Introduction

War and Visual Representation

This course reader explores representations of war, the most violent form of human disaster, in visual culture ranging from fine art to popular film. It gathers essays that deal with war as it is defined by individuals, institutions, and nations; and critically engage with the ways in which experiences and memories of war are interpreted, exhibited and challenged in various visual terms and methods. The essays not only concern the question of historical truth but also pay attention to the ways in which narratives and images of war are constructed and how they in turn produce meanings and effects in particular political, social and cultural contexts. In this reader representation refers to the process through which we create meaning of the world around us. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright point out that "The world is not simply reflected back to us … but we actually construct the meaning of the material world through these systems (of representation)"; our values, opinions and beliefs are not simply shaped by re-presentation of some aspects of the real world but by representation of it.[1] As our surroundings have been increasingly dominated by visual media, it is crucial to understand how visual images convey messages and how they help us make sense of our society.

The traumatic experience of war—destruction, dislocation and loss—both in a physical and emotional sense is deeply inscribed in individual and collective psyches. The selected essays, with a focus on Asia, explore the question of how war violence affects people's lives and how it formed and transformed identities. Representations of war are also crucial to private mourning of war victims because they create meaning for them. War memorials, for instance, convert the pointlessness of death by war into a narrative of self-sacrifice to fulfill national destiny. Here the war dead has tied citizens to the nation as individual memories meet collective memories in the form of national museums, monuments and rites of commemoration. Representations of war often take the form of a consolidated national narrative which transforms personal pain into collective suffering and redemption. However, in many cases national narrative of sacrifice makes death a conscious choice. We could say that the willingness to die for the nation, as Benedict Anderson points out, is made possible by the representations of war and the dead.[2] Propaganda in visual media and in war museums during both the wartime and the postwar periods constructs narratives that promote righteousness, victimization and perseverance of the nation. Yet, national identity is never a complete project. It is a process that needs to be mediated and managed through a series of representations, which in turn allow the nation-state to create its history, imagine its identity, and legitimize its rule.

Representations of war are far from stable and this contributes to the instability of national identity when it involves representations of war that the state engaged in. They

[1] Marita Sturken & Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.13.

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1991).

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are always subject to a challenge. In Asia, the transformation of post–Cold War geopolitics has opened new possibilities for inter-Asian relations and inevitably has led to a rigorous interrogation of the region's recent past. In this context, battles between nations over history have become more intense and domestic tensions between official and societal memories have also become more divisive. The selected essays interrogate controversies, challenges and negotiations surrounding the question of how to represent war.

Such contestation appears in different forms of visual culture such as anime, manga, film, photography and painting. The state is not the only source of representations of war: various members of civil society and different institutions and media industries all generate images. Popular culture and art often push the boundaries of official narratives of war and inspire critical and alternative thinking about national community, war memory and subjectivities. It is also noteworthy that the growing influence of virtual media has been shaping popular culture in a new direction. Its capacity to connect individuals and groups on a great scale and with rapid speed allows people to express their ideas and opinions more freely than ever before and provides the potential for them to more fully participate in public spheres. Yet it must be noted that this media can enhance as well as challenge hegemonic narratives of war since interest groups or the state may try to manipulate the virtual media precisely because of its popular appeal. In any case, we cannot dismiss the fact that new media add a vibrant dynamic to popular culture in the visual field.

This reader includes essays that deal with various visual media such as photography, film, documentary, anime, manga, painting, drawing, textile art, video, performance, TV and exhibition displays. Each medium has its own conventions, capacities and limits in creating meanings and also in soliciting responses from viewers. Despite their differences, it is essential to recognize that visual images convey not only intentions, problems or ambitions of individual artists or producers, but also, more critically, collective mentalities. The essays locate visual productions within particular historical and political contexts and relate them to larger issues of propaganda, national history, popular memory, historical injustice, reconciliation and therapeutic dialogue.

Organization of the Reader

The reader consists mainly of the cases related to Japanese involvement and experience in the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945). It also deals with the Korean War and the Vietnam War, which affected, among other places, South Korea, North Korea, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, all of Southeast Asia, and the USA. The wide coverage of regions, sometimes explicitly comparative, allows readers to recognize similarities and differences in representations of wars. Contributors look at various sites of representation in their investigations: war memorial museums and history museums (Hein and Takenaka; Kal; Kingston), anime and manga (Napier; Tanaka), documentary film (Li, Junkerman and McNeil),and film (Shim and Yecies). Although variations exist across these media in terms of the level of accessibility, these sites of representations can be characterized as having 'popular appeal' due to their capacity to circulate images of war widely. Exhibits in museums, for example, are publicized mostly through educational channels, inviting school groups and families, whereas other media are propelled by the profit-driven industry that aims to reach general populace. Some contributors also consider individual artists' art-

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making processes as an important site of representation.They elaborate on the roles of artists in communicating with audiences on the issues of propaganda, memory, history and trauma of war as a way of reconciling with the past: war propaganda photography (Germer) and painting (Ikeda), dialogues between generations of artists (Jennison and Hein) and between two American artists who express their views on history and memory differently (Truong and Slavick).

Despite their diversity in covering forms, narratives and places, the works of these contributors share the following three aspects. First, they situate visual productions and receptions in political, social and economic conditions. Second, they investigate what the representation tells us about collective identity in the context of war. Third, they analyze the distinctiveness of various kinds of visual media, revealing their potentials or limits in dealing with contested historical issues. This course reader emphasizes the relationship between war and visual culture as well as the historical significance and impact of war violence, which continues to affect contemporary politics and culture throughout the region.

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