

This is a postprint of the article - The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2024, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649373.2024.2293553>

To cite, if you must – please email me for a version with correct page numbers

–

John HUTNYK (2024) Elemental structures of memory: Marston Mats in Vietnam and beyond, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 25:1, 76-91, DOI: 10.1080/14649373.2024.2293553

Elemental structures of memory: Marston Mats in Vietnam and beyond

John HUTNYK

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Introduction

How are challenging pasts remembered, and how are they forgotten? Fifty years after the end of the American war, 70 years after the end of the war with France, the remnants of trauma remain real and tediously present. Psychological and historical-representational violence continues: simultaneously an impossible burden to carry and difficult to move beyond. A popular slogan insists that Vietnam is a country, not just a war. However, worldwide images and understandings of war are shaped by what happened in Vietnam, and a critique of violence must take up the structural role of memory even as time passes. Commemoration challenges form a grid to contain and suppress unwanted and resistive elements.

The research for this essay took up a series of images in connected consecutive frames: history, heritage, commercial and global manifestations of the “same” material iconography. Considering a central and famous representation depicting the defeat of the French, contradictions and ambiguities are built into the material context gleaned from news reports, documentaries, cinema, memoirs, archives, museums, art and scholarship. Memory’s double entendre plays with the relevance of structure in images that demand close attention, even when institutionalised as reified consumer entertainments. Here, the war may still be wholly political, especially where artefacts remain visible but, in interesting ways, are also ignored. What is it to forget or remember war when that order of business—war is, after all, and first and foremost an industry—is presented with so much double-dealing? In Vietnam, the war is called war against the French, the American war, and indeed wars in Cambodia and with China continued “after” the end of the war. Ambiguity and perspective: there is no doubt, however, that the communist struggle against the French (1945-1954), the Americans, Australians, Koreans and others (to 1974) and the RVN South Vietnam regime (1955-1975) defined the look of guerrilla war for global “audiences” for at least two subsequent generations, and perhaps beyond.

The much-noticed photographs of Eddie Adams, Nick Ut, and Malcolm Browne are not the only famous ones. Yet with Adams, the street execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém; with Ut, napalm victims fleeing a village; and with Browne's image of the self-immolation of the Buddhist Bonze Thích Quảng Đức on a central Saigon street in 1963, the horrors of war are striking.

Such images have an afterlife that sears them all the more into the historical record as a wider story. Browne's photo of the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức in 1963 is immortalised in a monument to the Bonze installed at an intersection in Ho Chi Minh City's District 3. Ut's photograph of Phan Thị Kim Phúc did not have to wait for the publication of her memoir—*Fire Road: The Napalm Girl's Journey through the Horrors of War to Faith, Forgiveness, and Peace* (Phan 2017)—to multiply its significance, but the picture itself does not reveal that Ut had immediately rushed several of the children to a hospital over an hour's drive away, and the hospital at first refused to treat them until he threatened newspaper exposure (Ut speaking at a Quy Nhon conference in 2022). The image of RVN Director General of Police, Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing Nguyễn Văn Lém (aka Captain Bảy Lốp) also invokes almost visceral reactions on all sides—there were more than two sides amongst those who found the execution a necessary price of war and those who condemned the execution, precisely, as the price of war. Meanwhile, as the Adams photograph was syndicated worldwide, film footage by NBC cameraman Võ Sứ of the same incident was eclipsed by Adams winning the Pulitzer Prize. Võ's film does appear in some avant-garde films from those times: The Monkees' *Head* (Rafelson 1968) and Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention's *200 Motels* (Zappa and Palmer 1971). For good reasons perhaps, it is still hard to see.

Within Vietnam, other images compete for attention. Heonik Kwon calls on us to be alert to a range of ways wartime trauma imposed itself upon people's lives (Kwon 2012, 236). As much as it is only arms-traders who really profit in a war, in Vietnam a sense of unshakeable pride in having secured a hard-fought victory exists. Crowds of visitors pile into the Hồ Chí Minh Museum in Hanoi; the solemn midnight ceremony in the graveyard of martyrs on Côn Đảo prison island is well attended; the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City is one of the most frequently visited museums anywhere. And everywhere in Vietnam, portraits of Vietnamese revolutionary heroes proliferate, whether it is Hồ Chí Minh, General Võ Nguyên Giáp, Nguyễn Thị Bình or Võ Thị Sáu. Any number of scenes testify to a relentless optimism: pictures of male and female fighters in battle fatigues, carrying guns sometimes almost as big as themselves, hauling even larger loads on bicycles along mountain

tracks, pushing artillery up steep hills, capturing airmen, and waving the five-point yellow star on red flag atop the bunker at Điện Biên Phủ. These are the more well-known images of war inside Vietnam. So also, the many commemorative photographs of fallen family members in museums, public memorial sites, communal and family shrines. Kwon suggests this memorialism is even “a distinct way to demonstrate economic development” (Kwon 2013, 89). It is plausible that building memorials can express economic prosperity, yet the framed photographs of family members in memorials are potent with pride and sadness together, as images displaying the everyday faces of an enormous sacrifice.

Mundane material objects might also invoke the horror of the war. The Marston Mat was developed as airport runway matting from versions used by the French and British military for airbases before the Second World War. The US Army Waterways Experiment Station (WES) at Vicksburg, Mississippi (founded 1929) perfected a more robust design for heavier aircraft in the early 1940s. These mats were described by Raymond Tolbert of the Office of the Chief of Engineers as a “device of important military significance that was largely responsible for the growth and maintenance of Allied air power” (Robertson 1992, 196). The Allies placed these perforated metal mats on “more than 100 landing strips in Europe between D-day and the crossing of the Rhine in March 1945” (Robertson 1992, 202-3; Tolbert 1945). As described evocatively by Victoria Hattam:

Portable landing mats ... went into production in November 1941. Marston mats were designed for lightness and portability that was achieved by piercing holes in the steel, making them look like oversized cheese graters (Hattam 2016, 29)

Later, the mats were used to surface Tempelhof airport for the 1948-9 Berlin Airlift, but their initial military use in Vietnam was by the French to bridge rivers, as airstrips, and to reinforce bunkers, and later by the American forces to land Huey attack helicopters. These otherwise unglamorous metal mats are not usually weapons themselves, but they underpin the war effort. Mundane perforated metal sheets that have lasted more than half a century are now recycled in ways quietly symbolic of the contradictions that linger after war.



Figure 1. Photo: author. Phú Quốc, torture somersaults. In a striking display in the Prison Museum of Phú Quốc Island in Vietnam, Military Police mannequins re-enact a brutally bizarre torture routine against supposed insurgents. This almost abstract metal artefact becomes a tool of torment, and indeed a part of the walls and gates of the most terrible war prisons (figures 5, 6) and in wider culture (figures 7, 8 and endnote 1).



Figure 2. Vietnam News Agency photo, used with permission. The victory at Điện Biên Phủ, on July 7 1954. This scene was a justly famous photograph attributed to Triều Đại.

Suggestions that the photograph was re-enacted long after the battle have been proven wrong (Chu 2018) but for this essay it is not veracity, but the wartime artefact within the frame that is to be examined. In the famous photo and in documentary footage filmed the same day, we see the twisted metal shards known as Marston Mats. These mats had been used to surface the Điện Biên Phủ airstrip, but also on the Muong Thanh bridge, and they supported the command bunker ceiling. As if by the law of quid pro quo, with this photograph, Marston Mats became part of the iconic imagery of victory. The footage of the flag waving was recorded by Vietnamese camera operators who were among the Viet Minh soldiers at Điện Biên Phủ. There were two film crews, including Nguyễn Hồng Nghi, Nguyễn Tiến Lợi, Nguyễn Phú Cần, Như Ái, Nguyễn Thu, Nguyễn Đăng Bảy, Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh, Nguyễn Quý Lục and Nguyễn Văn Sinh.

Just 17 days later, Soviet director Roman Karmen arrived in Điện Biên Phủ to make his film *Vietnam* (released 1955). The famed Russian director probably had seen the significance of the flag atop the bunker since he films the parade of the Viet Minh flag across the area of the battle, including across Mường Thanh Bridge. However, he signifies the French defeat by draping a ragged Tricolour across the site of French General de Castries surrender. In a note, he reports that the Soviet film crew worked in Vietnam “for some 7 months, until December 1954.” In his film, Karmen thanks two of these heroes, Nguyễn Hồng Nghi and Nguyễn Tiến

Lợi, as well as Mai Lộc (Karmen 1955, and as reported by Chu 2018). Acknowledgement should be made as well to Nguyễn Thụ who stepped on a mine while filming the parade of French prisoners. He continued to work in film safter his prosthetic leg was fitted, a career that included being Director of several documentaries, a Feature Film Studio, Director of the Cinema Department in Hanoi, General Director of Cinema Union and National Assembly Delegate (Phan 2004). His documentary on Điện Biên Phủ won the Grand Prize of the 1964 grand prize at the Asia-Africa World Film Festival in Jakarta, Indonesia. The restored footage from Điện Biên Phủ won the Golden Lotus at the 2nd Vietnam Film Festival in 1973 (reported in Nhan Dan 2008). Karmen’s admirable film includes colour footage of Hồ Chí Minh in various activities.

Figure 3. Photo: author. The most prominently staged historical example of Marston Mats within Vietnam is the enormous 360-degree mural produced by Nguyễn Văn Mạc and more than 20 young artists, on display at the Điện Biên Phủ Victory Museum since 2018 (Tienphong 2021). It shows composite scenes of the 1954 battle, including the surrender of de Castries. The centrepiece of the 360-degree mural, too large to photograph in one shot, again shows the three Vietnamese fighters waving the flag of the victorious forces above the French command bunker. The command bunker has been preserved at a separate site not far from the museum, and like several other French bunkers, its inner supports are also made of Marston



Mats. This bunker/flag icon also appears on a concrete frieze in the centre of the town, and here again, Marston Mats are plainly visible, some twisted by artillery bombing, but standing, as if also like a waving flag, a tribute to the failure of French military strategy.



Figure 4. Photo: author. In the Điện Biên Phủ Victory Museum, many actual, not painted, Marston Mats are on display, and in the central hall, more are placed strategically in front of the mural to provide an enhanced 3-D effect under the lights of the choreographed show. Note the “deceased” enemy mannequin in the far foreground. In Điện Biên Phủ, the ubiquity of Marston Mats is evident in bunkers across the town. Indeed, these mats appear in bunker scenes in other parts of the country, and are shown in films such as in *Đường Về Quê Mẹ* [The Way to Motherland] (Bui Dinh Hac 1971) and in the 2002 remake of Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* (Noyce 2002). In the latter film, the reluctant journalist hero, played by Michael Caine, travels north from Saigon to Phát Diệm, Ninh Bình, to investigate a war crime, and after an attack by Viet Minh forces shelters in a French bunker buttressed by Marston Mats.



Figure 5. Photo: author. The mannequins from Phú Quốc prison are not unlike those in the Điện Biên Phủ bunkers, but in Phú Quốc even the prison walls were made of Marston Mats. The mannequins themselves are almost ubiquitous features in Vietnamese war museums, as described by Phillip Hayward and Tran Giang Thuy Huu for Côn Đảo: “commissioned from CEFINER (Vietnam Central Fine Art’s Company) ... the pale shapes are a ghostly style of apparition” (Hayward and Tran 2014, 118), even as we might question whether all mannequin-ghosts enacting past crimes offer examples of “the ‘darkest’ imaginable thanatouristic experiences” (Hayward and Tran 2014, 118).



Figure 6. Photo: author. A tour guide at the gate of the Côn Đảo Tiger Cages. The Tiger Cages were another obscene torture, where prisoners of war were dumped in small, below-ground cells that were effectively only holes covered with bars. Conditions were severe, and deaths were common. Photographs of the Tiger Cages on Côn Đảo island prison were exposed worldwide by journalist Don Luce and US senator Tom Harkin, after “straying” from an official prison tour. Today, the Tiger Cage gates are repurposed Marston Mats.



Figure 7. Photo: author screengrab. A still from the film *Mùi Đu Đủ Xanh* [The Scent of Green Papaya] (Tran 1993). The servant girl Mùì is tending a vegetable patch where the plants are contained within two partly-buried Marston Mats (43 mins in). Distracted by the sound of a free bird, the grid of the mats contrasts with the latticework of the beautiful wooden house within which she labours. Traditional Vietnamese music plays while the conventions of patriarchy change little. Despite aircraft noise as loud as chirping crickets, the war barely intrudes. Yet, it is always the backdrop, even as onions and herbs struggle through the perforations of history and the young boys of the family grow up amidst the security of wealth and structure.



UNIQUE WEAR & TEAR

Each dial features a different wear & tear pattern that was made during the Marston Mat's life as a temporary road on the UTAH beachhead throughout June 1944. These organic traces of the mat's past life will make every A-11 Marston Mat completely unique.

AN EXCEPTIONAL PIECE OF HISTORY

Our Marston Mat was used as part of a network for a temporary road on UTAH BEACH on June 6th 1944. However, as the Allies pushed out of Normandy, many of these mats were left behind having outlived their technical usefulness. In the case of our Mat, it was picked up by the Utah Beach Landing Museum in Sainte-Marie-Dumont where it ended up in storage as part of their preservation efforts.



Figure 8. Photo: author collage. This juxtaposition of commercial manifestations of Marston Mats: souvenir heritage watch and model tank, illustrates how Marston Mats are now seen in many places in Vietnam—in films, and indeed, beyond Vietnam, in the Philippines (figure 10 below), and at the US-Mexico border, as Hattam investigates (2016). Mail-order catalogues offer models of the Matilda tank as a war toy replete with onboard Marston Mats (as an optional extra accessory). The Praesidus watch company site offers a stylised historical view of US military preparing a landing strip with Marston Mats—location unknown, but tropical (Owen Stanley Ranges?), and their souvenir “military heritage” wristwatch is fashioned from mats used on D-Day, WWII—a chance to wear a little history on your arm.



Figure 9. Photo: author collage. Commercial recycling of Marston Mats, long after the war, in a Seafood and Beer restaurant in Dalat, Vietnam. Without calling attention to their previous usage, the mats now work as structural supports for everyday life. A kitchen features one painted red. The restaurant welcome sign is painted gold, while electric bulbs in red mats light up the façade.



Figure 10. Photo: Donna Amis Davis (used with permission). A residential home in Puerto Princesa, Palawan in the Philippines, rescued and reused mats after the long US military presence in that country (1898-1941, 1944-1991). On Palawan, a local museum also showcases Marston Mats, using them as perimeter walls and as shelving for military artefacts, such as military helmets. Elsewhere, Marston Mats also make up significant sections of the US-Mexico border wall, effectively a military installation, and they have appeared reused in housing after being rescued as “fossil capitalism” from the former Italian Agip (Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli) oil fields on Rig Mountain in Iran (Khosravi 2019). Having underpinned the Normandy Landings, the Berlin airlift and military colonialism in Southeast Asia, Marston Maps now serve a wide variety of other uses, upcycled for good and bad.

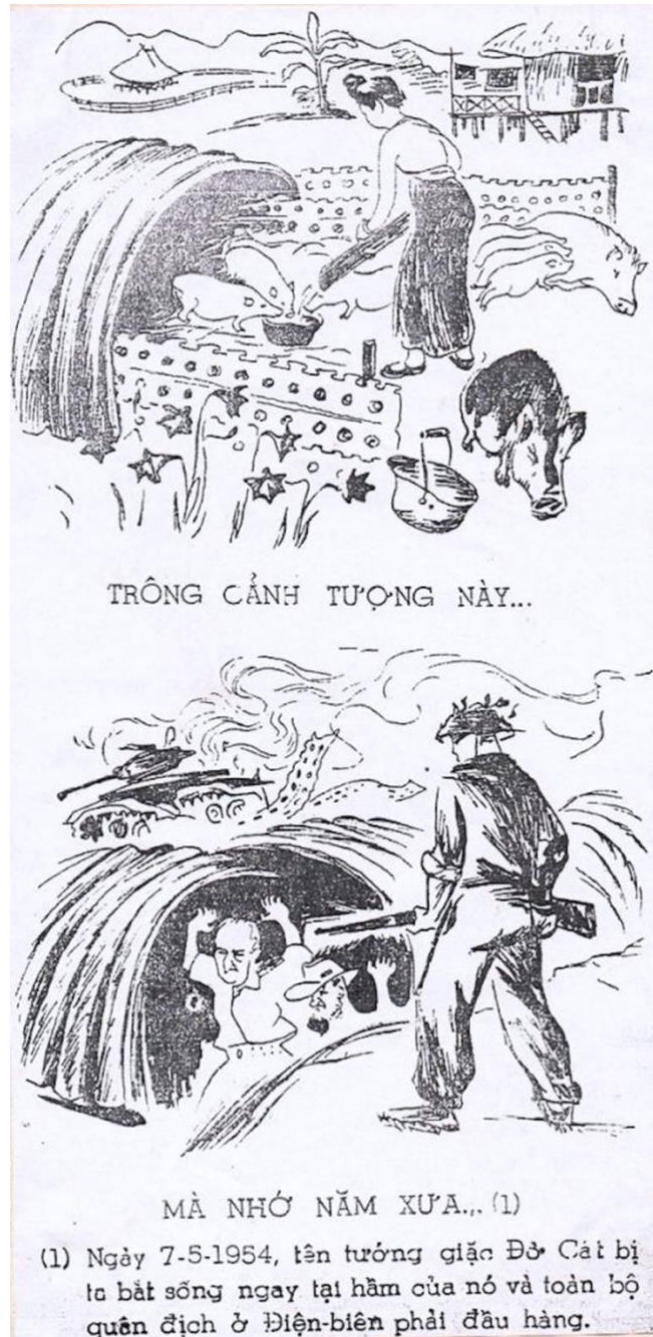


Figure 11. Sketch, 1954, with permission from the family of artist Phạm Thanh Tâm. A fighter on the battlefield of Điện Biên Phủ, on the day of the French surrender, he was near de Castries' bunker. In an interview in 2018 in Ho Chi Minh City, Thanh Tâm described the last days of the battle and the spirit of the artillery fighters he was with—though many of them perished. French airdrops continued for some hours even after the surrender, and Thanh Tâm was able to enjoy chocolate and cheese from the enemy supplies. The image here reproduces the message of remembering the past by moving on—the Marston Mats do duty as pig pens. The sketch's original caption reads: "Look at this scene ... and remember the old days: 7-5-

1954, the enemy general Do Cat [de Castries] was captured by our troops in his tunnel and all the enemy troops in Điện Biên had to surrender.”¹

Conclusion

Photography and film are key parts of the way wars are remembered, and they interpret the historical and ongoing role of Party authority as shaped by this memory. Necessarily referencing artefacts now mostly found in museums and stories in memoir books (where war memoirs are part of the Party’s self-conscious political-historical narrative [Zinoman 2001, 21]) the elementary aspects of history seem structured and overdetermined by images inside and outside Vietnam. War is a material structure even when the external narrative reaches beyond the staples of missing American POWs, war crimes, delta and rice paddy field patrols, or the firefights-in-the-jungle focus of the cinematic “Vietnam War” story. Structuring everyday remembering and forgetting, a significant part of the war, as lived by the Vietnamese themselves, was under an urban police regime, impacting many lives. Representation of this history recalls the incarceration of loved ones, brothers and sisters, relatives, parents, respected figures and revolutionary leaders. The memory of incarceration recalls the French, RVN and US regimes, structured through police lock-ups, detention centres and prison islands like Phú Quốc and Côn Đảo, all prominent and hated symbols of repression.

Was it distorted reverse diplomacy that the Phú Quốc MPs had in mind when their torture of prisoners descended into bizarre and cruel games? It seems so, when we read and see mannequin displays that present prisoners having to turn somersaults across metal platforms with jagged edges. The sharp, rusting, perforations would rip into the skin and flesh of the hapless victims in a bizarre and brutal torture callisthenics. History is shown in images, here becoming a perverse art. Prominent across the Phú Quốc prison site, these metals remain a reminder of the brutality of the occupying regime and how the use of handy, cheap, mass-produced metal sheets came to define the war and to both expand and contain the prison. More than commercial interest drove the colony, as the French built bridges, bunkers, and even a steel mat airfield on the Plain of Jars in Laos in 1952 (McCoy [1972]2003, 139); the Americans used the mats for airfields and to land Huey attack copters in their long, devastating, violent and illegal “police action.” The deployment of metal landing sheets enabled colonial forces to access parts of the terrain that were otherwise difficult, turning the

jungle into a platform. The Marston Mats worked as a mobile base for the forward operations of a platoon or a squad.

Yet the Marson Mat now recedes into the past and also remains obliquely visible with its perforations scattered across the social and historical landscape of memory, institution, and national trauma. Commodity versions of the Marston Mat, as building materials and repurposed war surplus, may be the way in Vietnam, but the implications for border warfare elsewhere can be seen. The need to get past the unspeakable and unasked-for tragedy of war so as to get on with the necessary everyday—and, with optimism, the future—perhaps requires the cross-hatched Marston Mat icon to offer a reconciliation template for remembering and forgetting. We could do worse than to adopt these relic materials since, as we now find, they seem to last longer than anyone else.

Notes on contributor:

John Hutnyk published the book *Global South Asia on Screen* with Bloomsbury Academic in 2018, and Aakar Books, India in 2019. In 2023, his 1996 book *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty of Representation* was re-released after 27 years by Bloomsbury India.

Note:

¹ I visited Phạm Thanh Tâm's family in Ho Chi Minh City in October 2023 to get permission to reproduce his cartoon and was overwhelmed with their hospitality. The house itself is a huge archive of materials, drawing and paintings, posters, memorabilia and books cared for by his widow and their daughter. I came away with a book written by Thanh Tâm published in 2016, *Vượt "Ngầm"* [Overcoming the "Underground"]. The title is a nod to the poet Phùng Quán, whose 1954 book *Vượt Côn Đảo* [Overcoming Con Dao] contains a poem that seems to allude to the harsh reality of Marston Mats (Figure 1): "Chập chùng lưới dây thép" could be translated as "Rolling on a sharp metal grid." Yet the poem says something powerful about resilience in the prison that was worse than hell, the prisoners would sing at night: "Bóng đêm trùm Côn Đảo/ Sóng bể réo âm âm/ Gió hun hút đời thông/ Trại giam Nằm như chết/ Chập chùng lưới dây thép/ Tráng in bóng tháp canh/ Côn Đảo bóng rùng mình/ Ai cất lên tiếng hát" (Pham 2016: 114). In my translation: "Darkness over Con Dao/ The waves are roaring/ The wind howls in the trees/ The prison is like death/ Rolling on a sharp steel grid/ The moon silhouettes the watchtower/ Con Dao shivers/ Whose song rises up?"

References:

Bui Dinh Hac. 1971. *Đường Về Quê Mẹ* [The way to motherland] [Film]. Vietnam: Xưởng

-
- phim truyện Việt Nam.
- Chu Chí Thành. 2018. “Gỡ bỏ nghi vấn một số ảnh nổi tiếng.” [Clearing up doubts about famous photos]. *Tienphong* [newspaper] 29 April <https://tienphong.vn/go-bo-nghi-van-mot-so-anh-noi-tieng-post1025738.tpo>
- Hayward, Phillip and Tran Giang Thuy Huu. 2014. “At the Edge: Heritage and Tourism Development on Vietnam’s Con Dao Archipelago.” *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 3 (2): 113-124.
- Hattam, Victoria. 2016. “Imperial Designs: Remembering Vietnam at the US–Mexico Border Wall.” *Memory Studies* 9 (1): 27-47.
- Karmen, Roman. 1955. *Vietnam* [Film]. USSR: Central Soviet Documentary Studio.
- Khosravi, Shahram. 2019. “What Do We See If We Look at the Border from the Other Side?” *Social Anthropology* 27(3): 409–424.
- Kwon, Heonik. 2012. “Rethinking Traumas of War.” *South East Asia Research* 20 (2): 227-237.
- Kwon, Heonik. 2013. “Cold War in a Vietnamese Community.” In *Four Decades On: Vietnam, The United States and Legacies of the Second Indochinese War*, edited by Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini, 84-102. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McCoy, Alfred. [1972]2003. *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill.
- Nhan Dan. 2008. “Quay phim Điện Biên Phủ—Những câu chuyện sau 54 năm mới kể.” [Filming Điện Biên Phủ—stories after 54 years to be told]. *Nhan Dan*. <https://nhandan.vn/quay-phim-dien-bien-phu-nhung-cau-chuyen-sau-54-nam-moi-ke-post496160.html>
- Noyce, Phillip. 2002. *The Quiet American* [Film]. USA: Miramax
- Phan, Dinh Mau. 2004. “Nghệ sĩ điện ảnh Nguyễn Thu tại chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ” [Film artist Nguyen Thu at the Dien Bien Phu campaign]. *Nhan Dan*. <https://nhandan.vn/nghe-si-dien-anh-nguyen-thu-tai-chien-dich-dien-bien-phu-post465523.html>
- Phan Thi Kim Phuc. 2017. *Fire Road: The Napalm Girl’s Journey through the Horrors of War to Faith, Forgiveness, and Peace*. Illinois: Tyndale Momentum.
- Phạm Thanh Tâm. 2016. *Vượt “Ngầm.”* [Overcoming the “Underground”]. Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Tre.
- Phúng Quán. 1954. *Vượt Côn Đảo* [Overcoming Con Dao]. Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hoá
- Rafelson, Bob. 1968. *Head*. [Film]. USA: Columbia Pictures.
- Robinson, M. C. 1992. *Landing Mat Development at WES. US Army Corps of Engineers, Builders and Fighters: US Army Engineers in World War II*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Tienphong. 2021. “Cận cảnh bức tranh tường kỳ tích panorama Điện Biên Phủ.” [Close-up of the miraculous panorama mural of Điện Biên Phủ]. *Tienphong* August <https://tienphong.vn/can-canhh-buc-tranh-tuong-ky-tich-panorama-dien-bien-phu-post1335254.tpo>
- Tolbert, R. L. 1945. “Development of Airplane Landing Mats.” *Road and Bridges* 83(11): 62-64.
- Tran Anh Hung. 1993. *Mùi Đu Đủ Xanh*. [The scent of green papaya] [Film]. France: President Films.
- Zappa, Frank, and Tony Palmer. 1971. *200 Motels* [Film]. USA: Bizarre Productions.
- Zinoman, Peter. 2001. “Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs.” In *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, edited by Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 21-45. Berkeley: University of California Press.