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APOCALYPSE THEN
Visual Memory and the Transnational Afterlives of the Vietnam/American War

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When I think of the global afterlife of the Vietnam War—or, as the Vietnamese call it with unsettling accuracy, the American War—I do not begin in the tropics but in Warsaw, Poland. My earliest association with that distant, tragic conflict is, in fact, an indirect one: Chris Niedenthal's world-famous photograph of an armored personnel carrier standing before *Kino Moskwa*—the Moscow Cinema—on December 14, 1981.

Above the gunmetal-gray hull, the marquee blazes with a title that could not have been more topical: *Czas Apokalipsy—Apocalypse Now*. It is the second day of martial law in communist Poland—the very same Poland that, if not mentally, then at least officially, still belongs to the anti-American camp of the Eastern Bloc. The authorities had chosen to screen Coppola's film precisely because its searing critique of American imperial appetites aligned conveniently with the propaganda needs of the regime. And yet, in Niedenthal's frame, the irony folds in on itself. The armored SKOT, menacingly parked before the cinema that bears the name of the capital of the Soviet Union, transforms the scene into a grotesque self-portrait of totalitarian regime. What was meant to expose the madness of distant America becomes, before the camera's lens, an unintentional allegory of repression at home. Beneath the promise of an American antiwar epic, the machinery of a local, communist, dictatorship hums in the snow. The photograph freezes a double theater: one cinematic, one political—both born of the Cold War's manic choreography of control.

Yet the singular power of Chris Niedenthal's 1981 photograph lies not only in the double entendre between the film's title and the name of the cinema, nor in the coldness of the winter mirroring the chill

of the Cold War. It derives above all from a remarkable historical and cultural coincidence. Here, three mythic trajectories intersect: the American film's adaptation of the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899); the Polish site of the image, captured under martial law; and the photographer's own dual sensibility, shaped equally by Polish historical memory and Western media literacy. Each element carries its own ideological freight, but together they generate an image whose resonance far exceeds the documentary moment. It is as if history itself had staged an allegory in which Poland's twentieth century meets the global iconography of apocalypse.

Fig.1. Chris Niedenthal, *Czas apokalipsy* [Apocalypse Now] Dec. 14th, 1981. Reproduced by permission of the FORUM Polish Photographers' Agency

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Coppola's film, released in 1979, offers the first of these trajectories—an adaptation and transposition, a cinematic reimagining of Conrad's colonial Congo now set in the moral quagmire of the Vietnam War. The narrative of imperial madness, once European, becomes American; the darkness of the tropics becomes the darkness of the self. Yet in Niedenthal's photograph this translation comes full circle. The Polish-born Conrad—who wrote *Heart of Darkness* in English but carried within him the moral geography of the partitioned Polish lands—returns to Warsaw through Coppola's cinematic text, now refracted by the lens of another Polish observer. The myth migrates back to its birthplace, transformed by war, ideology—and irony. What had been a tale of colonial guilt became, in this context, a mirror of occupation, surveillance, and rebellion.

And thus, for Polish viewers in 1981, the poster of *Apocalypse Now* above the sign *Kino Moskwa* could not have been a neutral advertisement. The very word *Moskwa*—Moscow—condensed centuries of historical trauma: the partitions, the Soviet presence, the erasure of autonomy. No wonder that the juxtaposition of "Moscow" and "Apocalypse" in the public sphere of martial-law Warsaw amounted to nothing less but a semiotic explosion. The foreign war in Vietnam, whose images had circulated through Western media, became entangled with Poland's own myth of resistance and moral trial. Niedenthal's photograph crystallized that entanglement. In it, the American narrative of imperial hubris met the Polish mythology of suffering and martyrdom under Soviet imperialism—and with it, the national longing for moral clarity.

What Niedenthal's photograph ultimately reveals is a larger cultural mechanism: global conflicts, even when geographically remote, are absorbed into national mythologies that translate the universal into the local. In this case, it is the Vietnam War—distant, tropical, and mediated—that becomes incorporated into the discourse of the distinctly Polish narrative of moral struggle. For Poles in 1981, the image of *Apocalypse Now* above *Kino Moskwa* did not evoke the tropics or the abstractions of the Cold War; it resonated with their own sense of catastrophe, rebellion, and historical repetition. The *Apocalypse* has migrated: from the Mekong to the Vistula, from Saigon to Warsaw, from the jungle to the gray winter streets of Eastern Europe. The photograph performs what might be called the mythological domestication of transnational history. In this way, the Vietnam War's afterlife cannot be understood merely through American guilt or Asian tragedy; it must also be read through the peripheral imaginations that adopted

it, transformed it, and made it speak their own languages of oppression and renewal.

In more rigid theoretical terms, this coincidence reveals what might be called a process of *mythological transference*—the way global conflicts are absorbed into local symbolic systems and rearticulated through national mythologies. As Roland Barthes explains, myth is not a lie but a form of speech that "steals" meaning and returns it in distorted form:

> Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things.
>
> Speech of this kind is a message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech. Myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning: the arrow which is brought in order to signify a challenge is also a kind of speech. True, as far as perception is concerned, writing and pictures, for instance, do not call upon the same type of consciousness; and even with pictures, one can use many kinds of reading: a diagram lends itself to signification more than a drawing, a copy more than an original, and a caricature more than a portrait. But this is the point: we are no longer dealing here with a theoretical mode of representation: we are dealing with *this* particular image, which is given for *this* particular signification. Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. This substance is not unimportant: pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it. But this is no longer a constitutive difference. Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a *lexis*. (*Mythologies* 108–109)

As a semiological system that transforms history into alleged "nature of things" by converting cultural phenomena into "self-evident truths," myth performs an operation resulting in ideology's circulation under the guise of common sense. It is precisely this mechanism that allows *Apocalypse Now*—a film born from American guilt over imperial overreach—to acquire, in Poland, the naturalized authority of a parable about moral struggle and political subjugation.

For the United States, the Vietnam War became a story of disillusionment and the limits of power; for the Vietnamese, it was a struggle for survival and self-determination. But for Poland—geographically distant, yet psychologically proximate through its own history of oppression and devastating conflicts—the war's imagery func-

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tioned as allegory. Even if the jungles of Southeast Asia would not be reimagined as the forests of Eastern Europe, the madness of Colonel Kurtz still echoed the moral corrosion of *any empire*; the rebel's cry of conscience mirrored Poland's underground culture of defiance. In Barthesian terms, Niedenthal's photograph does not merely depict an event but performs the work of myth: it translates the ideological contradictions of the Cold War into a visual common sense—a tableau of sorts, where both imperial systems, American and Soviet, appear equally entrapped in their own performative fictions.

In this sense, the photograph operates as a *visual palimpsest*. It layers multiple histories—the colonial, the Cold War, and the national—into a single field of vision. The *studium*, in Roland Barthes's sense, is dense with cultural legibility: the viewer can decode its historical ironies, its cinematic intertext, its political staging (*Camera Lucida* 26–30). Yet the *punctum*—that which "pricks" or "wounds" the viewer—emerges precisely from this uncanny overlap. The title *Apocalypse Now*, the sign *Moscow*, the silent tank: together they form a constellation of meanings that cannot be reduced to interpretation alone. The photograph pierces the viewer not only through spectacle but also through recognition—through that Barthesian moment when image and consciousness collide, and the contingent becomes unbearable in its precision (*Camera Lucida* 42–43).

For the Polish imagination, this convergence strikes a deep chord. National mythology, forged through partitions, uprisings, and occupations, has long oscillated between messianic suffering and morally grounded rebellion—a pattern discernible in both Romantic literature and twentieth-century resistance narratives (Benjamin 22–26; Sontag 89–96). The very word *apocalypse*, in its etymological sense of revelation, resonates with this dual heritage: catastrophe as unveiling, destruction as truth-telling. In Niedenthal's photograph, that apocalypse is secular and political. Rather than divine judgment, it reveals the absurd theater of power: tanks before a cinema named after Moscow, soldiers performing the choreography of repression beneath the glowing promise of an American antiwar epic. And yet, beneath that absurdity, the image carries what might be called a sacramental undertone, as if the photograph itself bore witness to a metaphysical drama unfolding within history's gray fabric—an uninvited grace glimpsed through irony.

Yet, the brief analysis Niedenthal's photograph through the dual lens of Barthes's *studium* and *punctum*, poses certain dangers: we must therefore pause before the seductive clarity of that interpretation lures us into false conclusions. To read the image solely as myth would risk

detaching it from the historical reality from which it arose. As Mariusz Grabowski observes in his article on Poles in Vietnam, Poland was not merely a spectator to the Vietnam War, nor was its engagement limited to the ideological sphere. Quoting Piotr Długołęcki, a historian at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the author writes:

> To begin, let us outline the political background of the events. Piotr Długołęcki observes that Poland became involved in the Indochina conflict as early as the 1950s: "The war, fought on one side by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam—a state established in 1945 from three former French colonies in Indochina) and on the other by the French Expeditionary Corps supported by the British (the so-called First Indochina War), ended with the Geneva Conference in 1954. Representatives of France, Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China decided that Vietnam would be temporarily divided into two zones along the 17th parallel. The northern part (DRV) remained under the control of the communist Viet Minh, while the southern part (also a former French colony) was to constitute the territory of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), supported by the United States." (Grabowski)[1]

The conflict reached deeply into Polish public discourse and private imagination, especially that, as Grabowski further reminds us,

> [a]t the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the conflict, the most serious incident involving Poland occurred. In December 1972, American aircraft accidentally bombed a Polish merchant ship moored in the port of Haiphong. Długołęcki recalls that in the raid—part of the so-called Christmas Bombings—four sailors were killed: "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted a note of protest. In response, the Americans stated that 'damage remains an unfortunate possibility anywhere hostilities are conducted, and it must be assumed that vessels entering North Vietnamese ports during such operations accepted the risk of such damage.' The United States refused to pay compensation. However, the ship was insured—Poland, the families of the deceased, and the wounded received compensation."
>
> Warsaw chose not to take a firm stand against Washington. The Polish Foreign Ministry also refrained from providing legal assistance to the victims' families, who sought civil compensation before US courts. The filing of the lawsuits coincided with Edward Gierek's visit to the United States, and in order not to jeopardize relations, it was decided "to act through our embassy in Washington to quietly suppress the matter." (Grabowski)

Polish soldiers—whether those wearing the uniforms of foreign armies (including Polish Americans serving in the US Army and others who had joined the French Foreign Legion) and fighting directly against the Viet Cong, or those officially dispatched to serve within

1 All of the translations of the quotations written originally in Polish—Paweł Jędrzejko.

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the International Commission for Supervision and Control—found themselves in the same Vietnam, though on opposite sides of its divided history:

"Initially, the Polish authorities estimated that to carry out the tasks within the three commissions, they would need 335 people, including 110 civilian employees and 225 officers and non-commissioned officers (the Indian and Canadian delegations were roughly the same size). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Public Security were all involved in the preparations. However, soon the Polish delegation to the three commissions was increased to 401 representatives, of whom 114 positions were reserved for employees of the Ministry of Public Security," writes Długołęcki.

Those selected for departure were first sent for training, which took place in the so-called Unit No. 2000, established by military intelligence. They had to be prepared in terms of language, professional competence, health (vaccinations), and culture (knowledge of the situation in Indochina). Among those deployed were communication specialists, doctors, medical assistants, orderlies, administrative staff, drivers, interpreters, and kitchen personnel. "Their equipment also included, among other things, sidearms for officers and semiautomatic weapons for non-commissioned officers." Part of the supplies was shipped by sea, while the rest was transported by Soviet aircraft via Irkutsk. (Grabowski)

During the 1960s and 1970s, the official image of Vietnam in Polish media reflected the ideological strictures of the Cold War. State-controlled press, radio, and television repeated the Soviet narrative. Vietnam was a just struggle for national liberation against imperial (read: American) aggression. The message was clear: the socialist world defended the oppressed and America embodied the violence of capitalist modernity. Within this visual grammar, the war served as proof of communist virtue—a mythic script that required no interpretation.

"Essentially, throughout the entire conflict Poland—with lesser involvement under [Secretary General of the Polish United Workers' Party] Gomułka and greater involvement under Gierek—supported North Vietnam," asserts [historian] Piotr Długołęcki. Hanoi received preferential loans from us, but also deliveries of a wide range of goods. Over twenty years we supplied food and medical supplies, cars, rails, metallurgical materials, concrete mixers, bridge spans, power generators, and even musical instruments (50 pianos and 200 violins) and—hard to believe—even circus wagons. Initially they planned to hand those over together with live horses. […] Deputy Prime Minister Józef Tejchma wrote in his memoirs: "They presented our government with a rifle bearing the following dedication: 'This rifle was delivered by the Government of the People's Republic of Poland and the Polish nation as part of aid to the Vietnamese people fighting against the American aggressors for national salvation. In September 1972 this rifle was used to attack a convoy of military vehicles on road N.14 on the Central Highlands plateau; 27 vehicles were destroyed, including 9 enemy tanks.'" (Grabowski)

Yet within this script, irony still flourished. The communist state eagerly amplified American voices that condemned the Vietnam War, since their message aligned with its anti-imperialist narrative. Some of the songs by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Country Joe McDonald, and Phil Ochs circulated in official media and student clubs not *despite* censorship, but, quite possibly, thanks to it. What could not be foreseen, however, was how Polish listeners would *reinterpret* these sounds. For the youth of Kraków, Poznań, and Warsaw, the same protest ballads that denounced US militarism also revealed a different kind of freedom—the freedom to oppose one's own government. As Katarzyna Koćma's essay "Kwiatem w karabin. O kontrkulturowych reakcjach na wojnę w Wietnamie" [*Flowers against Rifles: Countercultural Responses to the Vietnam War*] clearly suggests, the transnational idiom of protest carried a resonance that escaped ideological control. In this paradox, the Polish media that sought to expose America's moral failures seem to have ended up broadcasting the very sound of dissent that would later echo in its own streets.

The paradox extended beyond music into the moral geography of everyday life. For many Poles, America was not an abstraction but a "relative": an uncle in Chicago, a cousin in New Jersey, a family photograph showing a suburban lawn and a Chevrolet. Remittances from emigrant families arrived as both economic aid and emotional oxygen. In private conversations, "America" meant prosperity, openness, the chance to speak one's mind. To read about the Vietnam War, then, was to read about one's extended family gone astray—a war fought by the sons of cousins, the same America that once harbored the Polish dream of liberty. This intimacy made propaganda less believable, if not altogether hollow. The Polish imagination could not sustain politically fabricated hatred for a nation that had once welcomed its exiles and heroes; it could only interpret the war through the prism of its own divided soul—half loyal to Moscow by necessity, half enthralled by America by affection—and of images that affected it differently than all-too-familiar slogans ever could.

On the political scene, perhaps no figure embodies this inner division more dramatically than colonel Ryszard Kukliński. In 1967, as part of Poland's military mission to the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) in Vietnam, Kukliński witnessed firsthand both the devastation of the war and the hypocrisy of Soviet "anti-imperialism." Officially, he was there to assist the North Vietnamese cause; privately, he began to see the same patterns of domination that had long subjugated his own country. As Sławomir Cenckiewicz recounts in "Kukliński w Wietnamie" [Kukliński in Vietnam],

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the experience planted in him the first seeds of revolt. The Polish officer, observing Soviet generals treating Vietnamese officers with disdain and exploiting the war for political ends of their own "empire," came to recognize the mirror image of colonial arrogance. Vietnam thus became his awakening—the place where loyalty to the socialist camp began to curdle into disgust. In his conversation with the novelist Maria Nurowska, the author of the biographical novel *Mój przyjaciel zdrajca* [My Traitor Friend], Kukliński explains his breakthrough thus:

> I witnessed the cruelty of that war: I saw children with their heads cut off, whole families slaughtered—father, mother, seven siblings—lying in a row in the middle of a village. I also saw horrific scenes when the Viet Cong stormed Saigon. I felt ashamed that I was not on the side I wished to be, but there was nothing I could do. During the Têt Offensive, when a regular North Vietnamese division attacked Saigon and we had evidence that civilians were being butchered, I was not permitted to go on an inspection. If I had gone and written the truth in my report, they would have sent me home the next day, and at that point I was not yet ready to begin my own war against the system. (quoted in Cenckiewicz)

Soon, that disgust ripened into defiance. From 1972 to 1981, Kukliński transmitted thousands of secret documents to the CIA, revealing Warsaw Pact nuclear strategies and the Soviet plan for suppressing the Solidarity movement. In his article "Pułkownik Kukliński—atomowy szpieg" [Colonel Kukliński: The Atomic Spy] Maciej Danowski shows him as the man who betrayed an empire to save a nation. For the communist regime, he was a traitor, sentenced to death *in absentia*; for the opposition, he became a living emblem of conscience over obedience. His life traced a moral parabola from the jungles of Vietnam to the corridors of Langley, Virginia—from an emissary of one empire to a defender of another, and ultimately, to a symbol of the moral autonomy Poland long claimed as its own. After 1989, the sentence was annulled, and Kukliński was posthumously recognized as a national hero (Jakub; IPN). His trajectory distilled, in one biography, the larger dialectic of Polish history: complicity, awakening, betrayal, redemption.

Against this background, the Vietnam War reemerges not as a distant colonial conflict but as a mirror in which Poland examined its own entanglement with power. Official ideology glorified the struggle of the oppressed, while private morality identified with the very society that state propaganda vilified. The Polish experience of Vietnam thus oscillated between the state's narrative and personal empathy—between the staged solidarity of communism and the lived solidarity of human conscience. Through Kukliński's story we see that the war's meanings were not imposed from outside; they were contested within the very soul of the Polish state itself.

This tension is crucial because—as our Barthesian analysis has already suggested—in public reception "factography" often matters less than mythology, and visual media played a decisive role in shaping that mythology. And yet, as Mariusz Grabowski reminds us, Poles *did* have access to reportage and first-hand accounts from the combat zones:

> Those sent to the fronts of the Vietnam War were mainly advisers, experts, and doctors. A separate category included diplomats as well as journalists and writers. Among them were war correspondents such as Daniel Passent, who in 1968 published the antiwar reportage *Co dzień wojna* [War Every Day]; and Monika Warneńska, author of numerous books including *Most na rzece Ben Hai* [The Bridge on the Ben Hai River] (1964), *Alarm na ryżowiskach* [Alarm in the Rice Fields] (1966), *Taniec z ogniem* [Dancing with Fire] (1974), *Córka jego ekscelencji* [His Excellency's Daughter] (1978), *Raport z linii ognia* [Report from the Line of Fire] (1981), *Nie ma pokoju dla pól ryżowych* [No Peace for the Rice Fields] (1981), and *Skarby z dalekich podróży* [Treasures from Distant Journeys] (1986). Also active at the time was Grzegorz Woźniak, who later became a well-known television personality in the People's Republic of Poland and anchor of its main news program, *Dziennik Telewizyjny*. (Grabowski)

It is precisely at this juncture that Marcin Kempisty, in his article "O filmowych reprezentacjach wojny w Wietnamie" [On Film Representations of the Vietnam War], makes a significant point:

> Although academic studies on the American–Vietnamese conflict of 1962–1975 continue to be written, they rarely (especially in Poland) break into public consciousness. When such discussions do arise, they are far more often emotional than factual. The numbers of the dead slip from view—300,000 soldiers and around 500,000 civilians on the southern side, as well as, in all likelihood, over a million soldiers and several tens of thousands of civilians on the northern side. The people fleeing the war zones are scarcely remembered at all. The geopolitical context fades, and the reasons for American involvement become blurred and ambiguous. What remains are deeply rooted images: the execution in Saigon […],[2] the "napalm girl" from Trảng Bàng,[3] the piled corpses after the Mỹ Lai massacre.[4] The trauma of American society lasted for many

2 Eddie Adams, "Saigon Execution" (Associated Press, 1 Feb. 1968), is the Pulitzer-winning photograph of a Viet Cong prisoner's execution during the Tet Offensive, which serves as an archetype for debates on photography's ethical power and its capacity to "change history"; it is directly reference in the quoted article and in Niedenthal's conversation with Katarzyna Najman, quoted below. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saigon_Execution.jpg. Accessed 7 Nov. 2025.

3 See "'Napalm Girl' 50 Years Later." Event, Fotografiska New York, https://newyork.fotografiska.com/en/events/napalm-girl. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

4 See Paul Alexander. "Thirty Years Later, Memories of My Lai Massacre Remain Fresh." Digital History, University of Houston, https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/mylai_survivor.cfm. See the image at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:My_Lai_massacre.jpg. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

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years, for the documentation gathered by the press was like a persistent specter. The phantasmagoric visions of hell on earth were also fueled by the machinery of Hollywood. The films that emerged on the subject of the Vietnamese conflict took hold of the mass imagination, and although the most significant of them were made after the war had ended, they permanently set the direction of the discourse. (Kempisty)

Culturally, the resonance of Vietnam endured first and foremost in the visual sphere—in images and films that circulated internationally and, for reasons previously discussed, reached Polish audiences with particular intensity. If, as Kempisty notes, public memory, irrespectively of the country, gravitates toward myth rather than fact, then Vietnam became a global narrative not through documents or geopolitical analysis, but through a sequence of overpowering images. On the one hand, films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket* forged a visual grammar of the war that eclipsed historical nuance; on the other, these images shaped the very horizon against which Polish consciousness encountered, or still encounters, Vietnam.

The scholar makes a valid point arguing that the extraordinary critical acclaim garnered by these four canonical films—the Oscars, Golden Globes, BAFTAs—testifies not merely to their artistic merit but to the mythogenic force they exerted over the global imagination. Despite vast differences in style, all four directors converged on a shared visual logic: Vietnam appears as a psychological vortex rather than a geopolitical conflict, a landscape where moral coordinates disintegrate and American soldiers are reduced to solitary figures stumbling through chaos. The camera never steps back to reveal the web of colonial, ideological, and regional histories that produced the war; instead, as Kempisty points out, it plunges directly into the hallucinatory immediacy of battle. Stripped of context, the war becomes a timeless spectacle of terror, madness, and masculine unravelling. The visual field—flames, helicopters, mutilated bodies, the green-black jungle swallowing men whole—is the field in which meaning is generated. In this regime of representation, the viewer is invited not to *understand* Vietnam but to *experience* it viscerally, as if knowledge itself were subordinate to the shock of perception.

This image-driven approach is inseparable from the profoundly US-centric logic that shapes these films: the Vietnamese remain spectral presences, emerging only as victims or faceless threats, while the emotional universe belongs entirely to the American protagonists. What persists, therefore, is not memory of Vietnam but memory of American trauma—a trauma magnified by the camera's relent-

less search for spectacle and psychological collapse. In the absence of historical framing, these films create a paradox: they denounce the horror of war while centering the suffering of the invader, turning Vietnam into a stage for the existential dramas of young American men. A later cinematic stream, epitomized by the *Rambo* franchise, radicalizes this tendency into pure myth: the war becomes a wound to be avenged, a humiliation to be reversed through superhuman violence. If *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* mythologize the war as psychological apocalypse, *Rambo* mythologizes it as heroic reclamation—a fantasy in which America returns to Vietnam not to understand but to dominate. In both cases, history disappears behind the spectacle; what remains is the overwhelming power of the image, which outlives fact, eclipses context, marginalizes real people, and colonizes the popular imagination across decades and continents.

When on February 1, 1968, Eddie Adams captured with his camera the execution carried out by South Vietnam's police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan, he allegedly changed the course of history and indirectly contributed to ending the Vietnam War. The contorted face of the victim, from whom life was already departing, and the impassive features of the executioner were taken as stark testimony to the brutality and dehumanization of the Americans and the forces they supported. The public shooting of a civilian was treated as an assault on fundamental human rights. The photograph appeared on the covers of major American magazines, was repeatedly used during anti-war demonstrations, and earned its author the Pulitzer Prize the following year. The fate of this photograph made unmistakably clear that the press was scrutinizing the Vietnam War with exceptional attention, meticulously documenting the actions of the soldiers. The power of the image proved immeasurable, and the unleashed "television war" heralded the arrival of a new era for the "fourth estate." (Kempisty)[5]

And yet, as Marcin Kempisty's analysis demonstrates, the powerful cinematic representations of the Vietnam War ultimately overshadowed the non-Americocentric dimension of the very photograph believed to have triggered a breakthrough in American public opinion. The unbearable images—the naked children fleeing a napalm strike, the piles of bodies in Mỹ Lai, a man executed in the street—produced in American viewers a profound sense of guilt and moral disorientation. Yet, rather than illuminating the Vietnamese experience, filmmakers redirected attention toward

5 See also Jennifer Peltz's article "In an Instant, Vietnam Execution Photo Framed a View of War." The Associated Press, 28 Jan. 2018, https://www.ap.org/media-center/ap-in-the-news/2018/in-an-instant-vietnam-execution-photo-framed-a-view-of-war. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

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the trauma of the *American observer*. The shock of these images, witnessed firsthand by journalists and then circulated globally, may have provoked a psychological defense mechanism: a denial that shifted the focus from perpetrator to victim. But the victim was increasingly imagined as American—the psychologically shattered soldier, the misled conscript, the nation betrayed by its leaders. In this way, the mythogenic force of the image both exposed violence and displaced its historical context, drawing the gaze back toward the anguish of the United States itself.

What emerges from Kempisty's analysis—and from the larger constellation of images that shaped global perceptions of the Vietnam War—is a remarkable asymmetry between the abundance of available Vietnamese voices and their limited impact on public memory. Nowhere is this more evident than in the United States itself. According to the 2020 census, the country is home to more than 2.3 million Vietnamese Americans, including survivors of the 1975 exodus, their US-born children, and newer waves of migrants. Their cultural presence is profound. Writers such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, and Thi Bui have produced some of the most incisive meditations on historical trauma and refugee memory in contemporary literature—works that, through their formal experimentation and ethical clarity, challenge inherited narratives of the war. Yet, as numerous scholars have noted, these contributions, however celebrated, have not displaced the dominance of the cinematic imagination, which continues to frame Vietnam as an American psychological event rather than a Vietnamese historical catastrophe (Szymańska-Matusiewicz; Halik & Nowicki).

A parallel structure operates in Poland. Although smaller in absolute numbers, the Vietnamese community in Poland—estimated between 25,000 and 60,000 people—is one of the country's most established migrant diasporas, with multi-generational roots and a growing body of cultural expression (Halik & Nowicki; Przybył). Emerging Vietnamese-Polish authors such as Việt Anh Do, Karolina Do, and Ngo Van Tuong, whose work appears in the anthology *Inny głos* [Another Voice] (Bocheńska & Domańska), have begun articulating experiences of dislocation, linguistic hybridity, and the complex negotiations of belonging in post-1989 Poland. Their writing—often intimate, ironic, and quietly political—adds layers of nuance to what "Vietnam" means in the Polish cultural field. And yet here too, the gravitational pull of visual myth proves stronger than the corrective power of testimony. Popular awareness tends to follow the silhouettes cast

by American film rather than the textures of Vietnamese narrative or Vietnamese-Polish experience.[6]

This convergence suggests not a failure of Vietnamese cultural production but a broader structural condition: the primacy of the image over the witness. The dominance of cinematic tropes—helicopters cutting through jungle canopies, bodies illuminated by napalm, the tortured American soldier wandering through moral ruin—continues to mediate how Vietnam is imagined across vastly different societies. In this sense, both the United States and Poland participate in a shared perceptual economy in which the American visual archive eclipses the Vietnamese historical one.[7] The result is a paradoxical global consensus: in the Western world, Vietnam becomes a metaphor before it becomes a memory.

It is within this field of displaced meanings that Chris Niedenthal's photograph acquires its singular force. What makes the image so resonant is not merely its semiotic density—an armored SKOT before Kino Moskwa beneath the luminous promise of *Apocalypse Now*—but the fact that its meaning emerges from a collision between accident and interpretation. Like Eddie Adams's "Saigon Execution," Niedenthal's photograph was not staged to express an idea; it was taken in the unrepeatable *vérité* of a moment saturated with adrenaline, fear, instinct, and the primal urgency of witnessing. In this sense, one might say the photograph contains two temporalities at once: the immediate, embodied "punctum" of the photographer's pupils at the instant the shutter clicked, and the expansive cultural "studium" that would later enfold the image within broader mythological frameworks. The photograph's power, then, lies not in its conscious symbolism but in the way it becomes symbolic afterward—how an accidental

6 Research on the Vietnamese American community, its literary output, and the limits of its influence on US cultural memory includes: Szymańska-Matusiewicz; Nguyen; Vuong; Bui; Lê Thị Diễm Thúy. For analyses of the Vietnamese community in Poland and its emerging cultural voices, see: Halik and Nowicki; Przybył; Piwowarska; Wojewódka; and the anthology *Inny głos. Młoda literatura migrantów w Polsce* [Another Voice. The Young Migrant Literature in Poland], edited by Joanna Bocheńska and Maria Domańska, which features work by Việt Anh Do, Karolina Do, and Ngo Van Tuong. These sources collectively document the demographic scale, cultural richness, and relative marginalization of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-diasporic perspectives in both US and Polish public memory.

7 On the subject matter of the archive, see Krzysztof Pijarski's *The Archive as Project: The Poetics and Politics of the (Photo) Archive* and *The Archive as Project* (digital re-edition), as well as his Archeologia fotografii: czy można zarchiwizować gest?" [Archeology of Photography: Is It Possible to Digitize a Gesture?].

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encounter is retroactively claimed by history, meaning, and collective memory.

And yet the value of Niedenthal's image cannot be understood without acknowledging this dual structure. The photograph does not depict Vietnam; it captures the moment when Vietnam became visible as a metaphor within another society's own drama of repression and resistance. It stages, unintentionally, the very mechanism by which distant conflicts are absorbed, mis-seen, and redeployed in local myth-making. To understand this interplay between the visceral and the hermeneutic, we must return to the photographer himself—to the embodied experience behind the lens, the fear and the intuition, the hurried decision-making and the shock of recognition. It is here, I believe, that Niedenthal's own account becomes indispensable.

Katarzyna Najman: The poster announcing the premiere of F. F. Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, above it the sign "Kino Moskwa"; in front of the cinema, an armored SKOT personnel carrier and soldiers. This photograph from 1981 is known not only to photography enthusiasts. When you took it, were you thinking about the possible consequences? About what might have happened to you if someone had caught you?

Chris Niedenthal: It was the beginning of martial law, and we didn't yet know exactly what kind of danger we were in, although fear was probably at its greatest then. No one knew what awaited them, how the soldiers or riot police might react. Yet when you're working and you want to get something done, fear somehow recedes into the background. Working for *Newsweek* at the time, I was fully aware that I had to take as many photographs as possible in the shortest possible time. I was afraid, but I also knew I would have felt terribly foolish if I hadn't done anything. The fear was there, under the skin, but the sheer thrill of taking "forbidden" photographs was enough to keep it in check. A bit of adrenaline is always useful in situations like that.

Katarzyna Najman: You saw the situation and thought you had to capture it?

Chris Niedenthal: We were driving around Warsaw with some friends, looking for places worth photographing—that is, military checkpoints. We knew we could only photograph them from above, from windows. Taking pictures out on the street would have been suicide. In the first days of martial law, we were driving down Rakowiecka Street toward Puławska. We stopped at the traffic lights at the intersection. In front of us stood a soldier directing traffic. I noticed that the *Kino Moskwa* cinema was just ahead. I saw the *Apocalypse Now* billboard, but I hadn't yet seen the armored carrier with the soldiers standing at the entrance of the cinema—it was hidden behind trees. I knew immediately that I had to photograph it. I was riding as a passenger, so I quickly took a shot through the car window, just to have *something* in case we couldn't get closer—luckily, the soldier had his back to us.

We turned onto Puławska street and immediately spotted the SKOT in front of the cinema. We parked and started looking for an entrance to a nearby building

from which we could shoot from above. Today it would be harder—with intercoms and building attendants everywhere—but back then it wasn't a problem. We were afraid to knock on the doors of strangers, especially in that area, so close to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Fortunately, the stairwell itself proved a perfect location. All we had to do was come close to the window and take a few quick shots. That part wasn't complicated anymore.

As we left the stairwell, bundled up in thick winter jackets under which we had hidden our equipment—we looked like bears, or maybe like pregnant fish—we ran to the car and, of course, in the heat of the moment, the car alarm went off. We were terrified the soldiers would notice us, but they didn't even flinch. We managed to get away. We did get lucky. […]

Katarzyna Najman: You were a photojournalist, a reporter, an observer of those times. The power of the photograph lies above all in the juxtaposition between the film's title and what was happening on the streets of Warsaw. But do you think the film itself also contributed something to Polish awareness—did it serve as a metaphor, a symbol?

Chris Niedenthal: It was a film about the Vietnam War, and that alone evoked an association—the fact that that war, too, was anti-communist. After all, the point was to drive the communists out of that part of the world. Of course, the film itself had a slightly different theme—the rebellion of a mad American officer—but I think the word *rebellion* was very important for Poles as well. The film was based on a novel by Joseph Conrad, and that, too, was significant for us. And then there was the music. Alongside Wagner, there's that song by The Doors—"The End"—which spoke about freedom. Coppola himself would probably be surprised at how perfectly it all came together, at that very moment in history. In fact, he apparently saw my photograph, and I believe he even has a copy of it.

Katarzyna Najman: *Apocalypse Now*, like your photograph, has become a cult piece. What do you think makes certain works exert such a strong social impact?

Chris Niedenthal: Associations, associations, and more associations! In the case of my photograph, it's the combined impact of those three elements in the frame. They're such simple connections—and yet so beautiful. They matched exactly what Poles thought about Moscow, about Russians, and about communism. And the film itself was also cult and extraordinary. That moment marked a perfect convergence of events. I don't want to sound pretentious, but I'm pleased that the photo is considered iconic. Why? Simply because it was good. Three powerful associations—but not arranged by me. I was just passing by, saw them, and took the picture. Many people saw the same thing, but not everyone photographed it. […]

Katarzyna Najman: Do you think photographs are capable of changing history, or do they merely comment on it?

Chris Niedenthal: I think they are mainly a form of commentary. Every photographer would like to believe that his photograph could change history or the world, but the chances of that are small. My picture didn't change anything—it is simply a document of that time. But there's that famous photograph by Eddie Adams, the well-known American photographer, taken during

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the Vietnam War: in the street, a South Vietnamese officer drags a Viet Cong prisoner out of a basement, suddenly raises a pistol to his head, and shoots him. Adams captured that moment. That image truly could have influenced public opinion in the United States. It was simply too much. Public opinion began to turn against the war and forced the US government to withdraw. Another photograph that had a similar impact is the one showing […] naked children burned by napalm. […] The children are running, their clothes burned off by the napalm, their faces contorted in pain as they scream and flee. Those photographs moved public opinion so profoundly that people began to turn away from the war and pressure the American government to end it. So yes, there are photographs that can change things—but it's hard to think that every picture can. If that were the case, the world would change every day! (Najman)

What emerges from Niedenthal's recollection is the stubborn materiality of the photographic act:[8] a cold stairwell, a window frame, heavy winter coats concealing a camera, the hurried click of the shutter before a soldier might turn his head. Nothing in his testimony suggests symbolic intent; nothing gestures toward the interpretive density that scholars now discern in the resulting image. The photograph, which for later generations would crystallize an entire constellation of Cold War anxieties, began as a moment of instinct rather than vision—an attempt to register what was happening before the opportunity disappeared. The distance between that embodied immediacy and the monumental readings subsequently grafted onto the image reveals a structural paradox at the heart of modern visual culture: that photographs accrue meaning precisely by exceeding the conditions of their creation.

This paradox is not unique to Niedenthal. Adams's "Saigon Execution," Ut's "Napalm Girl," or the wartime photographs of Đoàn Công Tính, Mai Nam, and Võ An Khánh—all share the same trajectory from contingency to canonicity. Their afterlives are shaped less by the intentions of those who produced them than by the interpretive economies that later absorbed them. Visual culture is never static: images travel, detach from their origins, and reattach themselves to new political, emotional, and ideological contexts. What Niedenthal describes as just "a form of a commentary" becomes, once it circulates, a node in a global archive of meaning—a visual idiom through which entire societies negotiate the moral grammar of their own historical position.

To recognize this gap between production and reception is to recognize the limits of the photographic gaze within any national narrative. The Vietnam/American War was not only a conflict but a profound epistemological rupture: a war filmed, televised, reframed, appropri-

8 On the subject of the "non-human" element, see Joanna Żylińska's book, *Non-human Photography* (2017).

ated, muted, mythologized, and repeatedly overwritten by foreign imaginations. As Niedenthal's photograph shows, even images created far from the war zone were drawn into its gravitational field. But such appropriations—Polish, American, Western European—inevitably disclose their own blind spots: they privilege the shock register, the cinematic scale of destruction, the moral crisis of the observer. They rarely sustain the granular, locally situated, historically specific perspectives that Vietnamese writers, artists, filmmakers, and survivors have articulated for decades.

It is therefore necessary, at this juncture, to shift registers. Having followed the photograph's Cold War itineraries through Warsaw's martial-law streets, we must now broaden the frame to include the Vietnamese and diasporic archives that have long insisted on a different horizon of memory. These archives—textual, oral, photographic, and musical—do not merely supplement Western visual narratives; they unsettle them. They remind us that the war's global circulation has often obscured the very voices most intimately shaped by its devastation. They offer not an alternative myth but an alternative epistemology: one grounded not in the spectacle of conflict but in the continuity of lived histories, intergenerational transmission, and cultural survival.

The movement from Niedenthal's anecdote to these broader archives is not a detour but the structural pivot of this essay. For what his recollection quietly demonstrates is the essential instability of all transnational visual memory. Images migrate more quickly than testimonies; spectacle outpaces continuity; and the Cold War's systems of circulation ensured that certain ways of seeing Vietnam dominated the global imagination while others remained marginal. A hemispheric and transoceanic framework—one attentive to crossings, asymmetries, and contested genealogies of remembrance—is therefore indispensable. It is only within such a framework that Niedenthal's Warsaw image can assume its proper role: not as a self-sufficient symbol, but as a point within a larger constellation of transnational afterlives that the Vietnam/American War continues to generate.

In this light, the next movement of our reflection turns toward precisely those afterlives: toward the Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, and Vietnamese-Polish literary and artistic traditions that complicate and enrich the war's visual archive; toward the Cold War and post-Cold War migrations that reshaped the demographics of memory; and toward the theoretical commitments—hemispheric, transoceanic, and transnational—that guide the mission of the *Review of International American Studies*. Niedenthal's photograph opened a portal. What follows requires stepping through it.

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Abstract: This article examines the global afterlives of the Vietnam/American War through the intertwined lenses of photography, cinema, and Cold War cultural circulation. Beginning with Chris Niedenthal's iconic 1981 photograph of an armored SKOT before Warsaw's Kino Moskwa during martial law, the essay analyzes how a contingent act of witnessing became a visual allegory that re-situated the American War within Poland's own history of repression. Drawing on Barthes's concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, it argues that the image's enduring force lies in the tension between the photographer's embodied immediacy and the mythological readings later attached to it. Juxtaposed with globally circulating images such as Eddie Adams's "Saigon Execution" and Nick Ut's "Napalm Girl," Niedenthal's photograph becomes a case study in the transnational migration of wartime imagery and the asymmetries that structure public memory. The essay then turns to Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, and Vietnamese-Polish literary and artistic archives, highlighting how these testimonies unsettle the dominance of American cinematic narratives that have long framed the war as an American psychological event rather than a Vietnamese historical catastrophe. The conclusion outlines a hemispheric and transoceanic framework for the *Review of International American Studies*, urging contributors to explore the war's dispersed legacies as a shared, global archive of memory, representation, and resistance.

Keywords: Vietnam/American War memory, transnational visual vulture, hemispheric American Studies, Cold War media circulation, photographic testimony, diasporic Vietnamese archives

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