations of landscape have been a major preoccupation of a great many artists over the centuries. Writers, poets, painters and, more recently, photographers have used landscape-inspired themes to explore human activity and the human condition in general. Creative practice has as one of its natural features the examination and interpretation of existence, so that if, as Cosgrove puts it, 'landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world' then creative practice through its many forms is well placed to meaningfully reflect that construction.¹⁴ Further, it can be said that our ability to gain genuine meaning from qualitative inquiry depends in large part on our ability to interpret. It is through observation and reflection upon life and the circumstances of life that we are able to draw inferences, thereby generating conclusions and hypotheses that are relevant from one lived experience to another. The strength of qualitative inquiry is tightly wound within the complexities of human existence, and the stage upon which they are played out. Perception can be viewed as the frame through which knowledge is constructed and creative practice is a rich vein of perception that involves a particularly reflective 'way of seeing'.¹⁵ If 'landscape is a way of seeing the world' and if the nature of creative practice is to question and reflect the world back to its audience, then representations of landscape and its narratives assist in providing deeper insights into culture, identity and ultimately the significant question of who we are.¹⁶

Changes in understandings interpreted through landscape inform the shared histories of individuals, of communities and of nations; and in so doing the landscape itself becomes a marker for the transference of historical context and meaning for the next generation.

However, the debates concerning the validity of photography as a site for the explication of this meaning have continued for many years, often in context with a more general discourse about the authority of the anthropologist's position. Concerns about photography's role as ethnographic data revolve largely around the problems associated with the act of picture taking itself, namely that the photographer composes and constructs the image rather than documenting a perceived so-called 'reality'.

The insoluble dilemma of the anthropologist—or for that matter the historian, though not as many of us like to own up to it—is how to reproduce the 'other', separated from us by space, time, or cultural customs, without either losing ourselves altogether in total immersion or else rendering the subject 'safe' by the usual eviscerations of Western empirical analysis.¹⁷

Some ethnographers speak against the legitimacy of photography for those reasons. For example, Faris says 'by calling attention to the erasures constituted by photography's boundaries/frames, (I have) specified the absences, the graphic silences, the social relations not illustrated'.¹⁸ On the other side of the debate, anthropologist and archivist Elizabeth Edwards bestows photography with a materiality that goes beyond its content. She maintains that the photographic image 'places photographs in subjectivities and emotional registers that cannot be reduced to the visual apprehension of an image, and positions them strongly as what I shall term "relational objects"'.¹⁹

More than anything else, it could be said that an ethnographically based photographic image indicates one culture viewing another. The power of the image therefore lies in the contextualisation of the observation, especially when interrogated and made explicit through subsequent reflection and analysis. As Berger suggest, 'the look of the world, carried by photography, proposes and confirms our relations to the thereness of the world, which nourishes our sense of being' and thereby affirms our sense perceptions.²⁰ The cultural nature of this 'look of the world' is further implicated when we consider that even if the camera

automatically handles the technical aspects of the picture, the creation of the image is still enabled by a series of choices. These choices involve, among other considerations, framing, composition, tonality, aesthetics, as well as ethical and cultural values, and result in a particular photograph being created from among the countless number of possibilities available to the photographer.

However, the photographic image, unlike an image rendered in paint, has attached to it a 'rhetoric of photographic documentation' based on the notion that photographs are perceived as realistic and consequently represent a perceived truth claim.²¹ As a result, the photograph does not merely represent, it also contributes to our perceptions. As suggested by Tagg, photographic representations assign a particular identity or intention rather than simply involving a descriptive frame. The viewer of the photograph, who brings his or her own personal experiences and subjective memories to the act of decoding and meaning making, can then further influence this intention. It is therefore but a short step to offer the proposition that the apparently neutral image is constantly being threatened by an underlying subjectivity, resulting in a recursive process that ultimately mediates the sense of reality gained from the image.

It is clear the taking of photographs is an intensely personal experience, one that is firmly rooted in the aesthetic and creative decision making processes, and one that by its personal nature can never be objective. But the notion that the photographic image has authority and power within an ethnographic frame, at times even beyond that of words or words alone, is both its power and its weakness. Images need to be interpreted, they do not have fixed meaning in the same way that the meaning found in words has a defined precision. Sociopolitical change leads to the realisation that meanings derived from an image can also change over time; as the audience itself alters, so can the interpretative meaning of the image. The validity of the photographic image would thereby be predicated and interpreted with reference to its context, both with regard to the physical circumstances of its creation and to the intent of the photographer. This leads to the proposition that the phenomenological and the empirical have their point of intersection within the photographic image, made explicit through the interpretation afforded it by the viewer. Through the phenomenology of the taking of the picture, the photographer responds, interprets and attempts to 'make sense' of the 'otherness' which is before

the camera. This individual and solitary act not only constructs the object through the gaze, but contextualises the object as a creative response to the photographer's own cultural, social and political understandings, initiated by the physical surroundings in front of the camera.

Until relatively recently, the interactions of photography have been understood as a framework defined between the photographer, functioning with creative intent, and the photographed object. But according to Ariella Azoulay, this is a description that misses other important dimensions such as what she terms photography's 'civil space', which is seen to be dynamic, contextual and not subordinated to the intent of the photographer.²² Taking the view offered by Heidegger that 'the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture' leads in Azoulay's terms to the notion of photographic enactment performed as a dynamic relationship between the photographer, the photographed and the viewer.²³ A relationship that ultimately results in this Heideggarian 'conquest' being a continually unfinished enterprise, because even though the photographer and the photographed are temporally located within the image, the viewer or viewers continue to alter over time. Azoulay makes the significant claim that the photograph bears the trace of the encounter between the photographer and the object, but with neither ultimately controlling the final outcome. Therefore, the photograph's relationship to the object and ultimately the meanings read into the image are never fixed, as the frozen photographic moment is rendered across time and contextualised through varying cultural readings.

With the argument posited by Samuel that 'memory is historically conditioned ... it is progressively altered from generation to generation', photography is well placed to be used as a tool to interrogate this key aspect of memory.²⁴ By comparing past visual photographic records with contemporary understandings assigned to narratives of landscapes and landscape artefacts such as buildings, streetscapes, bridges, beaches, lakes, mountains and rivers, we can bring new understandings to bear upon the cultural meanings associated with place. As offered by Didi-Huberman, even though it is first and foremost the experiential nature of a visual image that holds pre-eminence over its interpretation, the viewing occurs in a defined era of time, a time that itself influences the spectator's response.²⁵ As a consequence, the position put forward in this essay is that the

relationship between the temporality of the photograph and the indeterminable periodicity of the viewing gives rise to the potential for a rich discourse of meaning-making. Contemporary narratives of landscapes can thereby be made tangible and viewable when overlaid with the narratives of individuals for whom the site is a repository of memory, and of forgetting—a repository that is historically conditioned but experientially mediated.

The 'historical conditioning' of memory is also closely tied with the act of forgetting; indeed, often the forgetting is as important, or at times even more important, than the remembering. Ricoeur suggests:²⁶

The best use of forgetting is precisely in the construction of plots, in the elaboration of narratives concerning personal identity or collective identity; that is, we cannot tell a story without eliminating or dropping some important event according to the kind of plot we intend to build.

The elaborations of these narratives are constructed and framed through the landscape upon which they are situated, where acts of remembering and forgetting are given tangible reference. Changes in Vietnam's landscape through the effects of war, rapid economic development and the more recent demands of tourism have also resulted in the landscape playing a key role as the 'stage' upon which past events have been played out. Informed by Michel Foucault's privileging of space as the pre-eminent focus of our era and acknowledging Lewis's view that 'our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form', I sought through photography to explore the nature of the trace upon the landscape left by these narratives.²⁷

Surprisingly, photographic landscapes of Vietnam, viewed as sites of memory, have received little attention in Western discourse beyond the ubiquitous monochromatic images of the Vietnam–American conflict. Because they sit within a defined commercially oriented aesthetic located in the present, the more recently prevalent tourism-oriented photographs figure within a generic frame not redolent with that discourse. Notwithstanding this current situation, place can be said to hold an eminent position as a reminder of not only Vietnam's turbulent struggles over the past century, but as a signifier to Vietnam's future. By photographically rendering the rural and urban landscape, I re-examine ways through which memories are

signified through place. The importance invested within the ‘significant sites’ of post-war Vietnam is explored photographically to contextualise transformations in Vietnamese society. As a result of burgeoning financial growth and dramatic political change many aspects of Vietnam are of a highly transitional nature, thereby providing a rich discourse for creative practice and scholarship. Through photography I am able to examine the connections between individual events and the landscape in which they occurred, to illuminate the emotional and physical traces implicit in the photographic relationship, but contextualised through my own cultural reading. Built upon the fundamental premise that creative practice holds a mirror reflecting a society to itself and to others, I assert that such practices act as a site of memory and re-enactment, from which the meanings of the past are renegotiated in order to formulate a future.

—THE JOURNEY

The story of human experience is played out in the twin domains of time and space. Both domains are fundamental foci of existence; however, one is clearly tangible and viewable, while the other is temporal and transient. This posits ‘place’ as being of particular interest as a potential means of deepening understanding. The potential for the landscape to, in Schama’s terms, ‘carry the freight of history’, is reinforced by the view that place acts as a repository of human meaning. Landscapes of rural vistas, constructed environments and public spaces are ‘cultural documents’ representing the contested power relationships between the individual and the community.²⁸ The discourse between memory and place, made tangible through photographic exploration and informed by individual narratives, therefore builds a collective memory or history, which can then be re-read and interpreted through creative practice.²⁹

With this discourse in mind, I found myself in the front room of Mr Chuyen’s house—where this essay began—listening to the gently plucked strings of the mandolin. I now return there to elaborate further on the details of these surroundings. The room was not much bigger than ten square metres, all of it crammed with the paraphernalia and remnants of Chuyen’s life. He had served in the armed forces of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, often referred to during the American–Vietnam war as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA. He took great pride

in the fact that he was part of the 'regular' Vietnamese army rather than the 'irregular' Viet Cong forces. Chuyen joined the army in 1965 at the age of sixteen, and was wounded in the battle of Da Nang three years later, when a rocket fired from a helicopter exploded nearby sending shrapnel into his shoulder, chest and back. This near fatal event took him away from active service, but he nevertheless continued his career in the armed forces.

Although Chuyen fought against America and its allies (including Australia) for a decade, he was very keen to meet Australian Vietnam veterans and was recently involved in a friendship and reconciliation service held with Australian members of the Ninth Royal Australian Regiment (9RAR) and Vietnamese veterans. In a corner of the front room of his house is a glass-fronted cabinet upon which sits a painted portrait of Ho Ch Minh dressed in camouflage greens, depicted serenely observing soldiers taking up positions in the countryside. Alongside this painting is Chuyen's service helmet, a stoic memorial to the formation of nationhood. The contents of his cabinet offer a change of tone. Alongside the Buddhist statues and Vietnamese Army badges lies a collection of memorabilia commemorating the relationships built up over the years with what were once his country's enemies. Among the Australian business cards on the shelves are stuffed koalas and kangaroos, key rings, commemorative glasses and cups, Australian Army regimental insignia, as well as badges and pins from Australian service personnel who have spent time with Chuyen over the past ten years. This treasure trove of memories signifies a life spent in pursuit of single-minded achievement; the long struggle for independence and national sovereignty. But it also represents a reflection and reconciliation towards those who were once his enemies and with whom he now shares a common past.

The contents of the cabinet are not arranged in any particular order. There is randomness in the way in which the objects suggest they have been taken out to view and then replaced—the last to return sits on the top. A micro-landscape of memory is reflected in this random arrangement: a landscape similar to that found outside his door, as Vung Tau develops and rebuilds itself, layer by layer.

I would now like to move to the intersection between public and private space as another example of the nature of lived existence and its connections with memory, culture and landscape: the intersections represented by those parts of the



Figure 2: Nguyen Dong Chuyen standing by his cabinet of memorabilia
(photograph: Les Horvat)

landscape that become the borders between the personal and the sociopolitical. The small town of Trai Mat sits in a valley in the central highlands of Vietnam within the temperate agricultural zone of the country. Terraced fields crammed with crops and immaculately tended market gardens are a direct product of the moderate climate and rich soil. The town itself would have little passing traffic from visitors except for two important occurrences that have helped define its circumstances. First, it sits seven kilometres east of the old French colonial hill city of Dalat, at the end of the railway line currently running only as a tourist service.

Second, the town is the site of the Linh Phuoc Pagoda, an impressive showpiece of tessellation art, where small pieces of broken china or glass are painstakingly arranged in cement. The slightly ramshackle town boasts only a few major thoroughfares, each with typical, narrow, multistorey houses facing the roadway. The main street of Trai Mat is an endearing mix of tourist-oriented offerings side by side with local cafes, groceries, hairdressers, motorbike repair shops and other necessities of life for the inhabitants of the town. The town is a little run down and not as well-to-do as it once was, largely because of the absence of wealthy French colonial visitors who in years past visited the region to take refuge



Figure 3: Main street in the village of Trai Mat
(photograph: Les Horvat)

from the humid weather of the coast. In fact, it is only because of the railway and the pagoda that the street has any tourist offerings at all.

This landscape of older, substantial, but nonetheless run-down buildings, together with more modest modern dwellings both situates and reflects the past and the present nature of the town. The grandmother sitting by the front of the family store while the rest of her family pursues work and family-related activities elsewhere is a motif repeated throughout the town and, indeed, in many other similar towns throughout the country. Her position is that of 'shopkeeper', 'guardian' and general family presence; it indicates ownership and is a role that has not changed significantly for many years. As the contents of her shop spill out onto the roadway, nudging out the pedestrian traffic, she sits quietly and watches, occasionally getting up to chat with a neighbour or serve a customer. Her private world is repeated in the many shopfronts located side-by-side along the street, in the process forming the public streetscape viewable to the visitor.

The mixed fortunes of Trai Mat are not only reflected in these streetscapes. The railway level crossing is also testament to present circumstances mixed with past glories. In years gone by, the train went beyond Trai Mat, up the mountains towards the coast using a rack and pinion system known as the Abt Rack after Roman Abt, a Swiss engineer who designed it in the late nineteenth century.³⁰ Today



Figure 4: Level crossing at Trai Mat, 7 kilometres from Dalat
(photograph: Les Horvat)

because of the destruction of war and the neglect of past governments, the train terminates at the town.

For the locomotive to cross the main street of Trai Mat and wait at the station for the return trip to Dalat, the manual level-crossing gates need to be engaged. Since very few trains now pass this way, the conductor of the train handles this task herself. Having struggled to activate the cumbersome and sticking gates, once they are engaged the conductor stands chatting to the stationary commuters who patiently wait on their bikes for the slow train to progress the few metres to the station, whereupon she lifts the gates and rejoins the train. This scenario is repeated no more than two, maybe three times a day; to operate a train whose sole purpose is to transport tourists so they can stroll around the village for thirty minutes before



Figure 5: Manually operated gates at Trai Mat level crossing
(photograph: Les Horvat)

the train returns once again to Da Lat. The conductor, the crossing and the single carriage train travel the fourteen kilometre round trip only if there are enough tourists to justify the journey.

This key landmark of the crossing, intersecting with the two main streets of the village, is still the epicentre of activity for the village's inhabitants. But it is activity punctuated by stillness, as the little train rarely appears and certainly no longer struggles beyond Trai Mat towards the coast. At the centre of town, the manually operated level crossing is not only significant as a memory of times past, but also as a landscape that firmly represents the present.

—CONCLUSION

What do countries such as Vietnam offer current debates about the use of photographic material in anthropologically based studies? I would argue societies and nations in transition, such as Vietnam, offer photographic interpretations of landscape's meaning through an examination and interpretation of place, informed by the rapid changes in topology and sociocultural structure. Narrative framing remains a central requirement for the understanding of lived experience, but a critical reflection on cultural history is further supported by creative practice used as a tool for the examination of memory. The narratives shown in this essay reinforce the suggestion that photography has a role to play in furthering understandings of cultural history through the interpretation of memory and its

relationship to landscape. From the uniquely personal story of a Vietnamese veteran to the narratives displayed within a small town in central Vietnam, the examination of memory and its connection to place is made visible through the photographic medium. The topology of place—as both a ‘silent witness’ and a physical platform and stage for events that formulate individual existence and shape collective histories, follows Foucault’s privileging of place and resonates with Lewis’s view that landscape and narrative are firmly interlinked.

The combination of landscape as a site of memory and creative practice as a rich vehicle for the interpretation of lived experience enables us to re-examine cultural and individual narratives. The complex interactions that photographic explorations may bring provide a more dynamic and enriched conversation about memory and forgetting. Following Ricoeur’s notions of the ‘historical condition’, tied to memory’s claims and given voice through acts of remembering and forgetting, the repository of these endeavours is referenced in the landscape.³¹ I argue therefore that photographically interpreted landscape, and the embedded narratives of lived experience, can form a nexus of deeper meaning. This nexus not only sits comfortably alongside the more commonly found anthropological discourse, it enables and adds meaning to those conversations and to the further examination of lived experience using less traditional means.

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—NOTES

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