

Hearts and Minds: A masterpiece that oversteps its bounds

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The 1975 documentary *Hearts and Minds* by Peter Davis stands as one of the most effective documentaries ever made. Mr. Davis took a controversial issue in American history and shed light on parts of the issue that had been placed in the dark by American ideals as well as ignorant patriotism. The film's faint cry is beginning to be heard once again as America finds itself in yet another controversial war. Mr. Davis's passion for this film can be felt through out. His use of interviews and images set an emotional tone for the film that would be difficult to match. Mr. Davis's *Hearts and Minds* is a masterpiece that oversteps its bounds in certain instances. There are key elements to this film that generate very strong reactions by the viewers, it is in these specific instances that Mr. Davis uses a sarcastic and exaggerated tone to point out merely some of the sentiments regarding the Vietnam war. We must first understand that this film is in no way un-American. Some may see it as un-American or lacking patriotism, yet the nature of our country and the manner in which we govern ourselves allows for these kinds of opinions to be had. With that said, there can be an exaggeration of facts to create a skewed view of truth, which is what Mr. Davis did in some instances throughout the film. In this documentary Mr. Davis has taken one American ideology and juxtaposed it with one Vietnamese ideology, the problem here is that both ideologies existed during a time when a number of conflicting thoughts and opinions (*that are not shown in the film*) also existed. Mr. Davis's depiction of the Vietnamese people gave a new outlook on who the people of Vietnam were and we get a real sense of what kind of innocent people were being hurt and killed as innocent bystanders. We see women,

¹ Casey Hill, an undergraduate communication student at Trinity University, wrote this term paper in December 2006 for a course on documentary film. The course was taught by Professor Aaron Delwiche. Student papers are available online at <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/guides.html>

children, and small weak men with nothing left but piles of bricks at their feet. We hear Vietnamese men cry and scream at the camera because of what is happening to them, which is stinging and painful to see.

Mr. Davis took on a very difficult task when he decided to make this film, while his personal and passionate views can be seen in parts of the film. The issue that he chose to consider in the film could not be much more controversial, especially for the time of its release, in his attempts to make his point Peter Davis has created a stinging reference and a painful reminder of an unforgettable mistake in American history. The film itself is a daunting, emotional, and frightening depiction of the power that some governments can yield.

Peter Davis is very right in his argument that the American government made a mistake in getting involved in Vietnam. However, he could have been a bit more conservative in his depiction of the U.S. soldier and citizen in the film. He leaves no room for depictions of Americans who support the soldiers yet are against the war. There isn't much room left for those who are objectively open about the war and are well informed. Mr. Davis takes truths and cuts them to pieces to form an underlying argument. This quotation from Carol Wilder in her article "Hearts and Minds Redux" says that Peter Davis has taken facts, quotations, and images and juxtaposed them to create a complete contradiction. She goes on to say that the way that Davis has patched these images and quotes together leads the viewer's thoughts in a way that allows his underlying message to be communicated. One sequence of the film shows a number of interviews with Americans who either know nothing about the Vietnam War or don't care to understand the reasoning behind the war. They feel as if they have not been directly affected by the war. First, this technique is genius. He incites passion with these interviews while he shines a light on the potential ignorance of a citizen under a very powerful government. However, while his use of these techniques does all of these great documentary things, they also cross some lines and sometimes depict Americans as uninformed and ignorant.

Some of the images and montage sequence that Davis put into his film take a bit of a swing at the US Army during the Vietnam War. Now, because this War is an admitted mistake in

American history, these images are appropriate to a point. They cross a line after they become redundant and obviously pointed. In one sequence, Davis creates a montage of images of U.S. soldiers burning down huts, pouring out rice and beating down what seem to be helpless men. He then places the patriotic song "Over There" on top of these images. By doing this Peter Davis is attempting to create the understanding that these soldiers along with the government leading them have no regard for these human beings. Davis uses these images to further ridicule an already admitted mistake in American history. While the technique was very well used and appropriate, again, I feel that Davis crossed the line. Another example of this technique used by Mr. Davis comes from the sequence in which he shows wounded American men learning how to use their new prosthetic limbs. This is placed underneath another patriotic song. Again, Mr. Davis has taken American pain and regret and used it to make his point; which is a very effective and smart way to make his point. However, Mr. Davis's argument has already been made here at this point in the film. Again, Davis takes a bit of a blow below the belt. Finally, the scene that shows two American soldiers with Vietnamese prostitutes takes us into a new frame of mind. As these two men carry on with the prostitutes, we can't help but be disgusted and ashamed. Davis's use of this sequence was effective. This scene hurt the image of the rest of the soldiers in the film which seemed to be a bit over the top. It is evident after this scene that Davis is trying to set a persona for the rest of the soldiers in the film.

Some of the sequences that Davis used that were compelling and eerily effective were: One, his interview with former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, who seems to give a very well informed account of his dealings with the Vietnam war. His speech and his demeanor are completely calm and he seems to be completely unbiased. The statement from Mr. Clifford that gives the most effect in the film is when he says "I have absolutely no hesitancy in saying that I could not have been more wrong in my attitude towards Vietnam." Mr. Clifford's interview was used in a good way by Mr. Davis because of the way that Mr. Clifford communicated his experiences. Secondly, Davis's use of the High School football sequences to show the American need to dominate was used in an effective way. By using this scene Davis showed a distinct flaw in the way that the American government

handled the Vietnam war. Mr. Davis takes these sequences and gently places them throughout the film to remind the viewer that this kind of aggression can be found outside of the armed forces. Lastly, his interview with Randy Floyd is very effective in making his point felt, much like Mr. Clifford, Randy Floyd has come to a realization. He has nothing to protect and everything to tell. When Randy breaks down and cries because of what he had done in the war we experience a very intense and emotional situation. These three techniques worked to Davis's advantage because they prove to be very real and interesting points without expounding on ignorance, apathy, or stupidity. One being that this man, Clark Clifford has come to a steady-handed and rational realization that America was wrong in their attempts in Vietnam. The other point he makes is that aggression and domination that is portrayed by the government has infused itself in the minds of Americans and can be found easily anywhere in America. Randy Floyd's interview allows us to see an American soldier who is completely ashamed of what he had done and not afraid to lay everything out there for the viewer to see.

Although there are aspects to this film that make interesting a effective points, we have discussed the fact that Davis overcharges some aspects of his point, here is a quote from a Washington Post staff writer on the film "Certainly Davis has a point of view – he's morally outraged and against the war. But that's the value and the endgame of most documentaries...when Davis shows us Gen. William Westmoreland making his infamous statement that "the Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as the Westerner," it comes just after footage of a Vietnamese boy crying inconsolably over the death of his father..."(Thompson). What Mr. Thompson fails to recognize in this description is that Mr. Davis had already made his point heard loud and clear. This sequence shows a racist General making a racist statement, the ignorance of this statement can be felt without the cutaway to the child crying. General Westmoreland is obviously an ignorant man who knows little about human emotion. By using this technique Davis attributes Westmoreland's ignorance to the entire American government, and again he magnifies the mistake that was made in Vietnam by making the American government look ignorant.

The overall theme of this documentary film is obviously anti-war. Mr. Davis's intellect and ability to create something so effectively emotional should always be remembered as a tribute to the genre of documentary film. Mr. Davis's film did contain a certain amount of objective material his intensity and obvious unfailing will to affirm the erroneous nature of the American government's involvement in Vietnam War. His depictions of American soldiers were biased and subjective at times in the film, yet they were effective. Davis is undoubtedly a brilliant man, his passion for this film shines through, and his opinions of the American Government seem to dissuade him from remaining completely objective throughout the film. With those things said this documentary is a reminder and a warning before anything. Davis's point, while sometimes over-biased, remains an important message for the future leaders of the United States.