

**The Voice that Carries Everything:
History and Confession in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer***

The focus of the present study is Viet Thanh Nguyen's debut novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015), in its double capacity of historical novel and confessional narrative. *The Sympathizer*, I argue, does not deal with the war in Vietnam as much as with its afterlives in memory. It is not a war novel—it is a novel about war narratives and the power rationales that allow for their (unequal) dissemination. In Nguyen's perspective, all cultural artifacts addressing the war's memory are to be seen as fabrications that always convey partial perspectives. All kinds of Vietnam War narratives, says the scholar/novelist, are based on distortions, manipulations, and erasures. This study claims that Nguyen's answer to this state of things was devising a fiction that was in turn based on distortions, but *deliberately* so. This fiction is informed by a logic according to which the only way to expose the power (un)balances underlying the industries of memory is to put together an implausible narrative that with its own existence questions the reliability of the others. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, as this study demonstrates, this is accomplished via a patent rejection of realism. All of Nguyen's creative licenses, I argue, are part of an overall design. By bending the facts, by stuffing the story with historical impossibilities (and occasional anachronisms), Nguyen brings into question the power circumstances that make misrepresentation possible.

By pairing the work with Nguyen's essay/manifesto *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016), we derive a picture in which Nguyen's fiction and nonfiction are part of one same "fict-critical" project. *The Sympathizer* is a self-labeled "thriller of ideas" thinly disguised as genre fiction—a piece of criticism written in form of a novel. Spy novel tropes are but screens concealing a more challenging class of narrative. Every oddity within *The Sympathizer* is thus to be explained as a "strategy of implausibility" meant to sew political discourses into the story. By having a spy protagonist from the 1970s that thinks like an ethnic studies professor from the 2000s, by merging plots of cinematic classics and B-movies, by showing Vietnamese communists dressed as mad scientists using CIA methods of torture, and a number of other such oddities, the novel goes far beyond the mere necessity of opposing hegemonic memories with suppressed histories, to embrace instead an aesthetic of distortion and infidelity meant to unsettle easy dichotomies of victims/victimizers typically found in other Vietnam War narratives. Key in this respect is also the adoption of the confessional mode. As a coerced confession written under duress, *The Sympathizer* is structured as a first-person narrative in which the hostile circumstances that ignited the autobiographical impulse are made evident by the textual frame itself. Thus, my idea is that Nguyen uses an unreliable confession as a means to reframe (and reimagine) history. Through what I call the "confession-as-a-frame," he rewrites postwar Vietnam using satire and avant-garde solutions in lieu of period realism. His is a deliberate fabrication, a game of historical refractions conveyed by the voice of a deranged narrator who hides theory and ideas beneath

the cover of genre fiction. Nguyen's rejection of realism is therefore to be understood as intentional and as part of a political/aesthetic project aimed at rethinking the war and its afterlives in memory under a new critical light. A coerced confession penned by an unreliable narrator and addressed to a hostile audience is the narrative pretext for a metafiction aimed at exposing the invisible connections that tie stories with power. In essence, the novel is a parable, the parable of a prisoner forced to write his own history until he becomes an artist that sees through the limits of language and audience reception. This parable underlies the idea of a scholar/novelist grappling with the expectations of a publishing industry that pigeonholes every "ethnic" American author into the ill-fitting role of a memoirist/representative authorized to speak on behalf of a whole community.

The study is divided into two parts, plus a conclusion. In the first one, "A Game of Refractions," I focus specifically on *The Sympathizer* as a historical novel. Over the course of seven sections, I go into detail about all the distortions and diversions put into place by Nguyen, his using history as raw material for his twofold "fict-critical" project. The second part is titled "A Gallery of Stills," and deals specifically with *The Sympathizer's* satire of *Apocalypse Now* and of Hollywood Vietnam War movies. Nguyen's criticism of Francis Ford Coppola owes a debt to Chinua Achebe's critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Coppola, Nguyen argues, treated the Vietnamese as props, the colorful backdrop of an all-American tragedy. The Hollywood subplot is the one moment in the novel in which Nguyen's fiction and critique perfectly overlap. Here, the aesthetics of distortion is not applied to historical sources but rather to movie plots. The scholar/novelist devises a fiction in which he can put a stand-in of himself on the set of a cinematic (mis)representation of the war in Vietnam in order to shed critical light on Hollywood's "simulacrum visions." By making his protagonist a movie consultant on the set of an *Apocalypse Now*-esque work titled *The Hamlet*, he puts his theories on power and stories to the practical test. Through fiction, he has the chance of addressing such issues in real-time rather than forty years later behind the walls of a university classroom. Over the course of this part, I make my case that 1) the fictive movie seen in the novel is not a send-off of *Apocalypse Now* as much as a Frankenstein monster made of bits and elements of seven other films; 2) Nguyen's satire does not target Coppola's movie as much as the everlasting *mythos* that surrounds it; 3) *The Hamlet* is not Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* as much as a counterfactual, never-made version of the same story partially based on the original 1969 screenplay by John Milius.

Finally, in the conclusion, "What Exceed the Frame," I postulate that the key element to consider is the ultimate unreliability of Nguyen's narrator. My contention is that all the oddities we see in the novel can be accounted for by bearing in mind that the whole novel takes place inside one man's head. All the stock characters, names-function, and general weirdness of the story can be explained by the fact that the novel is structured as a first-person narrative written under specific circumstances. The returning metaphor of the narrator-as-book serves to illustrate this unspoken connection between voice and text. In the metafiction

of *The Sympathizer*, Vietnamese reeducation camps become MFA workshops, commandants become teachers, and political commissars become demanding editors willing to revise people through the words they produce. The fact that every dialogue is reported without quotation marks suggests that the narrator's voice contains every other, that all the characters are to be seen as literary recreations of 'real' people filtered by an unbridled imagination. My final claim is that all implausible elements, ironies, and modernist/expressionist solutions one can find in the novel should always be read in the context of a narrative that is intradiegetically "artistic." Simply stated, the character arc of the narrator is that of a memoirist that is slowly morphing into an artist. His is a reimagination rather than a chronicle: his deranged state of mind, the material conditions he finds in, and the fact that he is writing to a hostile audience, all concur to prove it.