

Encountering Vietnam through Images: Utopian Dreams and Everyday Realities

Assignment Sequence One

Postwar Vietnam

Monday Jan. 14th-Wednesday Feb. 6th

One of the great joys of writing is the way it offers a space for critical reflection and sustained analysis of things we might otherwise take for granted. Writing takes time, but this time allows us to pause and think; it allows us to explore issues in depth, to revise our thinking, and to thereby push ourselves to see the world more carefully and in more nuanced ways. In this writing assignment we will explore the ways that images frame our encounter with Vietnam, and we will develop a sustained, critical analysis of the ways that such images provide utopian (and sometimes dystopian) visions of Vietnamese life, society, state, and culture. Building from this, we will argue about the accuracy of the visions depicted in the images, and what we think they mean.

In more concrete terms, you will select an image of Vietnam and then proceed to describe the component parts of the image in a way that provides a critical reading of the image you have chosen. A critical reading implies a reading that takes the reader beyond the surface of the image and situates it within a social, cultural, historical, and political context. That is, you will go beyond providing a simple description of the image in order to tell your reader why the image is significant, to help your reader look critically at the way the image represents Vietnam, and to develop an argument about how such a representation colors our understanding of the "real" Vietnam. You will need to ask yourself what the image means, who produced it, who it is directed towards, why it appears where you found it, why it takes the form it takes, what purpose it serves, and what kind of "argument" the image makes. In short, you will develop your own argument about what the image does and you will show how the image is not simply a picture of something but is in fact a "text" with its own set of implied arguments directed toward an audience. You will show how the image contains intentional rhetorical effects designed to affect perception through its particular modes of representation.

As you proceed through the stages of this assignment, you will ultimately be able to juxtapose the image you select against background readings and in-class discussions about Vietnamese social life, politics, and history. Building from this general background information, as well as additional independent research into the image itself, your writing will take the image apart and develop an argument about how your reader might see the image in new ways. The final essay you write will take the form of an "annotation essay" composed of about five to seven tightly argued text boxes that encircle the image. Each text box will highlight important elements of the image, but the text boxes should also flow from one to the next, composing in their totality a fluid essay that moves the reader gracefully through the image. Each text box should be coherent in its own right, but should also serve as an integral part of a larger essay formed out of all the text boxes taken together. That is, your reader should be able to read each text box on their own, but the boxes should also "add up" to an argument-driven short essay. In the best annotation essays the whole is always greater than the sum of its text boxes.



Example of an "annotation essay"

A professional example of an annotation can be seen in Daniel Brook's contribution to *Harper's Magazine*, "Mall of America: The Architecture of Our Privatized Government" (figure 1). We will use this text as a model for this assignment.

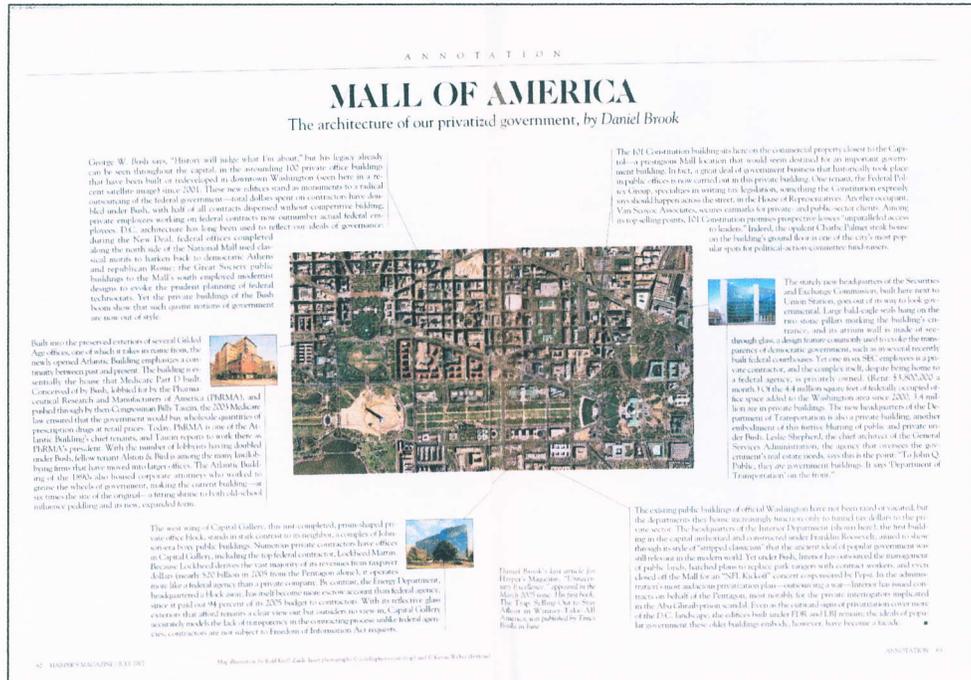


Figure 1: Annotation. "Mall of America" by Daniel Brook, *Harper's Magazine*, July, 2007.

Note how Brook uses his analysis of the Washington Mall to highlight key visual elements that buttress his claim that space is becoming increasingly privatized, and how this illustrates his argument that our government is catering to private interest groups. He does not describe the texture of the grass on the Mall, but emphasizes specific architectural features of buildings, describes the nature of their occupants, and details the history behind their construction. In this example, description, like all good description, has a purpose; it supports his argument. Furthermore, the captions read like an essay. While the captions all make sense independently, they actually follow a narrative thread that, like any good essay, carries the reader gracefully through the stages of an argument. This is what you should try to do in your piece as well.

You should begin preparing your annotation as early as possible. As you begin to make your argument, you may realize that there are certain elements of the image you can't quite explain. "What," you might ask, "does a dragon symbolize in Vietnamese culture?" To answer this, you might have to do a little research. Writing-up and research is often a recursive process, which means that the very act of writing and analysis will show the limits of your original observations, forcing you back into the library for more study. It is precisely in this way that the act of writing makes you sharpen your powers of observation. Indeed, the most compelling writing and research will always prompt new questions, which lead to more writing, which leads to more research. It is a generative circle that pushes thinking forward, with every draft refining the way we see the world.

Assignment 1A: Viewing Images of Utopia*Due Wednesday, January 16th*

For class on Wednesday, you will need to pick an image of Vietnam to analyze, convert it to a jpeg file, and insert it into the center of a Powerpoint slide. The easiest way to do this is to find an image on the internet and save it to your desktop, but you can also scan and save images from other sources, like course readings, tourist guide books, magazines, and library books. (If you happen to have any Vietnamese *Đông*, you can scan the money in your wallet, but I have already done this for you). Bring your computer to class so we can share the images you have found.

Suggested Sources for images:

- Vietnamese Money (I have scanned several notes for you and posted them on Blackboard)
- A Tourist Website
- An Image from an online Newspaper or Magazine, such as:
 - Viet Nam News: <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/>
 - Thanh Nien News: <http://www.thanhniennews.com/>
 - Vietnam Investment Review <http://www.vir.com.vn/Client/VIR/Default.asp>
- A scanned image from a Travel guidebook
- The Communist Party of Vietnam Website (Yes, they have a website!):
http://www.cpv.org.vn/index_e.html
- A Photo exhibition
- A Tourist blog
- Websites from Export Processing Zones and Industrial Parks
- Urban Planning Websites

Assignment 1B: Unpacking Utopia: Deciphering the Image*Due Friday, January 18th*

After selecting the image and saving it to your Powerpoint slide, you should begin by outlining elements of the image you find striking, strange, curious, or otherwise worthy of commentary. Create a new text box for each element of the image you would like to analyze, and connect that box to part of the image using a thin line in Powerpoint. After you have done this, begin brainstorming by writing directly into the textboxes. Ask yourself, and try to brainstorm answers to, the following types of questions:

- Who produced the image? Why?
- What do the various parts of the image mean?
- Who is the image intended for?
- What are distinguishing features of the image?
- What does the image conceal?
- Is the image an accurate representation?
- What does the image "argue"? Is it convincing?
- Are there parts of the image you don't understand?
- Etc.

Bring your computer to class on Friday so you can share your initial brainstorms with a partner.

Assignment 1C: Placing the Image in Context*Due Wednesday, January 23rd*

Building from your initial brainstorming process, and combining this with the knowledge of Postwar Vietnam that you are slowly developing through course readings and in-class discussions, you should begin to situate your analysis of the image within the context of Vietnamese history, politics, and social-cultural life. How do the ideal representations offered by the image correspond with the complexities of Vietnamese society as you have come to understand it? You might reflect on how these images can be contextualized within official narratives of the Vietnamese revolution, the history of socialist transition since 1975, the renovation policies of *Đổi Mới*, Vietnamese concepts of "Market Oriented Socialism," or the recent emphasis on economic development, modernization, and foreign direct investment. In short, you should situate the image in context. Bring a hard-copy to class on Wednesday.

Assignment 1D: The Image Speaks in Many Tongues*Due Wednesday, January 30th:*

Based on comments your classmates and the instructor gave you on Assignment 1C, you should continue your work on situating your image within the context of real historical events and within a context of Vietnamese social and cultural change. You should use this time to further incorporate references to course readings, as well as to other background sources you have found it necessary to consult in order to fully analyze and situate the image. As you continue your revision of your earlier draft, you should try to show the complexity of the image and pull out the myriad of ways in which it might mean different things to different people. You should highlight the "poly-vocality" of the image; that is, show its many voices.

Assignment 1E: Project 1 Draft*Due in class on Monday, Feb. 4th*

Complete the penultimate draft of your annotation by class on Monday. While your annotation will contain a central image, the text of the work should not "depend" on the image alone. That is, the text of the annotation should ultimately read like an essay, and it should make the reader "see" the image in ways they might not otherwise see by looking at it without the benefit of your annotation. Be sure to bring three copies of this draft to class on Monday for in-class peer review.

Assignment 1F: In-class Peer-review of Project 1 Draft*Complete In-Class on Monday Feb. 4th*

In class on Monday, you will engage in peer reviews of your annotations. With your peer reviewer, you should ask how you might rework the argument, and improve the style and arrangement of your text. Building from your peers' comments, you will turn in a hard copy of your final annotation at the beginning of class on Wednesday. You should also upload the annotation to Blackboard before class meets. Remember, despite the non-traditional format, the annotation should read like an essay, and there should be a clear narrative thread that guides the reader through your argument.

Project 1 Final Draft*Due in class and on Blackboard on Wednesday, February 6th*

Building from your peers' comments, revise your draft and turn it in as a hard copy and on blackboard by the beginning of class on Wednesday.