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*'What the Fuck is a Vietnam?'*¹

Touristic Phantasms and the Popcolonization of (the) Vietnam (War)

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Abstract ■ With the introduction of the reform project *doi moi* in 1986, Vietnam turned to tourism as a major new economic resource. Demands from international visitors have entailed a commodification of the Vietnam War. This article approaches tourism as an ideologically saturated nexus where identities and worldviews are continuously being represented, consumed, reconfirmed, negotiated and modified. Practices and narrations of Western backpackers, who travel to Vietnam spurred by phantasms of Vietnam as a war, are related to discourses of Vietnam in tourism literature, popular media, academia, journalism and politics, and traced to a 'popcolonial' fantasy of Western superiority. At the core are the hegemonic implications the 'been there, done that' cliché carries when war and tourism go hand in hand. It is argued that the dichotomies of here/there and war/peace need to be dislodged in order to understand the ideologies of both tourism and war.

Keywords ■ international tourism ■ phantasms ■ Vietnam ■ war

Introduction: 'Vietnam, a country made famous by a war'

You want to hear a gen-u-ine war story? I only understand Vietnam as though it were a story. It's not like it happened to me. (Vietnam War veteran)

Picture this!

A bunch of navy privates from a warship harboured outside Saigon has the night off – a rare chance to escape from soldiery hardships and indulge in some R&R action.² You hear music – 'Break on Through' by The Doors – as you watch a high-heeled mini-skirt clad Vietnamese girl walk out of a bar with her arm neatly wrapped around a GI's waist. Back in the bar the GI's friends are putting down bets on how long his coming 'boom-boom' will take. Some 20 minutes later the rosy-cheeked GI is back, his previously so impeccable leave-of-absence uniform now slightly creased and his wallet a few dollars thinner. His friends can't resist giving him some digs about his swift return. Soon the girl also

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returns, not rosy-cheeked but a few dollars richer. Apparently embarrassed by the loud soldiers she joins her co-workers at the other end of the bar. They greet her with silence.

We've all seen that Vietnam War movie, haven't we, with those obligatory beer-bar or brothel scenes. Only this was not a scene from a movie; this incident took place in March 1999 at a bar in Ho Chi Minh City (former Saigon). The warship was there on a friendly visit, I was told. The next day I met some other GIs, this time at the War Museum. Soldiers on a friendly visit, gazing at a war of the past. But that night at the bar, the only thing that really reminded me that I was in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City, not in the cinematic wartime Saigon, was that some tourists joined the GIs in bantering their 'boom-boomed' friend. The name of the bar was appropriately The Backpacker's.

When the war ended in 1975, Vietnam became yesterday's news – no longer a geopolitical reality, but a mythical war appearing typically as a 'syndrome', an MIA/POW issue and, mostly, a box-office hit. Then, in 1986, the Vietnamese government introduced the political reform project *doi moi* (renovation), and accordingly turned to tourism as a major economic resource. Ironically, while the war left most heritage sites otherwise destined for great tourism in ruins, it 'blessed' Vietnam with other sites – the Cu Chi tunnels, My Lai, the DMZ, China Beach, Hamburger Hill, Khe Sanh, the Rex – with their own seductive and unique aura. The subtitle above – 'Vietnam, a country made famous by a war' – is taken from the opening line in the popular guidebook *Lonely Planet: Vietnam* (Florence and Storey, 2001: 11). It reveals the crucial role the American War plays in promoting Vietnam as a tourist destination. Vietnam is marketed as having 'an ancient history and great cultural traditions, with later French-colonial and American-war periods still much in evidence' (Thailand Asia Pacific, 1997: 32). While a bumper sticker popular with American veterans heralds 'Vietnam was a war not a movie' (Doherty, 1991: 267), in tourism it has become chic to profess 'Vietnam is a country, not a war' (e.g. Lasser, 2000; Truman, 1999). But with the tourist trail so meticulously following the destructive trail once trampled by combat boots and Ho Chi Minh sandals, it's worth asking – is this newly discovered country still at war?

Initially the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) did not promote the war at all, and they still prefer to sell the uniqueness of Vietnamese culture to international visitors (Biles et al., 1999).³ I therefore would like to point out, lest there be no misunderstandings, this article is in essence *not* about Vietnam, nor about the War. Instead, it is about ways of approaching Vietnam, and primarily the ideological traits of these approaches. The study is limited to young Western low-budget tourists, often called 'travellers' or 'backpackers', who, due to their age, have had their images of Vietnam simultaneously informed by re-runs of actual footage of the TV-war and by Hollywood movies. In Ho Chi Minh City they

tend to gather in the area around Pham Ngu Lao Street – dubbed a 'budget-traveller haven' by *Lonely Planet* (Florence and Storey, 2001: 476). I will begin with a broad theoretical discussion followed by some ethnographic examples. Moving on to a global context, I will conclude by reflecting on the hegemonic implications the 'been there, done that' cliché carries when war and tourism go hand in hand. I do not pretend to be able to cover this vast subject in all its complexity, but with some touristic snapshots I hope to raise some critical issues for further investigations.

Touristic phantasms: When there is here and the past lies in the future

Collecting memories, or experiences, was my primary goal when I first started travelling. I went about it in the same way as a stamp-collector goes about collecting stamps, carrying around with me a mental list of all the things I had yet to see or do. Most of the list was pretty banal. I wanted to see the Taj Mahal, Borobudur, the Rice Terraces in Bagio, Ankor Wat. Less banal, or maybe more so, was that I wanted to witness extreme poverty. I saw it as a necessary experience for anyone who wanted to appear worldly and interesting.

Of course witnessing poverty was first to be ticked off the list. Then I had to graduate to the more obscure stuff. Being in a riot was something I pursued with a truly obsessive zeal, along with being tear-gassed and hearing gunshots fired in anger.

Another list item was having a brush with my own death . . .

(Garland, 1996: 163–4)

A Swedish trade union declared it an outrage that 25 percent of their members did not have the means to go abroad for the holidays. Having to vacation at home posed a serious threat to their members' health, it was argued. A few days later, Tamil Tigers bombed the airport in Colombo, Sri Lanka, whereupon all major Swedish news bulletins reported it as a threat to tourism. Tourists were interviewed along with soothing confirmations that none (no tourist, that is) had been injured, all this while ignoring the local realities and colonial history of the thorny conflict.

Tourism-as-usual

The excerpts from Alex Garland's best-seller *The Beach* and the newsflashes above illustrate the current topic – backpacker ontology and the emergence of tourism as normal expectation. These ostensibly unrelated examples indicate in different ways how tourism, once a novelty, has undergone normalization in Western society. This process has raised tourism, as a practice of 'getting away from it all' and/or a consumption of Other cultures, to the status of an unofficial civil right. With this tourism-as-usual, it is almost impossible to clearly separate tourism from other social

practices (see Urry, 1990). Rather than responding with a 'we-are-all-tourists-now' lament, I suggest it's more fruitful to view tourism as evaporating into overall society. Just as 'tourism' is more complex than plain 'free-time', a clear-cut opposition of mobility/immobility will not do, as both can be coerced or voluntary, depriving or privileging, mental or physical, and symbolic or material. When reviewing my data from Vietnam, it was obvious that it had – just like me and all the (other) tourists – its point of departure elsewhere, not merely spatially, but culturally, ideologically and conceptually. These facts are at the analytical core of this article.

Outlining 'modernity at large', Appadurai argues that the imagination has evolved into an organized field of social practices, which increasingly serves to define individual biographies in globalized and deterritorialized ways. This observation is not a cheerful one, as it implies 'that even the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities are now open to the play of the imagination' (1996: 54). The role of imagination is no longer that of 'escape' – when the imagination becomes crucial in the construction of everyday local realities, escaping by means of the imagination takes us straight back to that from which we are trying to escape (Rojek, 1993). The world Appadurai describes resembles in part one described by Heidegger: '[t]he fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture'. 'Picture' should here be understood as in the phrase 'to get the picture' concerning the world, which, in turn, should be understood as a positioning, as in, 'we are in the picture'. 'World picture', then, 'does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture'. This is a world where Being is sought and found in 'representedness', which is set forth and lived out, thus becoming life-experiences (1977: 134, 129).

At the heart of modernity lies consumption, in its widest sense, through which people are engaged in daily practices of imagination and nostalgia that evoke wishes and desires. To consume other cultures and places has become a marker of modern citizenship, and tourism is an ultimate form of this culture consumption (Urry, 1995: 165). This leads us back to my initial claim that, in the affluent part of the world, tourism is big-business-as-usual. Daydreaming of potential destinations precedes every act of voluntary travelling. The building blocks of these everyday-dreams are large-scale repertoires of images and narratives provided by what Appadurai has labelled 'mediascapes', which blur the boundaries between the realistic and the fictional. Consequently, '[w]hat travellers bring to [their destinations] is more than baggage, and entails a complex "worldview" which must be seen in the context of a technologically complex international scene' (Hutnyk, 1996: 35). In its apt wider social context, international tourism is an ideologically saturated nexus where culturally specific identities and worldviews – through practices and narrations – are continuously being represented, consumed, reconfirmed, negotiated and modified. Aiming at

dislodging static dichotomies – here/there, now/then, imagine(d)/experience(d) – to arrive at a better understanding of this nexus, I will employ the term 'touristic phantasm'.

Approaching the Other

Touristic phantasms are touristic in the sense of emerging in a context of tourism-as-usual, and they are phantasmic because they depend on the imagination as an elaborate social practice. A phantasm, as I use the term, is not a simulation of the Other, but the appropriation of the Other as an appearance to be practised and experienced. Closely connected to Benjamin's concept of 'aura' – 'the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be' (1968: 222) – phantasms demarcate places, erase them from the ordinary to reinstate them as extraordinary in a world of ubiquitous tension between local, national and global representations of places. Spawning urges to go from 'home' to 'elsewhere' – the latter a place not purely imaginary but imagined as pure – phantasms combine to bring people from different cultural contexts physically closer for a definite period of time, while cultural distance is upheld and reconfirmed. In this sense phantasms are related to 'perspectives' – a position from which to see something and a disposition from which to do something, in other words, one's position in the social structure (Hannerz, 1992: 62–99). Here we might talk of 'slants' or 'angles' to connote cultural biases and restrictions in scope. Phantasms evoke desires and wishes of the world and at once promise the fulfilment of these. Constructing phantasms is thus to position oneself in an 'occurrent landscape' – a world where places are demarcated as 'events waiting to happen' (Cragg, 1999: 246; cf. also Favero, 2000; Rojek, 1997). A touristic phantasm, then, is not merely *in* between here and there, but also a *go*-between between the two – it is, as it were, a '(t)here'.

For tourists, the degree of satisfaction corresponds largely to the degree to which a phantasm can be transformed into experience. The dissonance between '(t)here' and 'there' can ultimately disillusion tourists (cf. Rojek, 1993: 202; Urry, 1990: 13), and this asymmetrical arrangement of perspectives comprises a potential for social change. This disillusionment, however, is worked against in various ways. The tourism industry seeks to structure tourists' experiences in accordance with phantasms. While tourists might rationalize their phantasms, this is always undertaken reluctantly as phantasms are intimately related to tourists' identities and it requires tourists to give up their initial holiday dreams.⁴ With particularly persuasive phantasms, a '(t)here' can be experienced as a 'there' despite their objective discrepancies.⁵

A phantasm as an 'approach' is also a fitting metaphor as it suggests agency, strategy and movement. Like a sort of touristic protocol, phantasms not only help structuring practices, they also legitimize those very same practices, thus counteracting what Frow has identified as 'touristic shame', that is, the realization of the paradox by which 'tourism destroys (in the

very process by which it constructs) the authenticity of the tourist object; and every tourist thus at some level denies belonging to the class of tourists' (1997: 95–6). Touristic shame has produced ontological and ideological distinctions between 'vulgar' tourists and 'noble' travellers. This distinction is very fragile, and it's sometimes necessary for backpackers to differentiate themselves from fellow backpackers. In Vietnam, travelling on local buses instead of backpacker tour buses is a way of doing this. The local buses are considerably less comfortable and relatively unsafe, and boasting of this experience of 'danger' is an effective way of securing a traveller identity. Curiously, nouveau not-desperately-poor Vietnamese are increasingly travelling on the comfortable backpacker buses, which undermines the whole idea of not travelling with these buses as a way of having authentic experiences by siding with the locals.

Touristic phantasms can embrace all imagined times of all imagined places. We therefore speak of our phantasms as if of the real and, at the same time, as if we remember (Agamben, 1993: 86, n5). This relates to Appadurai's claim that the imagination has the ability to evoke 'imagined nostalgia', that is, nostalgia for things of which we have no memories (1996: 77). While being preoccupied with the past and with the elsewhere, phantasms help structure our present practices, which in turn help mould the future. Obviously, aspects of power and inequalities are present here. Hutnyk shows how travellers involved in volunteer work in Calcutta, informed by global 'rumours of Calcutta' as a place of dirt and poverty, through 'specific practices and technologies of tourism, representations and experience combine to reinforce and replicate the conditions of contemporary international inequality' (1996: 214). Norindr (1996) demonstrates how French imperialism, by entertaining a 'phantasmatic Indochina', not only manifested itself through physical domination, but also through a colonization of the imaginary. The combination of the tourism-as-usual discourse, which permits a view of a Third World civil war as, principally, a threat to tourism access, and backpacker predilections for experiences of danger, has gruesome implications. Garland illustrates this perfectly in *The Beach* when his backpacking anti-hero Richard reveals how he had wished for the Gulf War to happen just because he thought it would be exciting to watch on TV (1996: 253–4). Whatever their size or shape, phantasms disclose more information about the cultural contexts of tourists than about the exotic Other peoples and places they depict – through phantasms we imagine others in ways that allow us to imagine ourselves.

Though all tourists are culturally and spatially decontextualized while travelling – indeed a source of insecurity in itself – and although backpackers have a strong predilection for experiences of danger (Elsrud, 2001; Phipps, 1999), touristic phantasms act reassuringly. With them we can symbolically master the world – '[t]he feeling that the world is the size of a golf ball and that everything is possible lingers. The world IS ours!' (Lind, 2000: 3), as the chief editor of *World Wide Travel* expressed her enthusiasm for a

world made dangerously safe for tourism. This is a world where 'whatever is, is considered to be in being only to the degree and the extent that it is taken into and referred back to this life, i.e., is lived out, and becomes life-experience' (Heidegger, 1977: 134). Phantasms are dreams put into practice and their dominion is their ability to satisfy the desires and wishes they themselves evoke. To successfully become tourists we dream on until our dreams come true; the world is called upon to live up to the phantasms of it (cf. Frow, 1997; Urry, 1990: 13).

The cinematic/touristic phantasmic reality: going to the movies/going to Vietnam

'... Answer this. Where are you?'

'Leave me alone!'

'Where are you?' he repeated.

I covered my face with my hands. 'I'm in Thailand.'

'Where?'

'Thaila . . .'

'Where?'

Through the cracks between my fingers, I stole a glance down to the DMZ. My shoulders slumped as I got the gist. '... Vietnam.'

'Vietnam!' A great crowing grin spread across his features. 'You said it! You *wanted* it! And now these are the breaks! In Country losing your shit comes with the territory!' He whooped and slapped his thigh. 'Fuck it, man, you should be welcoming me! I'm the proof you made it! Rich, I am your lost shit! Viet-fuckin' *-nam!*'

(Garland, 1996: 323)

Just prior to my fieldwork a peculiar project took place on Koh Phi Phi in Thailand – they were building a beach where there already was one. Apparently the real beach did not live up to the expectations of figments. The imaginary beach is the one in Garland's backpacker epic *The Beach*, and when film-director Danny Boyle started making a movie of it reality had to be tampered with to fit the fiction. Eager to rub shoulders with Generation Y, the Coca-Cola Company launched a commercial simulating a scene from *The Beach* – a jump down a waterfall where the main characters transcend the world to arrive in the utopian beach paradise. In the commercial, the jump ends in Coca-Cola Land, but, though Coke might be 'the Real Thing', Garland's and Boyle's 'Beach' is even better than the real thing.

The question 'Where are you?'

That question seems so ridiculously trivial. But for Richard, the anti-hero in Garland's travelogue, it was not. For him, haunted by the glamour of Vietnam War movies, it became a question of life and death. As his tropical

paradise went haywire, his flight into a phantasmic reality allowed him to become unhinged enough to eliminate the obstacles preventing his escape – he ‘became’ a GI in the cinematic wartime Vietnam. But he was still in Thailand – the DMZ he stole a glance at was not the 17th parallel in Vietnam. Richard’s DMZ was a marijuana field on a secluded island in the Gulf of Thailand – a dividing line between Utopia and the World, not between South and North Vietnam. The VCs he saw were the Thais guarding the field.

But for Richard it was Vietnam. He said it! He *wanted* it! And indeed he got it! He dropped acid on the Mekong Delta, smoked grass through a rifle barrel, flew on a helicopter with opera blasting out of loudspeakers, he even smelled napalm in the morning in his cinematic/touristic phantasmic reality. As his war movie drenched phantasm finally choked his sense of time and place, he lived his dream . . . in ‘Viet-fuckin’-nam!’

Garland has made a major contribution to the phantasmological understanding of international tourism – Richard is a metaphor for tourists and travellers. We all phantasize about Other places and Other times and we let those phantasies influence our actions. And we all stand bewildered, wondering what went wrong, when our phantasies get stripped of their reality disguises. ‘Losing your shit comes with the territory’, said Duffy Duck to Richard in the vignette above. In tourism, the territory ‘comes’ to us in the guise of phantasms, an amalgam of facts and fiction, and we are ‘losing our shit’ without recognizing it. Instead we (mind)-travel boldly into phantasmic territories where so many have gone before. In this context the question ‘Where are you?’ is anything but trivial!

Implicitly I asked tourists that seemingly trivial question. I would generally ask them to give their view of the place we were at. Few would talk at any length about Vietnam, however, without talking about Vietnam War movies. Below are a few examples:

You know the opening line in *Apocalypse Now* – ‘Saigon, shit!’ – it says everything about Saigon.

Daniel’s girlfriend and two other backpackers agreed with his statement. Different experiences of Ho Chi Minh City were then shared, and some of these stories portrayed Ho Chi Minh City as a beautiful place – the descriptive quality of ‘Saigon, shit!’ did not do anymore. Daniel then modified his opening statement. Once again he referred to a movie:

Cylo really gives you a true picture of Saigon – it’s chaotic and frightening but at the same time romantic.

Cylo, a French movie by Vietnamese director Tran Anh Hung, does not deal with the war directly, but the war is implicitly there as the film portrays post-war Saigon as a nightmarish society of violence, prostitution and drugs. These tourists shared a misrecognition that allowed the phantasies of film directors to be dragged on to the physical landscape. Vietnam was thus seen

as a sign 'resembling itself' (Frow, 1997: 73). This can create oneiric situations in which the physical landscape is not only interpreted in terms of cinematic events, but fiction is put into practice and, in a sense, experienced:

When I lie on my vinyl coated bunk, looking up to the ceiling on the junkie blue lamps around the fan, with the music in my ears I feel transferred 25 years back in time.

Still Vietnam. Almost feel like Captain Willard, wake up hungover. Don't really know if I hear a fan or helicopters. I'm not yet aware that I'm to remove Colonel Kurtz from this earth. Almost expect Lt. Kilgore to come in and say: 'I love the smell of napalm in the morning!'

The train puffs slowly through the Vietnamese jungle night, the horn bellows. Don't really know if I'm in Vietnam 1997, or in the surrealistic world of *Apocalypse Now*. I hear 'Charlie don't surf!' then I fall asleep again. (Dahlgren, 2000: 2; my translation)

This excursion in paramnesia won an award in a reader's competition in the travel section of a major Swedish newspaper. Describing (the) Vietnam (War) as we know it, the award was perhaps given out of a joy of recognition. Danish travel writer Carsten Jensen knew that Vietnam:

I had never been able to hear the word 'Vietnam' without it being followed by the word 'War', as if it was the last syllable in the country's full name. For me Vietnam was a country that was a war, and I couldn't imagine that it had any history or identity beyond the battlefield. . . . Still, regarding Vietnam I had a true feeling of being well oriented. (Jensen, 1997: 334; my translation)

A tourist I talked to was even more explicit:

I didn't know anything about Vietnam before I came here . . . except what I've seen in the movies.

Another war-tourist stereotyped all Vietnamese as 'rude, miserable and with no service-mindedness whatsoever'. In his mind the war had dehumanized all Vietnamese, but, seduced by a phantasmic war, he paradoxically wanted to gaze at but not experience what he considered to be the consequences of the real war. When asked what they knew about Vietnam before they came there, few tourists talked about anything other than the war, and few listed any other source of information than movies. When discussing the war per se some made comments such as '*Platoon* was a great movie!' The second major source of information was the *Lonely Planet* guidebook.

On a lonely planet

Backpackers' experiences of places are heavily influenced by guidebook material, and travellers' tales mainly serve to reinforce images provided by guidebooks (McGregor, 2000). As shown by Laderman (2002), the major guidebooks for Vietnam adhere to a Cold War worldview that presumes

American benevolence as a protector against communist evils while omitting the imperialistic dispositions of American foreign politics. Apart from site information, guidebooks provide 'a language through which the mismatch of expectations and experiences can be resolved' (Hutnyk, 1996: 6). In this sense, guidebooks nurture phantasms. The guidebook of choice among backpackers is *Lonely Planet*, sometimes nicknamed 'The Bible'. The significance invested in the different themes in *Lonely Planet* is implied by the number of pages devoted to them. In first place, with 48 pages (not including the history sections of each site), comes not surprisingly 'The American War'. With 29 pages 'Shopping' is second, and third comes 'French in Vietnam'. Of 21 pages of history in *Lonely Planet*, a third are dedicated to the war and written with the trenchant, at times ironic, American jargon standardized by Hollywood. A mere two and a half pages deal with the history of Vietnam since 1975, even though this period – with liberation, the wars with Cambodia and China, the famine and the isolation and the introduction of *doi moi* – has been just as significant for most Vietnamese. (Around 60 percent of the Vietnamese population were born after that last Huey lifted off from the roof of the American Embassy back in 1975.) Furthermore, the history sections of most site descriptions are predominantly dedicated to the war-era. Even when representing the history of Dalat, a town not significantly involved in the war, more than half of the section is devoted to the 'sensational' fact of it *not* having been a battlefield.

In a passage dedicated to Vietnam-related movies, *Lonely Planet* informs us that:

... [P]erhaps the most memorable line about Vietnam was spoken by a captain in the movie *Apocalypse Now*: 'I love the smell of napalm in the morning.' (Storey and Robinson, 1997: 96)

Given the authors' continuous equation of Vietnam and the war, it seems they actually consider the brutal statement of Coppola's cinematic captain to be about Vietnam. This further suggests how the Vietnam of backpackers is a war-movie with surplus physical appearance. The same goes for the following passage:

The beer is expensive, the music is cool and the atmosphere is intense with some minor arguments here and there. At a big pool table some extremely scantily clad girls are showing off their bodies while playing. On the dance floor the dancing is wild and licentious. I start thinking about Saigon during the Vietnam War. (Sundgren, 1999: 46; my translation)

This quote, from a Swedish travel magazine, describes a scene at a bar called *Apocalypse Now*, which the author dubs 'the hottest bar in Hanoi'. Curiously, there are also bars in Hue and Ho Chi Minh City with the same name, all featuring movie posters from *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* and ceiling fans simulating Huey helicopter blades. This travel writer's phantasm functions as a mediator between reality and recollection. He thus speaks about his

phantasm as if of the real and simultaneously as if he is remembering. Gazing at the 'extremely scantily dressed girls showing off their bodies', he manages to merge contemporary Hanoi with the cinematic wartime Saigon. With no real memory, he still 'remembers' the war. In movies and phantasms, the war is, among other things, about Vietnamese girls who will 'boom-boom' Western males for a few dollars. Back then the foreigners were American GIs but nowadays the FNGs⁶ are tourists sipping B-52 cocktails at Apocalypse Now. Sometimes those two categories merge – an ex-GI with his dogtag gold-mounted, a Vietnamese 'girlfriend-for-rent' in his lap, wearing a fatigue hat sporting the slogan 'My business is death, and business has been good', once honoured Pham Ngu Lao Street with his presence.

Supreme souvenirs and surplus representations

On Pham Ngu Lao Street tourists can buy cigarette lighters in the shapes of guns and tanks. More appreciated are Zippo lighters of the style the American GIs used. Apart from ordinary Zippos there are fake antiques with inscriptions like 'If you want to boom-boom, give back this lighter with a smile', 'Let me win your heart and mind, or I'll burn your fucking hut down' and 'Peace is today and tomorrow is yesterday'. More expensive are Zippos allegedly left behind by the Americans. For true GI-wannabes, the nearby War Market supplies combat fatigues complete with flak jackets, helmets, boots, dogtags, canteens, bags, ponchos and bullet trinkets.

Lonely Planet instructs: 'to pass the time and preserve your sanity, you need . . . at least a few books' (Florence and Storey, 2001: 89). One night I was having dinner in the Pham Ngu Lao area when Hoan came up to my table trying to sell books. I asked her to pick one for me. 'This one is the most popular now.' It was Alex Garland's *The Beach*, and as I read it I could easily understand its popularity. When tourists read *The Beach*, they read about themselves; when they buy *The Beach*, they buy themselves. The supreme souvenir in the Pham Ngu Lao area is the souvenir of Self. Most Western books about Vietnam are about the war, many of which are available on Pham Ngu Lao Street. The book in the main genre – American veterans' stories – that has set the scene for all others, even including Garland's veteran-wannabe novel, is Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. Herr asks his readers to view his book, and thus the war, as a movie. Since the war ultimately is a movie, Herr's book is reviewed as the real Vietnam (War): 'Although Herr admits to his book being partially fictional, [*Dispatches*] is meaty, essential reading for anyone who wants to understand Vietnam' (www.amazon.co.uk). Converting his colleague Sean Flynn, ex-actor and son of Errol, into a phantasm of himself, Flynn becomes a star in, and an icon of, Herr's 'movie':

Flynn was special. We all had our movie-fed war fantasies, the Marines too, and it could be totally disorienting to have this outrageously glamorous figure intrude on them, really unhinging, like looking up to see that you've been sharing a slit trench with John Wayne. (Herr, 1978: 207)

Photojournalist Flynn shoots with his camera as he cruises on his Honda – *Easy Rider*-style – through a war-torn Southeast Asia to finally vanish in tragic MIA obscurity. In the context of tourism, it seems Herr's intended critique also vanishes. For war-tourists, Flynn becomes the ultimate backpacker, the Big Man to follow in search of the bona fide Vietnam (War).

Like the movies, the veterans' version leaves the Vietnamese, except as gooks and whores, conspicuously absent. As a counterpoint presenting a Vietnamese perspective, Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1990) is often mentioned. On the cover of Hayslip's book we are informed that Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth*, the last of his Vietnam War movie trilogy, is based on it. *Lonely Planet* also provides us with this fact: '[the book] by Le Ly Hayslip [has] been made into a fascinating movie' (Storey and Robinson, 1997: 96). One war-tourist, who said he used to be obsessed by the war, highly recommended Hayslip's book to some fellow travellers. When describing it he claimed Hayslip's autobiographical story was fictitious: '[Hayslip] is educated, not some farm girl'. As it turned out he had not read the book but he had seen the movie. In the movie Stone has, through ethnocentric selection and rewriting, deprived the story of much of its original Vietnamese perspective. Through the emphasis in *Lonely Planet* on the fascinating movie, the reference to the cinematic war rather than the real war on the cover of Hayslip's book, and the sheer persuasiveness of Hollywood realities, Stone's American cinematic war becomes the original, the Vietnamese book becomes the copy while the realities of the war and its aftermath are dropped off on the border to oblivion. These kinds of reversed chains of representations suggest how phantasms are primary. With them we travel all the way to Vietnam to buy T-shirts saying 'Good Morning, Vietnam!'

Even when the '(t)here' is identified as phantasmic, it can be difficult to eschew it. Journalist Justin Wintle set out to find the Vietnam that 'has become, culturally, off limits [and] is never even given a chance [in Hollywood movies]'. But as his biased imagination turned a fan into helicopter blades, he reluctantly confessed: '[g]etting away from the war was not . . . as easy as I had imagined' (1991: xiii, xiv). All examples above show how Vietnam is not the site itself but a sign of itself. But this view will, at some point, be contested. Below we will look at local representations of the War, which might contest globalized phantasms.

First porn in Disneyland: The Cu Chi tunnels and the War Remnants Museum

'In this book . . .' he paused for dramatic effect. 'There's a picture of a girl.'
I snorted. 'Big deal.'
'A naked girl!'
'Naked?'

'Uh-huh. You want to see?' . . .

The girl was indeed naked, and aged somewhere between ten and twelve. She was running down a country road.

Mister Duck leant over and put his mouth to my ear. 'You can see everything!' he whispered excitedly.

'You certainly can,' I agreed.

'Everything! All her bits!' He started giggling and rolled forwards with his hand over his mouth. 'Everything!'

'Yes,' I said, but I was suddenly feeling uncertain. There was something puzzling about the photo.

I noticed the fields that surrounded the country road; they were strangely flat and alien. Then I noticed the collection of indistinct buildings behind the girl, either out of focus or made fuzzy through clouds of smoke. And the girl was upset, holding her arms away from her sides. Other kids ran beside her. A few soldiers, apparently indifferent, watched them as they passed. (Garland, 1996: 226-7)

'Certain horrific images – a Vietnamese child drenched with napalm running down a road in pain and fear – have perhaps been indelibly etched into contemporary memory' (McQuire, 1998: 151). Now this image is being efficiently muddled in a phantasmic kaleidoscope. At the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, visitors are confronted with Huynh Cong Ut's photo of napalmed Kim Phuc and numerous other brutal pictures and statistics. Here I will examine the museum as an ideological presentation and investigate how visitors consume it. But first we will take a detour to the Cu Chi tunnels.

The Cu Chi tunnels detours

The Cu Chi tunnels – a 250 km underground network stretching from the gates of Saigon to the border of Cambodia – was an NLF (National Liberation Front, the Southern insurgent) stronghold in the heart of enemy territory. The three-storey tunnels held sleeping quarters, storerooms, hospitals, ordnance factories, kitchens and headquarters. Unknowingly the American base camp of the 25th Division was built on top of the tunnels. Realizing this blunder Cu Chi, a.k.a. the Iron Triangle, was declared a 'free strike zone'. Some 10,000 of the 16,000 Vietnamese living in the tunnels were killed. A small section of the remaining tunnels in this bombed out, bulldozed, herbicide-sprayed area has been turned into a tourist site.

As the tour bus makes its early morning departure from Pham Ngu Lao, Anh, the guide, opens with a plea: 'Don't believe anything you see or hear in Vietnam, because 90 percent of everything is government propaganda.' According to Anh, the communists would never tolerate his account of Vietnam. As an ex-soldier of the ARVN (South Vietnamese army), he spent two years in a re-education camp and didn't speak English for 18 years.⁷ His sister fled to America while he stayed behind working as a farmer and taking

care of their father. He views the USA as a place where anyone can be successful. The Vietnamese people are described in positive terms while the government is portrayed less favourably. The narrative is mixed with jokes. On most tours Anh follows a rehearsed procedure, but occasionally he would tell more about his personal experiences, among other things how he flew over Hamburger Hill one day after the notorious battle there ended.

After a few hours, the bus arrives at the Cu Chi tunnels. The tour starts with a history lecture and a movie. The latter is viewed as pathetic communist propaganda – ‘Its effect on me was to kill the desire to see any more official history exhibits’ remarks travel writer Harold Truman (1999: 40). Other judgements include ‘insulting’, ‘funny’ and ‘weird’. Moving on to the tunnels a variety of Viet Cong handmade weapons are demonstrated in jest by a soldier guide. Next stop is a tunnel entrance hidden under the leaf carpet, which tourists are challenged to find. The soldier uncovers the entrance and, going down, Anh calls him a hero. Some tourists try to squeeze themselves down into the tunnel and, although the entrance proves to be too small, they are also declared heroes. The highlight of the tour is a 100 metre crawl through an enlarged tunnel equipped with lights. Some play at being VCs and GIs with photoflashes as special effects. Coming up all are excited as if on a funfair joyride. Anh calls this tunnel a ‘symbol’, as he does the kitchen and the operation room next to be visited. At the kitchen ‘VC tea’ (herb tea) and ‘VC food’ (manioc with salt and peanuts) are served. Next on the tour are two VC-manikins to pose for photos with. The final stop is a caged bear, which *Lonely Planet* views as ‘perhaps the most disturbing part of the entire Cu Chi Tunnels tour’ (Florence and Storey, 2001: 504), and a souvenir shop with war-tourism trinkets.

The tunnel tour – dubbed ‘Vietnam’s answer to Disneyland’ and ‘Disney and Fellini do Nam’ by visitors – is organized to have tourists make-believe they are heroic VCs; they crawl in the tunnels, eat ‘VC food’ and join the VC-dolls for photos. Some tours include the opportunity to dress up in VC pyjamas and for target practice with M-16s and AK-47s for US \$1 per bullet. Those who are successful are awarded with medals or VC scarves. The overwhelming majority of participants are males. Some confess to being true GI-wannabes with a hedonistic repertoire of boozing, drugging and whoring. Adding to this their proclivity for war memorabilia, they present themselves as not too far from the stereotype of wartime GIs.

For the Department of Culture and Sports, which administers this former combat zone, the intention of focusing on active participation from a NLF perspective, rather than passive sightseeing, is undeniably ideological. This message, however, is received in an ironic theme park context. The insurgents are thus transformed from the intended heroes into kitschy icons of a phantasmic war. The predilection for the term ‘Viet Cong’ in international tourism and movies is conspicuous here. The term was

initially a propaganda creation of the southern Diem regime and later adopted by the Americans. It ignores the ideological diversity among those who opposed the South Vietnamese regime, lumping them all together as communist (*cong*, short for *cong san*, means communist in Vietnamese). Although the communists gradually gained power in the south, the NLF was established by South Vietnamese insurgents largely independent of the communist party in the North. One of the founders, Truong Nhu Tang, writes:

... the South Vietnamese nationalists were driven to action by [Diem's] contempt for the principles of independence and social progress in which they believed. . . . Most [members of the NLF] were not Lao Dong ('Workers' Party' – the official name of the Vietnamese Communist Party) members; many scarcely thought of themselves as political, at least in any ideological way. (1986: 68)

The term 'Viet Cong' is therefore grossly delusive. That said, however, it should be recognized that the communists were also ideologically diverse (they still are) and that the term only reaches its full pejorative meaning when joined by McCarthyism. Most tourists I met were ignorant of these ideological differentiations and instead adhered to Cold War paranoia and Hollywood mythologization of a monolithic evil communist foe. In this context, Anh's introductory instructions on the deceiving Vietnamese government foment the phantasmic reality in which the movies are as real as Vietnam is fake. Anh's tragic experience of the battle at Hamburger Hill is cut loose from reality, as many tourists know this battle as the movie with the same name. On the way to Cu Chi, the bus passes a war cemetery. Many brush aside the sight of the vast number of graves, calling it communist propaganda. Again Anh's recommendations points to an escape route to the familiar Cold War truth saying communists are not to be trusted. At the end of the tour, the dominant version of Vietnam's history and significance, as brought to Vietnam embedded in phantasms, is relatively unchallenged, despite the ideological organization of the tour. Below I will discuss another Vietnamese representation of the war that might be presumed to challenge Western approaches.

The War Figment Museum

The War Remnants Museum, situated a mere US \$1 cyclo ride from Pham Ngu Lao Street, is 'the most popular museum in Saigon with western tourists' (Florence and Storey, 2001: 457) according to *Lonely Planet*. This description attracts a continuing stream of visitors. While the Cu Chi tunnels highlight the heroism of the Viet Cong, the museum focuses on the Americans, here depicted as bloodthirsty imperialists. The role of the ARVN is downplayed. At Cu Chi, the Viet Cong's primitive weaponry is shown which, in contrast to the sophisticated American war technology shown at the museum, gives a picture of a David and Goliath battle. While

the VC-manikins at Cu Chi have a backdrop of a tranquil eucalyptus forest, the museum displays a GI-doll with a backdrop showing ruthless destruction of dead VCs and bomb craters. At Cu Chi the VC-dolls are displayed in a way that enables tourists to pose with them for photos and the tour invites tourists to participate instead of looking, to 'join' the Viet Cong. The GI-doll at the museum, conversely, is located in an exhibition case that limits tourists to a distant gaze. With the objectified GIs and the heroic, yet kitschy, VCs, the contrasting organizations of the Cu Chi tunnels and the War Museum merge in an all too familiar dramaturgy – an ideological reversal of the movies.

Apart from pictures, visitors are confronted with war statistics: 7,850,000 tons of bombs were dropped (nearly four times more than during the Second World War); 75,000,000 litres of defoliants were sprayed over South Vietnam; the US spent \$352 billion on the war; around 3 million Vietnamese were killed and over 4 million were injured. The death rate of the Americans – around 58,000 – although huge in itself, appears relatively small in comparison. For many visitors, these facts are hard to comprehend. The shock is not so much the uneven numbers of casualties, but that 3 million Vietnamese *people* were killed – in the movies there were only gooks, VCs and hookers. The War Museum deliberately tells a one-sided story which clashes with the Hollywood perspective. The propaganda aside, the museum 'reveals' the fact that war is not enjoyable – it's far too real to be – but from a touristic perspective that is debatable. Even though this asymmetrical arrangement of perspectives constitutes a potential for change, the phantasm of Vietnam is a mixture of fictional and realistic information prior to the tourists' arrival. While in Vietnam, tourists are continuously gulping that very same formula.

The most horrific sight at the museum is the formalin jars with foetuses damaged by Agent Orange. The intention of showing these is clearly to pressure the USA to acknowledge the high percentage of foetus abnormalities and cancer among inhabitants of defoliated areas as caused by herbicide toxins. This strategy backfires badly; many tourists feel their holiday experiences have been infringed on and dismiss the museum as pure communist propaganda. This approach is further enforced by ex-ARVN cyclo drivers hired as guides. Once the horrors have been dealt with, the real war can be enjoyed as phantasmic. Claiming she enjoyed her visit to the museum, a backpacker laughingly dismissed a picture of some GIs showing off some decapitated Vietnamese with the comment: 'It's funny really, this government propaganda, I mean, the Americans never did things like that.'

'[L]ike a photograph, a "fact" must be seen from somewhere, [it must have] a duration, a context, a configuration in time and space' (McQuire, 1998: 167). To many visitors the museum version of the war has no realistic duration, context or configuration in time and space simply because Vietnam, as they know it and enjoy it, lacks a realistic duration, context and configuration in time and space. As receivers of the ideological message of

the Vietnamese tourism authorities, tourists 'have a residual freedom: the freedom to read it in a *different way*', different as in chosen, not mistaken (Eco, 1986: 138; author's emphasis). The war pictures can thus be stirred into a prefab potpourri; the picture of napalmed Kim Phuc merges with its movie replica in *A Bright Shining Lie*, the photos of the My Lai massacre intermingle perfectly with an analogous scene in *Platoon*; the picture of a VC refusing to answer questions and thus being thrown off a flying helicopter blends well with its simulation in *Heaven and Earth* – a scene solely the product of Stone's imagination; it is not to be found in Hayslip's book – and so on. The cinematic images are enjoyable while the real ones are horrendous, but, blended together, the former lose their imaginary quality while the latter are deprived of their connection with reality. With phantasms as mediators the realistic and the fictional can be both real and entertaining, really entertaining. Herr compares the irresistible yet guilt-laying seduction of war pictures to that of porn:

I remember now the shame I felt, like looking at first porn, all the porn in the world. I could have looked until my lamps went out and I still wouldn't have accepted the connection between a detached leg and the rest of a body . . . (1978: 17–18)

Just like Richard got confused by the paedophilic eroticism imposed on the napalmed Vietnamese girl, many visitors are confounded, not knowing whether the war was real enough to be obscene or if it's fictitious enough to be enjoyed. While a few come out of the museum crying, others pose smilingly for photos by the American armoured vehicles. Some do both. Then they jump back up on hired cyclos, heading for other touristic adventures. What has happened is that they have made what Eco calls a 'discordant interpretation' where the messages are 'sent out from the Source and arrive in [a] distinct sociological [context], where different codes operate' (1986: 141). Tourists rely on phantasmic operating codes and, although made unconsciously, their interpretation sometimes spills over; leaking through to the conscious, it leaves a bad taste – a feeling that something is wrong without knowing what it is.

Vietnamization with a vengeance: how to win a war

'You tricked me!'

'How? What did I ever offer you? What did I ever say I'd provide?'

'You . . .'

'I never offered you anything but Vietnam, and only because you asked for it. It so happens you wanted the beach too. But if you could have had Vietnam and kept the beach, it wouldn't have been Vietnam.'

'I didn't know that! You never told me!'

'Exactly.' Mister Duck beamed. 'That was the beauty of it. You not knowing

was Vietnam too. Not knowing what was going on, not knowing when to give up, stuck in a struggle that was lost before it started. It's incredible really. It all works out.'

'But I didn't want that Vietnam!' I began. 'I didn't want that kind! I wan . . . ' Then I stopped. 'All? . . . Wait, you're saying it all works out?'

'All. Right to the bitter end.' He rubbed his hands together. 'You know, Rich, I always thought euthanasia was a kindness. But I never dreamed it could be so much fun.' (Garland, 1996: 379–80)

Richard finally becomes doubtful about wanting the kind of Vietnam where euthanasia comes in jest. The passage above is the climax in Garland's book. It's where 'the Beach' is unveiled as a metaphor. The Beach was not a place but a utopian dream of escape, inseparable from Richard's phantasm of Vietnam-as-War. Those put together were equally inseparable from a reality where lives were expendable. With a lead character displaying a borderline personality and a jargon of the stereotypical GI, Garland's book implies that the peacetime travel culture is a metaphor of war. Richard's taking refuge in a phantasmic Vietnam War, as his real situation turns desperately threatening, implies the media-packaged war as a safe, sound and necessary retreat. In the end, Richard flees a bloodstained Southeast Asian ex-paradise and returns home to a business-as-usual – playing videogames, smoking dope and proudly sporting a few scars – *as if the whole gory beach-adventure never took place*.

So far I have deliberately kept the analysis open-ended. Now it's time to tie the threads together, and I will take as my starting-point the suggestion that Garland's fictitious story echoes a real one.

Vietnam is dead, long live Vietnam!

'Vietnam, a country made famous by a war' (Florence and Storey, 2001: 11). An ethnocentric truism at best; it's not really Vietnam-the-Country that is famous, only in the Boorstinian sense – known for its 'well-knownness' (1992: 46–8). This well-knownness does not include the Vietnamese, who are conspicuously absent in the movies. Instead it's the War – the one the Americans lost. But no need to spell it out like that. Just say 'Vietnam', even 'Nam' will do, and everybody knows. 'Vietnam, a country made famous *as a war*' seems a more accurate declaration.

An eager tourism industry assures us that 'the Vietnam of today is a country of peace' (Florence and Storey, 2001: 11). Innocently turning former battlefields into tourist attractions is a message of peace; these sites will never be war sites again in the same manner. In this sense, Vietnam can boast of being the only nation to have defeated the US, while *Lonely Planet* can claim to promote peace. But here we must ask ourselves:

. . . [W]hat does it mean to win or lose a war? How striking the double meaning is in both the words! The first, manifest meaning, certainly refers to the outcome of the war, but the second meaning – which creates that peculiar

hollow space, the sounding board in these words – refers to the totality of the war and suggests how the war's outcome also alters the enduring significance it holds for us. The meaning says, so to speak, the winner keeps the war in hand, it leaves the hand of the loser; it says the winner conquers the war for himself, makes it his own property, the loser no longer possesses it and must live without it. And he must live not only without the war per se but without every one of its slightest ups and downs, every subtlest one of its chess moves, every one of its remotest actions. To win or lose a war reaches so deeply, if we follow the language, into the fabric of our existence that our whole lives become that much richer or poorer in symbols, images, and sources. (Walter Benjamin in Berg, 1990: 41)

In the second manifest meaning, Cu Chi is still a war site. In this sense there is a new war in Vietnam – a war of ideological napalm and propaganda booby-traps. This new war is a meta-war. A metamorphosis – the death of Vietnam as a country and resurrection of Vietnam as a War, it is about who will tell who what to remember about that other war. Since '[t]o be without a memory is to risk being without identity' (McQuire, 1998: 168), the meta-war is also about what Vietnam will be in the global arena. It thus becomes clear that this new war is in fact the old war in a new guise, a new phase/face of the war. The meta-war, which at a first glance seemed to be about owning a war of the past called Vietnam, is really about owning future definitions of a place with the same name. But defining a place of the future as a war of the past is like saying that someone awake is sleeping.

Good morning, Vietnam!

You see it everywhere, this the favourite trope of self-styled Vietnam 'experts' – in commercials for Western products, in guidebooks, brochures and in books, but mostly on souvenir T-shirts worn by tourists. It reads like a statement. But what does it mean? That night when I bought *The Beach*, I was sitting in a restaurant in the Pham Ngu Lao area called, yes, you guessed it, Good Morning, Vietnam! And just like Richard, the anti-hero in *The Beach*, whose war-movie-drenched phantasm finally choked his sense of time and space, I get confused. Exactly *where* and *when* was it I bought that book? In contemporary Ho Chi Minh City? ... or in the cinematic wartime Saigon?

Most obviously it's a wake up call – *good morning*, Vietnam! As such, it's also an invitation. But to what? Remember the movie? Co-producer Larry Brezner had a dream 'to make [it] as a metaphor of the war' (quoted in Gilman, 1991: 235). '[S]et in the early, "innocent" days of American involvement' (Williams, 1991: 124), it's also a metaphor for the obscurity present now, in the 'innocent' days of tourism. Adrian Cronauer, played by Robin Williams, had his gaze focused 'on an ethereal white-clad Vietnamese woman [whose] "other" side is her Vietcong terrorist brother. The remaining women are hookers' (1991: 128). The

imperialistic/cinematic/touristic Others are objects of aesthetic evaluation, penetration and/or moral negation.

'There's a lot of fucking going on here, but I guess it encourages the war effort', the American ambassador Ellsworth Bunker reportedly commented. The R&R programme, commonly referred to as 'I&I' (Intoxication and Intercourse) by the troops, played a decisive role in promoting sex-tourism in Southeast Asia. In 1967 US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara signed the R&R contract with Thailand. It grew into a \$16 million industry and, four years later, McNamara, by then Head of the World Bank, recommended the development of mass tourism in Thailand. With numerous HIV cases in Thailand, Vietnam is now considered a safer 'lay'. Male tourists who won't stop at penetrating the everyday life of the Other can get their inclinations satisfied at the Apocalypse Now bars, and in the Pham Ngu Lao area – the 'budget traveller haven' – three out of four shoeshine boys have been sexually abused according to ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking). Perhaps Wintle's claim is not so farfetched: 'There's no fucking end to it. I mean there won't be an end to war until there's an end to fucking' (1992: 348). 'Then' merges with 'now' – the body-count is resumed and Saigon is once again earning its wartime nickname Whore City.⁸

Remember how Cronauer in *Good Morning, Vietnam!* taught the Vietnamese to speak American slang? How he invited Them to be a little bit more like Us (read 'the US')? A little bit, but not entirely – white-clad, but not white. A recent book on *doi moi* is called *Vietnam Joins the World* (Morley and Nishihara, 1997). It echoes the GI terminology where Vietnam was 'In Country' and any place outside Vietnam (read 'the War') was 'the World'. But Vietnam, with or without war, with or without *doi moi*, has been part of the world for thousands of years. Only with a 'We are the world/West is the world'-hubris can one ever claim otherwise and annul the workings of embargoes and diplomatic confinement. This hubris permeates many studies of *doi moi* in which Vietnam is recast as a virgin to be lawfully penetrated by an aroused Western market – Nike sweatshops come to mind.

A new war will open soon at a theatre near you!

Ideological napalm and propaganda booby traps; the ethereal white-clad Vietnamese woman and her Viet Cong terrorist brother; contemporary Ho Chi Minh City and the cinematic wartime Saigon; the West and the rest – same-same but different. But is it really well directed, that wake up call? What is Vietnam supposed to wake up to? And who is really sleeping? . . . and dreaming? . . . daydreaming about Vietnam? Good morning, *West!* When the '(t)here' and the 'there' are not the same, where does one travel? And what time is it when the past lies in the future? . . . contemporary Ho Chi Minh City or the cinematic wartime Saigon?

When a country is a war that is a phantasm, its people get relegated from humanness to Otherness, one step from nothingness. The American

war-strategy of the 'body-count' is an obvious case in point here, and this dehumanizing tabulation of death prevails (Spanos, 2000: 155).

By the time the United States finally left South Vietnam in 1973, *we* had lost over 58,000 men and women; *our economy* had been damaged by years of heavy and improperly financed war spending; and the political unity of *our society* had been shattered, not to be restored for decades. Were such high costs justified?

This is how Robert McNamara opens the final chapter of his highly acclaimed *In Retrospect* (1995: 319, my italics). For McNamara the high costs were not justified, and he has learnt this lesson the hard way. As wartime Secretary of Defense he knows the war from personal experience, not from movies. Still, in his view, only 58,000 of the 3 million casualties were human; in his view, the high costs were not justified because the war was lost, not because it was wrong in any moral or ideological sense.

Few writers, even those who oppose the war, disobey the norm of both equating Vietnam with war and forgetting the losses of Vietnam-the-Country. Olson and Roberts end their exposé saying, '*Vietnam was the wrong war* in the wrong place at the wrong time for the wrong reasons . . . And the end of the Vietnam War is a black wall in Washington with *58,175 names, an epitaph to a loss that is every American's*' (1991: 283; my emphasis). Stanley Karnow argues that the Cold War experience stimulated Asians to 'recover their identity and to shape fresh goals'. An innocent enough claim, but then Karnow's ethnocentrism sets in as he concludes that, '[the Cold War experience] sowed the seeds of a struggle that was to *culminate* in the inscription of *nearly fifty-eight thousand American* names on a granite memorial in Washington' (1984: 46; my emphasis). If you don't own the war, your losses don't count. What is most alarming here is not Karnow's amnesia, but its contagiousness – his book is possibly the most authoritative and, complemented with a 13 hour TV-series, certainly the most popularized book on Vietnam's history.

Though bound to our bodies, our heads float freely in a universe of fancies we claim are real enough to live, die or kill for. President Reagan, the former actor who called the war in Vietnam a 'noble cause', 'prepared the nation for the possibility of military intervention in the Middle East by commenting: "Boy, I saw *Rambo* last night; now I know what to do next time"' (Klein, 1990: 23). His successor, George Bush, later claimed to have cured America of the 'Vietnam Syndrome' by crushing Iraq in a TV-blitzkrieg that brought myopic perception and destruction even closer together. Following Spanos (2000: 142), the 'Vietnam Syndrome' encompasses the view of massive war protests as symptoms of 'national neurosis' in inexorable need of recuperative and conciliatory forgetting. With the Gulf War spilling over in space and time to act as a band-aid for the infected wounds of the Vietnam fiasco, Bush could assist the amnesiac process. By the way, Bush Senior also believed tourism would speed up the peace

process in the Middle East (Goldstone, 2001: 155). With Bush Junior, however, there has so far been a general decline in tourism (read peace).

This popcolonization 'function[s] less as an absence of the real than a multiplication of its indices and a rearrangement of its signs in conformity with a world picture in which "embodied" and "disembodied" perception have become radically interchangeable' (McQuire, 1998: 207). When we say that information is getting globally accessible and the world is getting smaller, it's just as much our phantasms that are getting bigger. In the Western image gallery of Vietnam, cinematic images dominate. These images of napalmed Philippine and Thai jungles show, not the complexity of what was but, rather, what We must remember in order to remain what We and They are. Initially I asserted that this article would be about neither Vietnam nor the war. In the wake of tourists, film-makers, war veterans, academics, journalists, Hawks and Doves, I have pretty much steered clear of them both. However crude and empty, the GI's comment I have taken as the heading – 'What the fuck is a Vietnam?' – has been the most epistemologically sane statement about Vietnam, leaving the door open for the possibilities of other approaches as it does. While the war left Vietnam economically devastated, the meta-war has turned Vietnam into the poorest country in the world in terms of identity, for an identity based on well-knownness is the most shallow of all – it's narcissistic, only the narcissism is not one of Vietnam. It's Ours! We said it! We *wanted* it! And indeed We got it; *Our* phantasmic reality; *Our* domesticated Vietnam; Vietnam-the-War. And blessed are We for the '(t)here' is already here, there and everywhere. Vietnam is Our worldwide wet dream come true. Yes, *indeed* We do love you. We love you in order to love Ourselves . . . long time!

Vietnam, we love you long time

'To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return' (Benjamin, 1973: 148). Tourism is not all about sightseeing and consumption, it's also about *being seen* and tourists also *invest* in the Other. Through these and previous investments, We have turned Vietnam into a mirror – a place without a place. Gazing at Vietnam, We see Ourselves where We are not – a self-affirmation deceptively disguised as an ego-escape. As Our gazes fail to reach beyond Ourselves the myth of Western superiority prevails, not because Vietnam is a subordinate country, but because Vietnam is not a country at all. Can anyone ever really win a war? When the refusal to fulfil Nixon's secret Paris Peace Agreement clause of US \$4.7 billion in reconstructive aid, and the post-war embargo and support of the Khmer Rouge, are set alongside Clinton's politically correct visit in November 2000, during which he could recuperate his lack of wartime 'been there' authority by urging his hosts to account for the 1,498 American MIAs while he had little to say about the 300,000 Vietnamese MIAs, the continuousness of the war crystallizes itself. Its lethality

is evident in infants deformed by 30-year-old Agent Orange, and thousands of civilians blown apart by left behind ordnance.

Rather than accepting guilt, the Free World (i.e. the home of international tourism) habitually singles out communist mismanagement as the sole root of Vietnam's economic deprivation, which points to the efficiency with which phantasms have erased the material consequences of a US \$352 billion war and 20 years of post-war embargo. Thailand – the not-fallen domino and supreme resort in Asia – is frequently applauded as a regional counter-example with a democratic market economy.⁹ However, dependent on traveller's cheques, the Thai government has until recently been reluctant to acknowledge the shattering problems that tourism has entailed. This denial has engendered a foul affair where the economic costs of sex-tourism (whose origins and current practice are linked to the Vietnam War), in terms of an HIV epidemic, are rapidly running through the economic benefits of tourism. To this should be added the costs in terms of human suffering. Communist Vietnam has conversely faced these problems with straightforwardness, only to be criticized for infringing on the 'civil right' of tourism access.

Having lost the war, the strategic attempts of Domino theorists to retrieve and recast the war for their own (new) ends have been sporadically recognized, but are still left relatively unchallenged. A reviewer loathes McNamara's remorse claiming it comes '58,000 lives too late' (www.amazon.co.uk). Indeed, the ethnocentric debate that followed the publishing of McNamara's remorse has almost entirely focused on how much can be blamed on the alleged Soviet/China-dependent Vietnamese and whether the fiasco of US intervention was a betrayal of American values or a failure to fulfil the same. That is, the fiasco is questioned but not the logic behind the intervention, leaving American values per se unscrutinized (cf. Spanos, 2000: 131); hence when Oliver Stone and other homespun radicals criticize the inability of their elected leaders to live up to American ideals, while leaving the ideals themselves unscrutinized, these flag-wavers end up ratifying the Free World logic that put the Americans in Vietnam in the first place. Few have been willing and/or able to tiptoe around this trap of compliant critique.

So what has tourism – not innately good or evil – to do with all this? To be able to love Vietnam as a war indicates the dominion of presumably innocent phantasms, a dominion we acquire when we endorse them. Contrary to the beliefs of the nostalgic faction of postmodernism, phantasms are not empty and their seductive powers and ideological persuasiveness lie precisely in their accumulating substance; the more meaning we invest them with, the more we desire them, and vice versa. As mentioned above, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate tourism from other social practices. This evaporation of tourism as a distinct set of practices goes hand in hand with the emergence of 'imagination' as 'an organized field of social practices . . . and a form of negotiation between sites of

agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility'. Appadurai argues that this 'unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors' (1996: 31). The construction of entire cinematographic dream worlds of wartime GIs, the framing of Vietnam as a (psychedelic) war in movies and books, the omnipresent references to Disneyland and cinematic events among war-tourists, and the phantasmic Vietnam rhetoric of American politicians are not accidental, and imply that we should take the fun and games dead seriously.

I suggest that the contradictory logic of the 'tourism-as-civil-right' ideology, which demands worldwide tourism access for Westerners while the pleasure-periphery Others – whether immigrants, refugees, tourists or exporters – are confined by xenophobic protectionism, is structurally affiliated with the Free World logic that once introduced the Domino Theory. In his excellent study, Mark Bradley (2000) shows how pre-war American policy makers – informed by the global discourse and practices of colonialism, racism and modernism – fashioned an imagined Vietnam that included the deprecating conviction that the country should be remade in America's image, a conviction that still remains. In its structural design, the phantasmic Vietnam of contemporary tourists shares too much with the imagined Vietnam of the embryonic American warlords to be brushed aside. Although '[t]he stridency with which many tourists have been willing to assert, or just assume, their right to experience the Other at any time and place resonates with an imperiousness that is almost militant' (Phipps, 1999: 75), tourists will obviously not start any wars. But there are other agonizing issues to consider here.

By the turn of the century tourism has become not only the world's largest industry but something far more complex than 'the single largest peaceful movement of people across cultural boundaries', as appointed by anthropologist James Lett (cited in Hutnyk, 1996: 138). 'Low-budget' we call these tourists – it sounds so much more authentic that way – but in a global context it takes a relatively gigantic purchasing power to go country-hopping for months on end. Far from being simpletons duped by a cunning industry, backpackers enjoy a zealous agency that they put to use to sanction a pre-existing glossy pamphlet Vietnam (War) with surplus entertainment value. On the affluent side of the world, all natives are potential tourists. For Us natives-turned-tourists value for money is paying US\$1, not US\$1.50, for a cyclo ride from Pham Ngu Lao to the War Museum, and value for money is to read the narrative of the museum as phantasmic. By ignoring how the freedom of one might be the confinement of an Other, and by exploiting an epistemological authority of 'been there' experience and authenticity, tourism, especially in its backpacking variety, is an alternative instrument in the ratification of the international geopolitical hierarchy (see Hutnyk, 1996). Becoming a tourist, then, is inevitably a political act.

War-as-usual

In this context the marriage between tourism and war bears a seductive child indeed (see Diller and Scofidio, 1994). 'Alternative' tourists – beneficiaries of age-old institutionalized global asymmetries they claim to be able to sidestep – for whom Vietnam is a cinema-stuffed thing called war, set out not to 'get away from it all' but to 'get into it'. Add to that an international industry promoting former war sites while simultaneously portraying a country 'bombed back into the Stone Age' as 'unspoiled', and the popcolonization can reach its fullest potential. This 'Vietnamization with a vengeance' constitutes extraterritorial corroborations of Western 'truths' through the filters of the indigenous and the naïve complacent authority of the dodgy old 'been there, done that' shibboleth.¹⁰ The last century was the bloodiest in the history of humankind. In this century, veiled under the slogan 'Enduring Freedom', we seem to be entering a state of chronic deterritorialized civil war – the business potential of war-tourism is without doubt monstrous. As they take the media packaged Vietnam-as-war out travelling and return it home safe, strengthened with new levels of authenticity, backpacking war-tourists dwell in an incongruous space between the Free World logic that justified the intervention in Vietnam and the genocidal practices that realized that logic. In this sense, peacetime war-tourism adheres to a belligerent dogma – a '*Pax Americana*' to go along with Spanos (2000) – that hides war in peace in an effort to smokescreen its continuing violent practices. A world made safe for war-tourism puts us in the quagmire of 'an occult landscape' (Crang, 1999: 246) where every war – past, present and future – promises entertainment and enticing self-ratification for well-heeled leisure vagrants – the ultimate playground for trigger-happy hegemonists.

Hardly a homogeneous horde, some tourists are clearly infatuated by war while others have the 'war' prefix more reluctantly attached – if Vietnam is War then all visitors are war-tourists, like it or not. Just as most film-directors (nowadays) claim to oppose war, so do most war-tourists. My aim, however, has not been to represent war-tourists, but to examine the global representations they, among others, circulate and the ideology that sanctions this. In dissecting the contradictions of war-tourism, what worries me is not the ostensible banality of tourism-as-usual, but its malicious other half – the comfortable numb state of war-as-usual in which the odd genocide barely provokes a raised eyebrow (cf. Bibby, 1999: 155; Phipps, 1999). Long ago, Hans Magnus Enzensberger identified the tourism-as-usual ideology, but rather than falling into its entailing trap of 'touristic shame', he concluded that 'critique of tourism . . . belongs in truth to tourism itself. . . . The disillusionment with which the critic reacts to it corresponds to the illusions which he shares with tourism' (cited in Frow, 1997: 95). I suspect that something similar applies to war – the disillusionment of war-as-usual shares its illusions with the ideology of war.

Tourism does not begin with the act of touring, but with the construction of a world picture that renders the world 'tourable'. To fully understand

war, we should examine how it makes its presence in peace – war does not begin with the act of killing, but with the construction of a peacetime world picture through which some people(s) are demarcated as ‘killable’. America never declared war and the Paris Peace Agreement was never observed – there was no war and there is no peace. Even the charade following the My Lai massacre points to this. First the massacre was denied enough to have those responsible walking free. Then, after 30 years of forgetting, the lime-light was turned on Hugh Thompson and others who tried to prevent it, and they were declared American heroes, decorated with medals to prove it. With this shrewd scheme, an indiscriminate slaughter has been transformed into a triumph of American ideals while the ideology of carnage that caused it has been left intact. Now the only nation ever condemned for terrorism by an international court can claim to lead a righteous war against terrorism while doing its best to throw spanners in the works of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The establishment of the ICC should of course be criticized for sanctioning war-as-usual – with a juridical positivist demarcation of odd ‘war crimes’, most slaughters will inevitably be construed as ‘just wars’. For all the wrong reasons, American wants none of that – their wars are all just! In present-day post-ism, this New World Order of ours – where meek war critics can help America to get away with losing a war and still end up winning it – it might be wise to take heed of our conceit in order to avoid continuously having to write the history of our own obscurity with author/North Vietnamese Army-veteran Bao Ninh’s lament: ‘The future lied to us, there long ago in the past’ (1993: 42). With war-as-usual, the fact that Vietnam is a war that *never was* has never been truer – *as if the whole gory beach-adventure never took place*. Freedom is being sacrificed on the altar of the Free World.

Notes

- 1 The title was a GI’s comment when he received his orders to go to Vietnam (Baker, 1982: 25). Thanks to Klas Hallgren, Lena Ohre, Gudrun Dahl, Paolo Favero, Johan Lindquist, Raoul Galli, Galina Lindquist and Scott Laderman. Special thanks to Stephen Nugent for his insightful comments and persistence.
- 2 The Rest and Recreation programme aimed at keeping the American troops’ morale at its ‘highest’. Soldiers were flown to cities throughout Asia to ‘rest and recreate’ at the brothels there.
- 3 See also the forthcoming work of Scott Laderman, University of Minnesota.
- 4 There is a risk of essentializing identity and reifying the subject here. But:

. . . [b]y decoupling the idea of experience from the vision of an ontologically prior subject who is ‘having’ it, it is possible to see in experience neither the adventures and expression of a subject nor the mechanical product of discourses of power but the workshop in which subjectivity is continually challenged and refashioned. (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 29 n17)
- 5 My scope is to examine the ‘(t)here’ rather than the ‘there’. While the ‘(t)here’ is a globalized imagined ‘elsewhere’, the ‘there’, below specified as

'Vietnam-the-Country', does not refer to an objective Cartesian reality but more democratically to the possibilities of other perspectives, a possibility that there is more to Vietnam than war.

- 6 FNG (Fucking New Guy) was a term used for newly arrived GIs during the war.
- 7 The market value of the war is generally recognized by guides. Although I see no reason to doubt Anh's story, a common market strategy among enterprising guides is to tell fake war stories to attract customers.
- 8 According to a 1993 survey, nine out of ten sex buyers are Vietnamese (Franklin, 1993). But to claim that tourists only contribute marginally to the sex industry is to fiddle with statistics. When the 669,862 foreign tourists of 1993 are put in relation with Vietnam's population of 75 million, one out of ten is a relatively large portion. Some sex-tourism protagonists argue that prostitutes catering for international customers make more money and are therefore better off than their domestic co-workers, but this likewise points to the huge economic contribution international sex-tourists make to the industry.
- 9 During his speech in 1995 at the ceremony in Hanoi celebrating the normalization of diplomatic relations between the former enemies, Secretary of State of the Clinton administration Warren Christopher praised Thailand as democratic and liberal. He didn't hide his view that a subordinate Vietnam should be moulded in the image of America (see Bradley, 2000: 188).
- 10 The fact that this argument, aimed at the moot 'truth'-producing 'been there' authority constructed around the space between the affluent Western subject and the exotic Other, extends itself to a critique of anthropological knowledge production is old news yet ever-so critical.

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