



Viewing guide for *Hearts & Minds*

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Trinity University, December 2006

***Hearts and Minds* - Pre-viewing guide**

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QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

I. Overview / Introduction To The Film

Director Peter Davis' Vietnam War documentary, *Hearts and Minds*, is an emotional rollercoaster of various perspectives on the influences, condition, and results of the conflict in Vietnam. Although released in 1974 toward the end of the American involvement, the film was made during the height of the Vietnam War as nothing short of an outcry to the American people to realize what is actually happening on the other side of the world. What Peter Davis accomplishes in this film is his uncompromising portrayal of the Vietnamese side of the conflict. He chooses to portray their plight rather than focusing on the American soldier's side of the war, as many news agencies were in the habit of at that time.

By using archival footage of events, interviews with soldiers and political officials involved around the time of the conflict, and excerpts from the American portrayal of the war in film, television, and fiction, Peter Davis weaves together an ensemble of different viewpoints as seamlessly as can be done with such a wide variety of recordings. His purpose is to intentionally juxtapose contrasting ideals and misconceptions in order to elicit an emotional response from the audience. In watching this film, even an amateur conception of the process of film would recognize that the editing in *Hearts and Minds* is careful and deliberate in execution.

Davis leaves little to ambiguity when it comes down to how he expects his audience to respond.

Hearts and Minds is very unrestrained in its approach to showing all of the neglected facets of both American ineptitude and Vietnamese tragedy. Davis does not shy away from occasionally portraying his interviewees in an unfavorable light if the things they say and reveal are worthy of ridicule. Even more substantially in the film, Davis does not hesitate to incorporate extremely graphic and macabre images of Vietnamese destruction and loss of life to assist in the emotional appeals to the viewer. Bombed, burned, beaten, or shot, a plethora of Vietnamese pain is captured in the film in the aftermath of destruction, sometimes in brief and gruesome clips, other times in lengthy interviews with the victims and survivors. He even occasionally splices in scenes from everyday American life to contrast just how significantly different the perception of the war at home and in Vietnam is.

Many have considered this film to be biased, and rightly so. It is no accident that the Vietnamese are sympathized considerably more than are the American soldiers and their leaders. In a time when many pro-war Americans felt that our position as a world power granted us the right to intervene and make decisions for other groups of people, Peter Davis' documentary was an eye opener for those willing to embrace its strong and poignant criticisms. Part of what Davis attempts to do is to show us the Vietnamese, not as a baser and apathetic people, but as real human beings with intelligence, history, and culture that were being trampled upon and overlooked in the face of a debilitating fear of spreading Communism. To carefully watch this film is to experience a side of war that has all too often been disregarded in American history, the view from the other side.

II. **Questions To Keep In Mind Before and During The Film**

- At many times during the film, Davis inter-cuts footage from interviews about parts of the Vietnam war with footage from actual related events that either support or contrast with the interview dialogue. When it is support of the message that is being edited together, the subjects look intelligent and analytically knowledgeable. When a significant contrast is shown, the subjects seem uninformed and even indifferent to the truth. How much of this technique is competent composition of reality and how much is manipulative of the subject's interview?
- As you watch the film, be aware of how Davis chooses to portray American civilians and Vietnam veterans. Their views on the war are inevitably going to differ because of their strikingly different experiences related to the war, but notice the types of people Davis repeatedly comes back to. What similarities do many of these people have that make them ideal for Davis' film?
- Davis will often use the cinematic technique of the reveal to expose the audience to some influential piece of knowledge about the interviewee's

context or physical situation that was not apparent in the first part of the film. Why do you think it is that he did not choose to enlighten us completely from the start of the film? What kind of emotional response does this elicit?

- In trying to reveal the humanity of the Vietnamese, some may argue that Davis actually neglects a lot of the empathy that many Americans against the war had for the inhabitants of Vietnam. He clearly focuses much more on the atrocities and American apathy of the war than on the peace movements and anti-war campaigns. Is this irresponsible of Peter as a filmmaker to not evenhandedly portray both sides or is it a necessary element of the film in order for it to successfully function as a critique and criticism of the war?

III. Where To Obtain Copies of *Hearts and Minds*

For Purchase:

- Dvdaficionado.com is a website that allows users to catalogue and keep track of their DVD collections. By clicking on the “Compare Prices” tab for whatever film is selected (*Hearts and Minds* in this case), a price listing of every major online retailer with shipping prices will come up.
- DVDplanet.com regularly has the lowest price on Criterion Collection titles (the makers of this DVD) and do not charge shipping over \$25
- [Best Buy](http://BestBuy.com) and other large local retailers known for carrying documentaries and art films will be likely to have a copy.
- eBay.com often has cheaper, used copies for sell

For Rent:

- [Blockbuster](http://Blockbuster.com) and other large rental stores will often carry a copy
- Netflix.com carries more than enough copies to quickly get one sent

Hearts and Minds - Post-viewing guide

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I. Overview

After viewing Peter Davis' *Hearts and Minds*, a variety of questions may arise pertaining to the nature of the Vietnam War, the documentary film genre, the techniques of film art, the critical reception of the film, and scholars interpretations and theories on the film itself. It is my intention to provide you with relevant and useful resources below in order to help you answer the multitude of possible questions that may have arisen. The following is carefully organized and I provided links to articles or article sources where it was possible.

This post-viewing guide is meant for use in a scholarly or informative way for the viewer or for a group of people who have viewed *Hearts and Minds*. Its intent is to be read and followed up on after the audience has already viewed the film and is wishing to reflect on it. Reading it prior to seeing the film will spoil a lot of the emotional methods Davis uses and take away from the dramatic power the film initially holds. This guide may be especially helpful for those trying to find sources for critical and scholarly work on *Hearts and Minds* since there is not a large amount of related and credible material in the public domain on the film itself.

As was the case for me, many people may simply be curious after seeing *Hearts and Minds* about a variety of issues that the film raises and about the techniques that were used in creating such an emotionally charged film. For those who may have not understood the context of *Hearts and Minds* as well as they would have liked to, I have included a few links to websites that can offer a varying and individual range of depth over the Vietnam War itself. Seeing this may have generated the viewer's interest in the area of documentary film as an art form and means for social critique. For these viewers I have included a lengthy essay on the relation of the documentarian and the subject, scholarly and critical writings on documentary in book form, and for the especially interested, a link to the International Documentary Association that upon joining can connect the reader to hundreds of articles written over time in the organization's publications.

Also included are glossary film terms for those who want to intelligently write or speak about *Hearts and Mind's* technical approaches or who wish to more fully understand concepts stressed in other related film articles. I included a range of reviews that tie the film into current news such as the Iraq war or Michael Moore approach to filmmaking and those that review Peter Davis' successful use of editing. Below these are scholarly work concerning the film, including a paper of my own and of a fellow classmate's. One deals primarily with Davis' use of

juxtaposition, two with Iraq war parallels, and mine with the propagandistic methods being used at the time of the war citing support in the film and from various scholars. The paper is ended with an analysis of a clip I found characteristic of much of the film, a variety of questions to reflect on, and a concluding statement about the film providing closure.

I hope this guide is useful in all the ways I have described above and in any others that the reader may find it practical for. Most of all, I am happy to help those that appreciate this film for its importance both as a political piece and as a masterpiece of successful documentary filmmaking.

II. Useful Resources

a. The Vietnam War

The Wars for Viet Nam: 1945-1975 (<http://vietnam.vassar.edu/>)

Developed for Robert Brigham's Vassar College Vietnam course, this is a thorough website examining America's lengthy involvement in the Vietnam conflict covering the nature of the Vietnamese revolution, our justifications for becoming involved, and why the war was as lengthy as it was. Incorporating a variety of official statements and documents, the site carefully examines the war from an objective and factual standpoint.

The Vietnam War (<http://www.vietnamwar.com/index.htm>)

For the truly interested, this massive website offers brief and lengthy views of the war, military and political photos, strategic maps, analysis of involved presidents, descriptions of various offensives, and almost any other facet of the Vietnam War history that a curious person could need.

Dr. John Guilmartin. America in Vietnam

"In *America in Vietnam*, Dr. John Guilmartin, professor of history at Ohio State University, gives a broad outline to the war in Vietnam, from French involvement to the fall of Saigon in 1975. *America in Vietnam* is an excellent place to begin for anyone who is new to Vietnam War Studies"

b. Documentary Film

Paul Arthur. "Extreme Makeover: The Changing Face of Documentary"
Cineaste Magazine. (<http://www.cineaste.com/parthur.htm>)

This is a wonderful article exploring the changing roles of subjects in documentaries, as the public over time has become more media conscious and documentaries more exploiting. Arthur comments: "To be sure, nearly

the entire history of nonfiction filmmaking can be refracted through the moment of collision between camera and subject.” The focus here is on that collision.

Eds. Derek Paget & Abe Nornes. Studies In Documentary Film
(<http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals.php?issn=17503280>)

Beginning in early 2007, this series of critical and theoretical essays on the nature of documentary film will be released through Intellect Publishing. It will be the “first refereed scholarly journal devoted to the history, theory, criticism and practice of documentary film.” In the field of Documentary film studies, this should be a rich resource.

International Documentary Association (<http://www.documentary.org/>)

This is an organization that circulates a magazine on filmmakers, their projects, and approaches to documentary film. It is well reputed and internationally recognized. Most beneficial of all, the IDA’s articles are archived and searchable for members.

c. Glossaries of Film Terms

Joel Schlemowitz. A Glossary of Film Terms
(http://homepage.newschool.edu/~schlemoj/film_courses/glossary_of_film_terms/glossary.html)

From A to Z, Joel Schlemowitz defines every relevant term in his vocabulary that relates to the language of films and film productions. Joel places particular emphasis on the film student’s use of these terms and their definitions reflect this. He comprehensively covers the terms one might encounter in a filmmaking course and leaves out those that involve the engineering and lab work of film technicians.

IMDb Film Glossary. (<http://imdb.com/Glossary/>)

In an alphabetically organized list, this page covers terms that are often used in film interpretation, acting, and production. By simply clicking on a letter, every term beginning with that letter will be displayed with the definitions of each right along side of them.

Cinematic Terms: A Film-Making Glossary
(<http://www.filmsite.org/filmterms15.html>)

This is my favorite site among the three. In a similar way, *Cinematic Terms* lists alphabetical terms and definitions, but it also provides small screen shots from recognizable movies to visually define what is being

described. This leaves little room for misunderstanding. For those really new to cinematic terms and techniques, this would be especially useful for comparing shots of one film (*Hearts and Minds*) to those of the examples.

d. Film Reviews of *Hearts and Minds*

Christopher Null. Hearts and Minds. (www.filmcritic.com)

Christopher describes *Hearts and Minds* as an “archetypal important documentary” that sympathizes to the Vietnamese and damns the government. Citing the fact that Davis selectively edits, he was a little frustrated at the films editing and at its portrayal of Americans. Overall he rates it 3.5 out of 5 stars.

Jack Garner. Hearts and Minds. (www.DemocratandChronicle.com)

Garner describes *Hearts and Minds* as the Fahrenheit 9/11 of its day for being a controversial, Oscar winning piece. He also thinks that the lack of narration will make it more difficult for younger audiences to understand. Overall, he describes the reissue of the film as a Criterion as essential to own for those who need to remember.

Desson Thompson. Hearts and Minds Recaptured. (www.washingtonpost.com)

One of the more praising reviews around, Desson lavishes *Hearts* as a most important type of documentary capable of capturing an era and an attitude. Drawing parallels between the Iraq war and the Vietnam conflict, he feels it is now more important than ever. Most importantly, Desson describes Davis’ moral outrage at the war as a necessary endgame of most documentaries, which I could not agree with more.

e. Scholarly Treatment of *Hearts and Minds*

Jimmie Briggs. Echoes of An Unending War. (New York Amsterdam News)

This article discusses war related film’s impact on our mentality and political convictions. Paying particular attention to *Hearts and Minds* and *The Battle of Algiers*, the influence of colonial powers and super powers is explored relating to one country’s bombing and invasion of another. The article continually cites both films in support of its parallel argument to Davis’ against the war.

Sarah Boxer. Finding Echoes of Iraq War in A Film About Vietnam. (www.nytimes.com)

Sarah Boxer retells an experience she had seeing *Hearts and Minds* in the Academy Theater at Lighthouse International in Manhattan, New York City with Peter Davis. In it she talks about how he addressed the film, the issues it raised, and its significance for current US policy in Iraq.

Kaatie Cooper. "Contradiction and Irony in Hearts and Minds" 2006
(<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/k.cooper.2006.hearts.and.minds.pdf>)

Kaatie's paper is an enlightening read on the justification of Peter Davis using juxtaposition to contrast parts of the film. It is her analysis that "the use of contradiction and irony in *Hearts and Minds* is justified by the contradictory nature of the Vietnam war itself." I am in total agreement with her and believe her paper deserves to be read by viewers of the film.

Charles Tallent. "Hearts and Minds: Analysis Of War Propaganda and Dehumanization" 2006.
(<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/c.tallent.2006.hearts.and.minds.pdf>)

This is a paper I wrote for my documentary film class at Trinity University. In it I explore American war propaganda and the dehumanization of the Vietnamese by analyzing various scenes in the film and utilizing multiple scholarly sources for support.

III. Thich Lieu Minh Video Clip Analysis

a. Explanation and Set-Up

This clip comes a few minutes after a point in the film when a montage of clips from popular American films and television shows describe the Asian race as stinking little savages and hideous yellow monsters. It is either done comically or viciously and it is entirely degrading. In a brief interview, this man says: "Americans say Vietnamese are just slant-eyed savages. The Vietnamese have 5,000 years of history. We fight against the invaders. It is not we who are the savages." This man's short speech is reflective of what this entire film is trying to say.

b. Thich Lieu Minh:



Hyperlink:

<http://www.youtube.com/index?&session=gA.J9cQEoVOxlcNjvc19maWVsZHNxAmNFX2J1aWx0aW5fXwpzZXOKcONdhVJxBFUGZXJvb3JzcOVdcQZVc1RoaxMgaXMgYSBwcm12YXRlIHZpZGVvLiBjZiB5b3UgaGF2ZSBiZWVuiHNlbnQgdGhpcyB2aWRlbywgcGxlYXNlIGIha2Ugc3VyZSB5b3UgYW5jZXB0IHRoZSBzZW5kZXInc3VzZC5xY2FVCG1lc3NhZ2VzeOhdcOILLg>

c. Analysis

Whereas most of the interviews in the film with Vietnamese depict them in utter despair from the loss of family and friends, this clip shows a man who is empowered by his background and willing to stand up and defend his countrymen on a logical basis. The first time the film is viewed, it can pass by quickly, drawing little attention, especially since it is strangely positioned between a man telling a story about an interrogation involving throwing prisoners out of a helicopter and a man in the heat of gunfire shooting back at a wall of Viet Cong. For such a striking rebuttal to all of the criticism that is thrown the way of the Vietnamese, it is alarming to me that this is not more carefully positioned.

In seeing this man stand up for himself and actually give intelligent, convincing arguments about his pride, the audience must identify with him to some extent and understand the way he must feel. When he references the fact that his people have over 5,000 years of recorded history, it can be understood why he finds it ridiculous that the Americans would refer to him and his people as savages. Many parts of Asia have a rich and interesting past that is almost unanimously overlooked when soldiers go to war. The humanism of this man is disregarded and after thousands of years of civilization, he has been dehumanized to become a simple enemy, nothing more than another target in the crosshairs of a trained soldier.

He ends with the argument that his people are fighting against the invaders of their country and therefore they are not in fact the savages, the American soldiers are. From an American standpoint this sounds preposterous. Our country has never been invaded by foreign troops so it

is extremely difficult to relate to that feeling of panic at losing your homeland or that natural need to fight back in order to protect your life-long territory. This clip is important primarily because it offers a counter-portrayal of the Vietnamese man as a reasoning human being defending his culture and his history.

IV. Discussion Questions

- After viewing this film, many people leave with one part cemented in their mind more than all the rest. For some it is the prostitution scene, for others it is the Gen. Westmoreland speech. What part of this film really got to you in one way or another? Did it bother you or did it please you in its portrayal? Why?
- Similar to the previous question, was there a specific part of the film where you felt that Peter Davis overstepped the ethical boundaries of documentary in editing multiple pieces of footage together to elicit a certain response from the viewer? Why or why not?
- Assuming that none of the interviews or footage were staged, is Davis' film any less objective because it chooses to focus primarily on the Vietnamese suffering and American ignorance in the war? Can a filmmaker ever truly be objective?
- Davis is especially selective and careful in the way that he edits his film. Does the fact that he is so meticulous about splicing film together make his film propagandistic in any way itself?
- Is *Hearts and Minds* still an important film with a pertinent message today or is it simply a contextual testament to the time it was made? Can parallels between our current administration and international involvement be drawn? Explain.

V. Closing Thoughts

Peter Davis' *Hearts and Minds* is a film that simply cannot be overlooked when studying the important history and impact of documentary film. This film could also be placed in the study of editing for its clever use of juxtaposition throughout. Beyond its merits as a functional, scholarly example of cinematic achievement, this documentary is just as important today as it was when it was made. The old adage that history repeats itself unless properly learned is all too true in the modern world. People are eager to stereotype, demonize, and ridicule those with different beliefs than them, but are much less hasty to empathize with one another. The world could use more films and powerful reminders like these that we are not all in fact as different as we would like to believe.

VI. About the author of this guide...

a. Short Biography

My name is Charles Tallent and I am an undergraduate sophomore majoring in Communications and minoring in Film at Trinity University in San Antonio. This viewing guide was put together as part of a final assignment for my Documentary film class with professor Aaron Delwiche. It is my plan to continue studying film until I graduate and then to attend film school and become involved in the production of films.

b. Contact Info

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c. A note to those who plan to use my work...

I give consent to anyone wishing to use my work in a small group setting or as a source for a project or paper. Its employment for academics is protected under fair use. Out of curiosity, I would like to receive an email as to the nature of how it will be used and in what context. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.