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Remembering/imagining: Shona Illingworth's time present and Trinh-T Minh-Ha's forgetting Vietnam

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Abstract

This article considers the intersecting of remembering and imagining vis à vis individual and cultural amnesia. It focuses on two artists' films, Shona Illingworth's video installation *Time Present* (2016) and Trinh-T Minh-Ha's film, *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015). *Time Present* portrays the experience of an individual living with amnesia and further relates it to the immobility that denotes the cultural representation of the island of St Kilda (Outer Hebrides). *Forgetting Vietnam* questions the problematic legacy of the Vietnam War and its recollection by bridging personal and shared experiences through a portrait of Vietnam itself. Both Illingworth and Trinh use the film's features of frames and movement to convey the emotional and affective resonances of the experiences and places presented to generate the possibility of presence. This article closely examines *Time Present* and *Forgetting Vietnam* with a focus on the films' respective structures and thematic developments and reads them by suggesting the intersecting of remembering and imagining culturally and its potentiality for engaging with absence and silenced histories through decentralized approaches.

Keywords: memory; amnesia; imagination; Shona Illingworth; Trinh T Min-ha

Introduction

This article considers the intersecting of remembering and imaging *vis à vis* personal and especially cultural amnesia as mediated by filmic artistic practices. It focuses on Shona Illingworth's video installation *Time Present* (2016) and Trinh-T Minh-Ha's film, *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015). Despite their different subject matters and distinct approaches, which I will detail below, both films deal with the absence of memories and deploy the formal features of the filmic medium (e.g., frame, viewpoint, camera-angle, movement, intersecting of sound/image) to convey the emotional and affective resonances of the experiences and places presented, unravelling expanded spatiotemporal dimensions in which imagining and remembering can interact. Both artists address absence through radical ways of reasserting presence.

In *Time Present*, Illingworth portrays the experience of Claire, a woman living with amnesia, conveying her condition as a mental space that can open neither toward the past nor the future. Illingworth further relates it to the immobility that dominates the cultural representation of the isle of St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides where the centuries-long legacy

of its inhabitants has been obliterated. Central to *Time Present* is the foreclosure that amnesia causes, precluding both remembering and imagining. In considering *Time Present*, I ask what kind of imagining is possible without memories. Marking the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, *Forgetting Vietnam* weaves Trinh's family history and memories of her native country with the problematic legacy of the war. The film portrays the everyday life of Vietnamese people and their cultural traditions, bridging the personal and the political across past, present and future. In examining *Forgetting Vietnam*, I consider what kind of remembering transpires from imagining as rendered through the poetics of the film itself.

For my discussion, I draw on Kathleen Lennon's definition of imagination. Reflecting on the shared etymology of image and imagination, Lennon underlines the phenomeno-logical correlation between the sensory-perceptual experience of reality and the mental 'images' that ensue from it.[1] For Lennon, such 'images' – whether oral, haptic, olfactory, or visual – delineate the spatiotemporal co-ordinations of the world in which one moves, their shape and form: 'Images, in this sense, weave together the sensory *present* with what is *past*, the projected *future*, and the spatial *elsewhere*' (Lennon 2015, p. 2). Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Lennon defines the imagination as 'that by which there is a world for us', meaning that it is thanks to the imagination that one can confer shape and form to experience by gleaning its emotional significance and potential meanings as well as weaving together 'the present and the absent' in ways that remain open to revision (Lennon 2015, p. 2–3). Hence, following Lennon, 'the working of the imagination within the world gives that world an *affective texture.* It has a salience and significance for us, suggesting and sometimes demanding the desiring and sometimes fearful responses we make to it' (Lennon 2015, p. 3), thus soliciting an engagement with experience. With affective texture, Lennon refers to 'the imaginary shape' that the world takes for the individual as one responds and interacts with one's surroundings (Lennon 2015, p. 61). It is through this weaving of past, present and projected future – to use Lennon's words – that the potential intersection of remembering and imaging can emerge as memories are also imbued with the affective texture of experience, its emotions and sensations.[2] In my discussion of *Time Present* and *Forgetting Vietnam*, I suggest the generative potential of the intersection of remembering and imagining *vis à vis* an absence or suppression of memories for the individual and culture. My focus is on the affective texture of experience as afforded by the moving image.

Time-present: 'Stranded in time'

Shona Illingworth's filmic artistic practice engages with contested histories and the role of memory for both the individual and society through a focus on internal and external atmospherics and their affective resonances. Her approach is characterized by interdisciplinary collaborations with, for example, neuropsychologists Martin A. Conway and Catherine Loveday on memory processes, trauma, and amnesia.[3] The double-screen video installation, *Time Present*, was developed in collaboration with Conway and Loveday, and

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[1] The literature on the relationship of perception and imagination is extensive and beyond the scope of this article. For an outline of key contributions see Lennon 2015, 15-31. See also Kind 2022, Kind 2021, and Kind 2020. For cultural centrality of the imagination, see Castoriadis 1987, and Castoriadis 1994.

[2] Both remembering and imagining partake to ways of knowing and creating meaning that relate to what is absent – whether by engaging with the past or projecting into the future (Tadeo 2020, 41-42).

[3] Claire and St Kilda are also the subject of Illingworth's three screen video and sound installation, Lesions in the Landscape (2015), also developed in collaboration with Martin Conway and Catherine Loveday.

with Claire – a woman who lives with retrograde and ante retrograde amnesia and prosopagnosia due to viral encephalitis. The resulting damage to parts of her brain means Claire has lost the ability to recall memories and to retain even briefly the new ones that she can occasionally form; she is also no longer capable of recognizing faces, including her own (Convey and Loveday Conway and Loveday 2010; Albano 2016, p. 109–110).

Time Present portrays Claire's experience of living with amnesia. Illingworth's careful filming shows her agency in the complex coming together of vulnerability, resilience, resourcefulness, and self-knowledge. Conway's voiceover further reflects on how the impossibility of recalling the past and forming new memories undermines Claire's ability to unravel a life story for herself that is capable of supporting a sense of identity. Claire's amnesia also affects her capacity to project into the future, thereby limiting her experience of a continuous present. Illingworth expands such understanding of amnesia to critique the suspended temporality underpinning the cultural construction of St Kilda as a secluded and remote island whose 4,000 year-long history was figuratively frozen on the day the inhabitants were evacuated on 29 August 1930. Such construction not only obliterates the historical past of the island but also conceals its current military importance as a testing range for ballistic weapons and its geopolitical significance *vis à vis* the impending global political instability as a forward projection in time. Throughout *Time Present*, the personal and cultural dimensions of amnesia intersect, as images of Claire and St Kilda appear alongside each other or are interwoven.

In my analysis, I examine how Illingworth uses framing and the malleability of the filmic medium together with sound to convey the spatiotemporal dimension of Claire's experience and her affective landscape. While anxiety and fear are prevailing emotions for Claire, Illingworth focuses on touch and the haptic potential of the moving image to expand the affective texture – to use Lennon's phrase – of *Time Present*, opening the possibility for imagining *vis à vis* the foreclosure that amnesia generates. Framing is also important in Illingworth's questioning of the cultural myths of remoteness and immobility imposed on St Kilda, as she contraposes an image of the island imbued with the sensory vibrancy of the place from which other imaginings can ensue. Although imagining remains latent for both Claire and St Kilda, Illingworth renders its potential palpable for the viewer through the sensory resonances of the film itself.

Claire

Time Present opens on two dark screens on which one extended acute note reverberates. As this single note begins to evolve, a close-up of Claire's profile emerges on one of the screens next to a glass reptile cabinet illuminated by a reddish light. The focus then shifts to Claire trying to feed a snake a small mouse. One then sees a frontal black-and-white picture of Claire, while on the other screen, a granular rain of stones floats in space. We hear Claire's voice talking of being scared and unable to recognize her own family and home, not knowing anything about them anymore (Illingworth 2016, voiceover). In the following sequence, the focus moves back to Claire's attempts to feed the snake. It shows her fingers flipping through handwritten pages recording the snake's behaviour. While reading the notes she explains that the snake hasn't eaten for 28 days – 'it seems forever' (Illingworth 2016, voiceover. For a transcript of the voiceover, see also Illingworth 2021). This is the only occasion in the video in which Claire attempts to make sense of the passing of time by conferring on it some graspable though undefined meaning. As Conway observes in the voiceover, through remembering one gives meaning to one's own experiences by connecting events into a life story in which continuity and change are woven together (Illingworth 2016, voiceover).

Figure 1. Shona Illingworth, Time Present, 2016. Digital still. Two-channel digital video and stereo sound installation, 35 min. Courtesy the artist. © Shona Illingworth.

When such ability is precluded, as in Claire's case, time extends into a continuous present. In Conway's words, this is comparable to being 'stranded in the present moment, stranded in time' (Illingworth 2016, voiceover).

In filming Claire, Illingworth shifts from close-up to medium plane, deliberately emphasizing the framing of images by using corners, windows, and doorframes as internal compositional axes while black and white sequences alternate with colour-saturated ones. As a viewer, one becomes acutely aware of the ways in which the camera angles delineate the boundaries of Claire's spatiotemporal experience. Hence, a black and white sequence shows Claire in the sitting room of her home, repeatedly adjusting cushions on two armchairs. The room's doorframe and the bow window in the background mark the thresholds of the space in which Claire moves. The repetition of internal geometries within the images themselves – be they of the squares into which the window is divided, the shape of a glass fish tank in one corner, or of a blanket that Claire lifts and folds – emphasize the framing of the camera (Figure 1). In the hazy milky light streaming from the window, Claire's gestures appear almost vaporous. Indeed, Claire repeatedly refers to feeling displaced with no sense of belonging in her own life – a life about which everyone else knows (Illingworth 2016, voiceover). She is 'effectively cast out' – as Gabriele Schwab puts it – 'of the chronological sense of a lifetime commonly generated by memories' (Schwab 2021, 68) and feels estranged when others tell her of her own previous life. Schwab asks, 'What does Claire feel in the transitional space between the words she finds in the here and now and the stories she can no longer tell?' (Schwab 2021, p. 70). Through their collaboration Illingworth and Claire work through this transitional space, unfolding what the loss of the past feels like as they piece together fragments of lived experience and feelings. The cinematic frame thus acts as the visual counterpart to what Conway refers to as Claire's spatiotemporal "window of consciousness" constantly closing in the present (Illingworth 2016, voiceover).

Fear permeates Claire's experience of being stranded in her own life. This is evident in a section in which she describes the urge to get up as soon as she wakes in the morning to write down the thoughts spinning in her head for fear that she will forget them. In her words, 'The fear of remembering things and not having any possibility to write things down gets me into a panic' (Illingworth 2016, voiceover). Illingworth suggests Claire's whirlwind of thoughts and rising anxiety by revolving the video frames so that they open in a diamond-like shape across the two screens, moving diagonally to the sound of one piercing extended note. None of the images can be fully grasped because changing prisms of images form and fade across the screens. Claire then appears sitting at the kitchen table going through her lists and notes. The focus is on her face and her hands and papers – as

Figure 2. Shona Illingworth, Time Present, 2016. Digital still. Two-channel digital video and stereo sound installation, 35 min. Courtesy the artist. © Shona Illingworth.

simultaneous frames on the two screens (Figure 2). On them, Illingworth overlays the spinning reflections of other images, and Claire's voice reads through her lists in extended metallic notes which fragment the reading into vibrating echoes. Such visual and oral interferences become ever more intense and disorienting as the sequence progresses, until the sound of a sole protracted metallic note fills the two blank black screens, followed by silence and a single image of the interior of the house slowly spinning on one of the screens. For Claire, such disturbance is like 'a whole load of muddled connections – just all kinds of things come in and out… I don't know what I am thinking about…' (Illingworth 2016, voiceover).

These two sequences are indicative of the ways in which Illingworth uses the malleability of the filmic medium to convey the spatiotemporal dimension of Claire's experience for the viewer, and how framing, overlayed and spinning images, and sound become the means through which the emotional resonances and potential meanings of *Time Present* emerge. Hence, in another sequence that focuses on touch, the camera follows Claire's fingers delicately tracing closed boxes, the edges of shelves, and an old chair in a utility room as if it were in slow motion, as she observes:

It's been a bit scary in a way going into rooms that have

strange feelings of no sense of belonging to any of it or things

I don't understand; I think I used to know about things

in the house, who gave us that lovely chair or, you know, even the

memory of choosing a carpet or something (Illingworth 2016, voiceover).

The camera's close-up frame on Claire's fingers gently holds her feelings of fear and estrangement, implicitly suggesting how Claire's inability to remember has severed the associations that memories would create to her home and life, emptying them of meaning. As a viewer, one shares her not knowing the content of the unmarked boxes or the stories she is searching for. At the same time, one also senses the tenderness and longing of her touching fingers. In another short sequence, Claire traces the outline of the framed picture of a boy; her fingers stop for a moment on one of the cheekbones. Her gesture is imbued in equal measure with tenderness, yearning, and sadness. The glass covering the photograph stands in between the finger and the image: simultaneously a barrier to the closeness Claire

longs for and a tangible token of her amnesia as it alludes to the memories that she can no longer access and the feelings frozen in her imagination. Conway in the voiceover asks,

> What would happen if you couldn't imagine?
>
> Could you then have a memory?
>
> It seems to us that quite probably
>
> It is the case,
>
> If you lost the ability to imagine,
>
> Then you lose the ability to create new memories.
>
> And that's because imagining and remembering are part of the same process (Illingworth 2016, voiceover).

According to Conway, the possibility of shaping what one does or does not remember is 'an important creative process' that allows individuals to construct histories for themselves and integrate change: 'We all exist in an epoch of remembering and imagining which forms a system that moves through time in a window of consciousness'; within this system 'it is not possible to imagine the future without in some way remembering the past while at the same time living in the present' (Illingworth 2016, voiceover. See also Conway *et al.* (2016); Rathbone *et al.* (2011)).[4] For Conway, amnesia inhibits such creative processes and the related sense of moving in time. Illingworth's cinematic frames draw the confined perimeter of Claire's present as she touches a reality that constantly eludes her.

In the sequences described above, the objects that Claire traces with her finger bear the emotional charge of the memories and stories that remain ungraspable for her. Touch here acts as a metonym for loss and what *Time Present* suggests as Claire's unrequited search for glimpses of the past and the meaning that they might unravel. Touch alludes to the absence of memories but simultaneously also to their latent presence. Drawing on Lennon's notion of the imagination as that which weaves together the present and the absent through an embodied experience of the world, I would like to suggest that in *Time Present* touch creates an opening – although momentary – in the confined spatiotemporal framework of Claire's continuous present as imagining. While, as Conway states, the lack of memories also affects the ability to project oneself into the future and hence to imagine, when touching the boxes in the utility room or the boy's photograph, the tactile sensation of these gestures seems to bring Claire closer to those memories that she cannot access. Through sensation, she fugitively holds their potential as imaginings. According to Erin Manning, touch can, in fact, be regarded as a becoming toward something that is not yet as touch foregrounds a reaching toward something or someone with which or whom one is relationally connected, both temporally and spatially. Manning sees touch as a motion that unfolds forward in time and space in the act of reaching and such forward movement is imbued with the potentiality of knowledge and meaning (Manning 2007, p. xv-xvi, xviii, and 138). Although such potentiality ricochets on itself for Claire, as the imaginings that touch momentarily holds as a possibility cannot take shape, it is nonetheless emergent for the viewer in the affective texture of *Time Present.* The close-up of

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[4] I here refer to how the correlation of imaging/remembering is presented in Illingworth's *Time Present*, acknowledging that this view is debated, see for instance Robins 2022.

Claire's fingers, in fact, operates haptically as a forward movement that opens potential meanings that each viewer can bring to these images by assuming who the boy in the photograph might be or by imagining what the boxes in the utility room might contain, or by musing on memories of one's own. Hence, one emphatically relates to Claire's experience of loss through one's own responses to Illingworth's video. The affective and emotional engagement that the work generates through its texture becomes a site for the unravelling of viewers' imagination. As a viewers, one is immersed in such texture.

St Kilda

Throughout *Time Present*, Illingworth intersects Claire's portrait with images of St Kilda, which is now a UNESCO cultural heritage site. Toward the beginning of the video, she introduces a double-screen panoramic still of St Kilda while the voiceover observes how the now empty island had been populated for centuries, but its history was frozen on the day its inhabitants were evacuated in 1930. The still view of St Kilda epitomizes the romanticized aesthetics that define it as a remote and secluded island. Like Claire, St Kilda is also trapped in the continuous presence of its supposed immobility and of the romantic myth imposed on the island. In the nineteenth century, when the island began to be a touristic destination, travellers' accounts already presented it as frozen in time. St Kilda acted both as a reminder of past ways of life capable of evoking sublime feelings and as a 'primitive outpost' in contrast with the growing modernization of the mainland (McDonald 2010, p. 153. See also McDonald 2001). Both these contradictory representations fulfilled an ideology and aesthetics of marginalization (McDonald 2010, p. 156) that are still apparent in the recurring account of the last day of its remaining inhabitants and the supposed preservation of the abandoned island as an unaltered heritage site – an image that conveniently screens the contemporary strategic relevance of the island (Albano 2016, p. 113). Such relevance and its "occultation" from dominant narratives dates to the Cold War period and Britain's first nuclear testing programme and continues today as evidenced by a large radar control dome that dominates the top of the island's hillside and the drone of military training actions (McDonald 2010, p. 276–77; Albano 2016, p. 114). A silent air space (no-fly zone) surrounds the island and the archipelago of St Kilda for 30,000 square kilometres, extending horizontally as well as vertically to include the surrounding airspace, thus protecting satellite communications and digitally transmitted information that circulate high in the atmosphere (Albano 2016, p. 114). Fraser McDonald reads such a shift from a merely horizontal plane of control to a vertical one as a contemporary re-articulation of the sublime imagination with which St Kilda has been traditionally associated (McDonald 2010, p. 267–68), thus reinforcing an idea of remoteness.

Illingworth counteracts the static, distant vision of St Kilda with medium-plane footage of a volcanic rock formation and close-up images of the stone walls of the buildings on the island accompanied by the sound of the sea, wind and screaming gannets circling around the dark rocks. These sequences are characterized by a haptic and acoustic feeling of the place filling the supposed emptiness and stillness of St Kilda with vibrancy and a sense of continuous change. Illingworth also includes a sequence of Claire walking through the ruins of Village Bay touching the stone walls of the abandoned buildings that connects her experience of 'being stranded in a continuous present' with the frozen temporality that characterizes the cultural representation of St Kilda. However, the connection is only partial. In a black and white film sequence, Claire is shown from the back sitting on the deck of a boat, looking toward the island which is faintly visible in the background (Figure 3). It is unclear whether the boat is moving toward or away from St Kilda as if suspended on a journey without a course. Later in the voiceover Claire comments, 'The future is frightening,

Figure 3. Shona Illingworth, Time Present, 2016. Digital still. Two-channel digital video and stereo sound installation, 35 min. Courtesy the artist. © Shona Illingworth.

not knowing how I am going to fit into a world that once knew this person I have to call me' (Illingworth 2016, voiceover). Displaced in her own life, a stranger to herself, Claire's feelings of isolation and fear resonate in the painful note that cuts through the images. While for Claire time seems to fold in on itself, Illingworth's medium frames of St Kilda expose its imbrication with the present and the future in ways that contradict the dominant myth of the island as a sublime remote ancestral place. The images of Claire touching the stone walls of St Kilda's ancient buildings and the medium-plane shots capturing the life on the island reinstate the forward movement and potentiality for knowledge that Manning ascribes to touch, as if through the contact of her fingers Claire could also reach towards the lost memories of past life on the island. Hence, as in the earlier sequences of Claire in the utility room and tracing the boy's framed photograph, touch acts metonymically evoking the liminal presence that fills the empty buildings and narrow paths.

The feeling of presence that ensues for St Kilda is further emphasized by the affective texture of Illingworth's images of the island from which a different spatiotemporal dimension of this place emerges – one in which the island is marked by time as much as by the erosion of the wind and sea. As Schwab observes, Illingworth 'enters the space of the past through the way its loss feels in the present. And while it doesn't imagine a future, it opens memories of the future that are foreclosed in amnesia' (Schwab 2021, p. 69). Illingworth thus creates the potential of imaginings that are imbued with the affect and atmosphere of the place, suggesting that, although St Kilda's inhabitants are no longer there, the island continues in more-than-human forms – through the elements, the vegetation and rocks – "to move through time", to use Conway's words, while the human presence of tourists, the military and other workers on the island testifies to its present relevance facing the future rather than the past. Illingworth thus resists the "petrification" imposed on St Kilda and the sublime detached aesthetic that endorses it. The highly sensory quality of her footage and its intentional close focus make tangible the multiple temporalities that denote St Kilda, creating an imaginative space where past, present and future intersect.

Forgetting Vietnam: 'Between two'

Filmmaker, writer, and composer Trinh-T Min-Ha is renowned for her expanded approach to documentary that critiques the authoritative voice and vision typical of the genre in favour of multiple voices and ways of seeing that, as the artist suggests, do not speak about but rather "nearby" a subject, through a critical reimagining of ethnographic filmmaking (Trinh in Chen 1992, p. 85–87). This is the case in *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015). The film comprises video footage that the artist filmed on two separate visits to her native country, first in Hi8 format that Trinh shot in 1995 and then in HD video that she filmed in 2012 when she went back to Vietnam to

complete filming. Trinh superimposes short written texts on the edited video footage and pairs the images with a polyphonic soundscape that includes the breaking of waves, people speaking, musical compositions with traditional instruments, folk and popular songs, gongs and chanting, the din of traffic and the clattering blades of a helicopter. By intersecting visual, oral, textual, and graphic components and by moving across places and temporal references, Trinh weaves together a complex web of internal associations through which concurrent ways of apprehending reality, of telling and signifying, arise. In my analysis of *Forgetting Vietnam*, I consider the affective texture of the film itself and the role that movement plays as an intimation of both flow and duration. My focus is on the poetics that characterize Trinh's specific approach to filmmaking and the potentiality for what the artist refers to as "rememory" through the imaginings that the film solicits. For my discussion of the poetics in *Forgetting Vietnam*, I draw on Éduard Glissant's notion of 'poetics of relation' whereby relation is understood as movement (Glissant 1997, p. 171).

Holding of twos

Aware of the significance that time-based technologies play in memorialization, Trinh has deliberately chosen not to include any archival footage of violence and devastation in *Forgetting Vietnam*, to avoid the sensationalism, both exploitative and hegemonically charged, that is typical of the media representation of the Vietnam War (Trinh and Mercier 2018, p. 82). As she explains, 'The commitment to not use any footage of the War that has been taken and circulated on the media in *Forgetting Vietnam* was a question both of ethics and of intense remembering in forgetting' (Trinh and Mercier 2018, p. 83). Instead, her film traces the still pervasive though muted presence of the war in people's memories and places. The film footage in Hi8, though supposedly of 'poor' definition, has 'a kind of saturated colour' – as the artist explains – 'that it is unique to the medium: a grainy, painterly quality that you don't have in HD' (Trinh in Balsom 2018) which has a sharper clarity. The careful editing of these two video formats is symptomatic of the status of images as shown by the fraught relations between old and new (Olivieri 2020, p. 181), whereby the distinct qualities of the video footage point to the impact of technology on everyday life. Hence, 'While profoundly immersed in Vietnamese life, imagery and history, it [*Forgetting Vietnam*] also interrogates the power of cinema, seeing and recording, and the relation between the inside(r) and outside(r), drawing attention to the significance that technologies of recording play in the production and consumption of both histories and memories' (Olivieri 2020, p. 182).[5] The editing of high- and low-definition video thus adds to the material qualities of colour, luminosity, and contrast that, together with the carefully nuanced soundscape, create the affective texture of the film and its potential to 'show and tell traces of what can't be seen' (Trinh 2015, text-over).

Central to *Forgetting Vietnam* is, in fact, an engagement with the latent trauma and repressed memories of the Vietnam War *vis à vis* the amnesia imposed by its official memorialization. Underpinning Trinh's showing and telling "of what can't be seen" is what she refers to as the 'holding of twos' that characterizes her film. As Trinh remarks,

> In *Forgetting Vietnam*, everything is said to begin with the 'two', the ability to hold both: the forces of mountain and water, of solid and liquid, low and high, old and new, north and south; the movement of ascending and descending, or of leaving and returning (Trinh in Balsom 2018).

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[5] This also relates to the prevailing western economics of consumption whereby technologies become quickly obsolete and incompatible (Trinh and Mercier 2018, 82).

Figure 4. Trinh T Minh-Ha, Forgetting Vietnam, 2015. Film still, 90 mins. Digital film. Courtesy of the artist © Trinh T Minh-Ha.

This holding of 'non-binary twos' (Trinh in Balsom 2018) includes remembering and forgetting as two concurrent and mutually related processes. Quoting Vietnamese writer Pham Tiến Duật, Trinh asks "'To really forget, we must fully know what we want to forget'. But how to remember the face of war?" (Pham Tiến Duật quoted in Trinh 2015, text-over). Confronted with the official silencing of the traumatic memories of war, Trinh seeks to create the potential for "rememory" (Trinh 2015, voiceover) through imagining as the poetics of her radical way of filmmaking.[6]

Forgetting Vietnam opens with images of boats in the South China Sea in the pinkish light of dawn. The focus shifts to a formation of rock covered in lush vegetation arising out of the water. The sea and the rock allude to the two opposing forces of the descending and ascending dragons from which, according to Vietnamese mythology, the country originated (Trinh 2015, text-over). Later in the film, over images of rice fields, the Vietnamese word for water *nước'* appears on screen, then that for land, *đất.* As one learns, the two words together mean country (*đất* nước') (Trinh 2015, text-over). Throughout *Forgetting Vietnam*, Trinh unfolds the intimate bond of land and water that characterizes Vietnamese life and culture, drawing a complex and articulated portrait of the country and its people, as the film moves from North to South, intersecting past and present, history and mythology, folklore and poetry, personal and collective memories, images, sounds, and words. Memory itself is rooted in this indissoluble connection and the opposing forces that they represent: in an early sequence in the film, a black and white photograph of the artist's father as a young man is overlaid onto a seascape, appearing next to a rock formation, while the words 'memory of a vast origin' traverse the screen (Figure 4). According to Vietnamese cosmogony, as Trinh recounts, Vietnam was born from the union of the Dragon King, Lạc Long Quân, and a fairy or mountain's daughter, Âu Cơ, who swallowed a handful of soil losing the power to return to Heaven. Her tears formed the many rivers running through Vietnam and their periodic floods are how the land remembers her (Trinh 2015, text-over). 'She' – as the country born from the union of water and mountain, as the mythological mother, and as the many women and girls that Trinh filmed rowing, cooking, eating, talking, praying in temples, or sitting in marketplaces selling their goods – is a

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[6] Trinh underlines the centrality of poetics in her documentary film making as an ability to 'play with meaning' (Trinh in Chen 1992, 86).

recurring referent and presence within the film. Myths and legends are integral to Trinh's portrait of Vietnam contributing to the potential of "rememory" through imagining.

Within the expansive structure of *Forgetting Vietnam*, filmic movement merges with the internal motion of flowing water and changing landscapes, while the pace of the streets in Hanoi or Saigon alternates with the cadence of paddy fields, rowing or praying. Images overlay, single frames open or momentarily freeze, and words move across the screen. Repeatedly, the passage from one section to another is marked by the rhythm of a moving train, while expansive landscapes change on the screen and single frame close-ups, mostly of people, open like carriage windows on the bottom half of the screen. Movement is here intrinsically related to time – both as the internal movement of frames and their duration and as the tempo of gestures and ways of living shown by the film and marked by the concurrence of tradition and modernity, past and present. The movement also underpins the internal structure of the film itself. Indeed, the attention to ordinary gestures and motions accentuates the internal links among images, generating a chain of references beyond the images themselves, as a form or structure open to possibilities of signification and expanded resonances (Trinh and Rowley 2010. See also Rancière 2022, p. 78). Hence, movement – whether as internal duration or flow and gesture – relationally connects the sections, sequences and diverse components of the film (visual, oral, verbal, graphic etc..) that Trinh interweaves to create the poetics of *Forgetting* Vietnam. This use of movement resonates with Édouard Glissant's notion of relation as a movement. For Glissant, the relation 'relinks (relays), relates' (Glissant 1997, p. 171) opening new possibilities.

> They do not add up to anything clearcut or easily perceptible with any certainty. The relinked (relayed), and the related, cannot be combined conclusively. Their mixing in nonappearance (or depth) shows nothing revealing on the surface. This revealer is set astir when the poetics of Relation calls upon the imagination. What best emerges from Relation is what one senses (Glissant 1997, p. 173–74).

Relation thus engages with what is latent to experience through the imagination and makes it perceptible as sensation and emotion, foregrounding what Glissant refers to as "poetics of relation": a dynamic process of joining what would normally be kept apart (Glissant 1997, p. 174). In this process, the imagination operates as that which 'prefigures reality, without

Figure 5. Trinh T Minh-Ha, Forgetting Vietnam, 2015. Film still, 90 mins. Digital film. Courtesy of the artist © Trinh T Minh-Ha.

determining it a priori' (Glissant 1997, p. 192) or fixing it. Imagining is itself envisaged as a movement that stirs the affective texture of the quotidian in a continuum of relaying, relinking, and reshaping, of emergence and disappearance. In *Forgetting Vietnam*, such poetics give rise to "rememory" as a dynamic associative process able to activate the silenced traces of the past whereby remembering emerges through imaginings (Figure 5).

Rememory

In *Forgetting Vietnam*, Trinh typically shows and tells relationally from the intermediacy of twos, be those of land and water, North and South, past and present, images and words. It is for the viewer to piece together references and allusions, to see and hear.

Between two

water and land

sites of memory and forgetfulness

receptacles of history's open wounds (Trinh 2015, text-over)

reads a text-over as two barges float swiftly on a river, the rowers paddling with their feet as if they were cycling. 'History's open wounds' are impressed in the landscape where traces of contamination and violence persist in rice fields and waterways as 'the hearth remembers' (Trinh 2015, text-over). They also mark the features of the people that the camera encounters. Trinh includes video footage of a veteran sitting in a market followed by the words, 'can millions of veterans across countries forget?' (Trinh 2015, text-over). In the next sequence, the figure of a boy is barely visible in the shadow cast by a wooden veranda, with the words 'can survivors of war trauma disremember?' (Trinh 2015, text-over). The focus then shifts to two elderly women talking while sitting on a low step. The next sequence moves to the interior of a Buddhist temple. Trinh remarks, 'scars of war surfaced publicly through increasingly unearthed hidden remains. The walking souls of the unclassified, dismissed or "impure dead" continue to populate Vietnam's collective memory' (Trinh 2015, text-over). Earlier in the film, she included an extract of the *Legend of the Returned Sword*, performed by a water puppet theatre. According to the legend, in times of peace, the king returns his sword to the water dragon as it is unnecessary to hold on to its power. The artist asks, 'would today's king return the sword?' (Trinh 2015, text-over). The question resonates with another subsequent sequence in which tranquil images of paddy fields bathed in watery light are accompanied by the reported dialogue between a bus driver and a passenger in Hanoi about the disappearance of people who oppose the current regime. The fragile balance between war and peace alluded to by the ancient legend is brought to bear on past and present violence, connecting the recollection of the unreported and "unclassified" dead of the war to that of today's disappeared, also unreported and unclassified. Hence, within the economy of the film, buildings, rivers, or landscapes are themselves imbued with memories, stories, and histories; they are also receptacles of the traces that are liminal to official narratives and participants in Trinh's process of telling and showing.

Halfway through *Forgetting Vietnam*, Trinh introduces a section on the ancient imperial city of Huế in central Vietnam. The images show views of the historical buildings and temples under persistent rain. Here, the pain and sorrow caused by the 1968 offensive of Tết Mậu Thân led by Hanoi's authorities and the subsequent massacre of civilians are still perceptible in mass graves and burial sites to be found everywhere 'scattered in sand dunes,

children's schools, and rice fields' (Trinh 2015, text-over). As author Phan Huyền Thư, quoted by Trinh, writes,

> I want to murmur to Huế and to caress it

> But I'm afraid to touch the sensitive spot on Vietnam's body (Trinh 2015, text-over. See also Trinh and Mercier 2018, p. 82).

The incessant reparation work carried out on old buildings in the city seems to allude to the working through of trauma, as the figurative suturing of past wounds through remembering. However, as Trinh remarks, amnesia jeopardises such a collective process of remembering as the atrocities of Huế are 'placed into oblivion in the official version of War history and conveniently absented from the government-operated War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City' (Trinh and Mercier 2018, p. 88). Trinh intersects a panoramic view of an army of antique bronze figures with the unnerving din of a surveillance helicopter that cuts through the film's soundscape. The intrusive interference of the engine rotors disturbs and counteracts the pensiveness suggested by the images. The film frames thus hold the tension between amnesia and the emergence of residual traces of the past, restating the basic question of the film about how to remember what has been silenced.

"Rememory" designates remembering in forgetting. It can be understood as the expanded reality that *Forgetting Vietnam* articulates through the encounter of two realities, the one that Trinh films and the one that she creates through the affective texture and poetics of the film itself. Here, the recurring reference to "She" embodies the very possibility of "rememory". "She" is both singular and plural, alluding to the many women filmed in marketplaces and temples. Her/their gestures and prayers are simultaneously individual and passed down through generations, the expression of actions and words that resonate across time, both memories and imaginings. Rituals and practices, following Julia Jansen,

> may be described as embodied cultural memories but they may be also understood as enacted joint imaginings of possible, perhaps desired ways of living or as enacted social imaginaries, something like preconceptual, pre-symbolic ways of interpreting or understanding something (life perhaps, or death) (Jansen 2018, p. 137).

Accordingly, they can be considered the simultaneous embodiment and enactment of remembering and imagining as shared '*vehicles and fields*' (Jansen 2018a, p. 133) of continuity and difference, 'interweaving the present and the absent, echoing the past and elsewhere, and holding out possibilities for the future (Lennon 2015, p. 97). Hence, in *Forgetting Vietnam*, "rememory" emerges in 'the quiet and the quotidian' – in Tina Campt's words – of 'practices' infused with meaningful possibilities (Campt 2017, p. 4) and the texture of every day as it is characterised by gestures that 'are occluded by their seeming absence or erasure in repetition, routine and internalization' (Campt 2017, p. 4). Shared gestures are also, like places, the live receptacles of what is liminal to both official commemoration and amnesia; they hold the possibility for new memories as they are 'encountered and modified' in the ongoing interactions with one's own and others' surrounding environments (Lennon 2015, p. 97). 'She' is also Vietnam itself, the land and water which bears the traces of war, contamination, and burial. 'She', however, functions metonymically within the economy of Trinh's film, as it points to an absence as much as a presence, elusively shifting as a referent that is never specified or personified. Hence "she" is capable of "rememory" by holding both past and present, the living and the dead, remembering and forgetting (Figure 6):
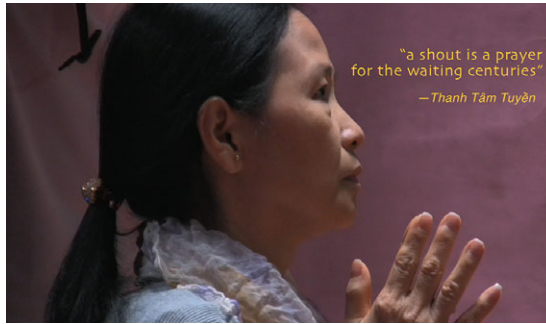
Figure 6.   Trinh T Minh-Ha, Forgetting Vietnam, 2015. Film still, 90 mins. Digital film. Courtesy of the artist © Trinh T Minh-Ha.

> she who gives thanks [...]
>
> she who speaks to the departed
>
> lives with the imaginal world and in prayer faces the living (Trinh 2015, text-over).

The 'imaginal world' alluded to by Trinh relates both to images and imageries – as the interacting and converging of visual, oral, and haptic resonances – reminding us of the relationality that connects images, words, sounds and tactile feelings in *Forgetting Vietnam*. "Rememory" thus unfurls in between what is shown and what is said, at the intersection and in the gaps of collective and personal memories – including those of the artist[7] – and in the silences that cannot be filled. It is a relational movement within the film itself with its own flow and recurrences.

   In the concluding sections of *Forgetting Vietnam*, Trinh draws further attention to the characteristic overlap of tradition and modernity in Vietnam, questioning not only the impact of technology on change but also the pressure posed by globalization and the burgeoning tourist industry. Such pressure is brought to bear on the sexual exploitation and human trafficking that afflict Vietnam, and on China's increasing economic and political interference, whereby attention to the past becomes a means to expose current conditions and the future trauma that they might cause, 'Recalling yesterday's stories to expose today's events' (Trinh 2015, text-over). Trinh shows a woman rowing and the close focus on the backwards /forwards movement of the rower's paddle emphasising the continuous cadence of strokes whereby one gives shape to the other. Tangentially, the end of *Forgetting Vietnam* ricochets to its beginning, with images of water and land, to an origin that is also continuity, and to the backwards/forwards motion of "rememory" itself. The film concludes with the words, 'the spectre of Vietnam haunts and changes the world' (Trinh 2015, text-over). Trinh makes us feel, see, hear, smell, and think of Vietnam – she makes it present to us through the affective texture and poetics of her film and, through them, evokes the spectral traces of what is both remembered and forgotten about Vietnam.

Remembering/imagining

Both *Time Present* and *Forgetting Vietnam* deal with the "presence in absence" of the past as an affect. According to the philosopher of history, Eelco Runia, to experience the presence of

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[7] Trinh's own family was politically divided (Trinh in Chen 1992, 83).

history means 'being in touch' both literally and figuratively 'with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are' (Runia 2006, p. 5). In this sense, the past refers not only to major historical events but also to individual and shared memories. Such a past is one 'that is absent from our own mythology, [it is] the past that is withheld verbally, the past that is subconscious [...], that is the past that waits to be made sense of' (Runia 2006, p. 8). Hence, it is the traumatic past of the Vietnam War that is silenced in its official memorialization. It is the history of the island of St Kilda that it is obliterated in its current presentation as a heritage site fixed in an image of remoteness and isolation. It is also the personal memories that Claire can no longer access. This concluding Section I refer to Runia's notion of "presence in absence" and the significance that he ascribes to metonyms to expand on the relevance of remembering/imagining as intersecting processes mediated by film.

For Runia, the trope for the past that is apparently absent though deeply embedded and 'radically continuous' (Runia 2006, 9) in the present is a metonym (Runia 2006, p. 6). Runia understands metonyms not only linguistically, but also materially, visually and performatively, in terms of objects, images, and gestures. Hence, a metonym is a "presence in absence" 'not just in the sense that it presents something that isn't there, but also in the sense that in the absence (or at least the radical inconspicuousness) that *is* there, the thing that isn't there is still present' (Runia 2006, p. 20). Metonym, in other words, operates with what is implicit in history and culture and makes contact 'with a different level of reality' (Runia 2014, p. 147) evoking what remains liminal, yet deeply felt within what I call the affective texture of the real and its emotional resonances. The present itself is, in fact, made of metonyms that are no longer recognisable because completely blended into the contexts in which they were once conspicuous. According to Runia, through metonyms it is possible to access what has been forgotten or silenced and initiate what he refers to as *inventio* – that can be understood as emergent imaginings. In his words, it is 'by allowing the presence of the past to take possession of us, that we start to go forward in an unimaginable way' (Runia 2014, p. 156). Artistic practices, specifically non-descriptive ones, can be a site of metonyms because of their ability to engage with the affective texture on which, as suggested, both remembering and imagining can emerge (Runia 2006, p. 19). Such an engagement is particularly relevant *vis à vis* silent histories within decentralised approaches to the past.

In my discussion of *Time Present* and *Forgetting Vietnam* I draw attention to how both Illingworth and Trinh engage with the affective presence of the past by establishing a correlation between imaging and remembering through the malleability of the moving image as a medium. The kind of presence that I have highlighted for them refers to potential imaginings for *Time Present* and "rememory" for *Forgetting Vietnam.* Both artists bring these to the fore as entangled potentialities through their specific approaches to filmmaking and the features proper to the moving image – respectively frame and movement – to critique established forms of memorialization and the imaginaries that support them. Their respective approaches resonate with Ariella Azoulay's claim for the need to attend to such imaginaries and their aesthetics through a critique of the narratives and categories that it helps to support to reclaim the importance of imagining as 'a tool for reading the possible within the concrete' (Azoulay 2015, p. 24–25, 164–165, and 171). The concrete – to use Azoulay's term – relates to what is normally absent or marginal to official narratives or representations of the past. Their critique requires accessing absence. Hence, the relevance of artistic practices that, as in the case of Illingworth's and Trinh's, draw on the medium itself to glean the affective texture of the real and through it the metonymic presence of the past. As the films I have analysed show, remembering is not sufficient *vis à vis* amnesia for the potential of imagining as emergent and unfixed to open the possibility for new memories to appear but also for the potentiality of other perspectives to shape the real.

Indeed, as critic Sadiya Hartman suggests, 'The necessity to trying to represent what cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future' (Hartman 2008, p. 13; see also Hartman 2021).

Both Illingworth's and Trinh's films suggest that such a necessity must address the intersecting of other potential "images" of both the past and future as unfixed and emergent memories and imaginings to evoke presence by drawing on the affective texture of experience. Their respective artistic practices question the concealing effect of established imaginaries and suggest the mutual potentiality of remembering/imagining by gleaning on metonym as a means – to use Glissant's words – to relay, relink and relate. This consists of the possibility of imagining or engaging with the elsewhere and absent as presence.

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