



Viewing guide for *Hearts & Minds*

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Trinity University, December 2006

***Hearts and Minds* – Pre-Viewing guide**

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1. Overview / introduction

Hearts and Minds is a documentary about the Vietnam War that presents a thought-provoking, powerful, and deeply moving examination of the effects of the war on the nations engaged in the conflict, and exposes many of the truths behind America's military involvement in Vietnam. In the film, director Peter Davis combines archival newsreel clips with interviews and footage shot by his own crew in a still war-torn Vietnam in order to force viewers to confront their own feelings about the war.



In Vietnam in 1946, insurgents under Ho Chi Minh's leadership began fighting to defeat French efforts to re-impose colonial rule on Vietnam. Ho fully expected the United States, a country of freedom fighters, to support his move for independence. However, the United States, fearing the spread of Communism throughout Asia, decided to support French efforts. What began as a small commitment of military and economic aid in 1950 grew until America was bearing almost 80 percent of the war's cost. The U.S. began to support the South Vietnamese government, but as the National Liberation Front in North Vietnam increased their efforts, so did the United States. Despite their best efforts and "superior" technology, the United States could do no better than a stalemate that continued the terror and suffering of all Vietnamese citizens. The United States dropped more tonnage on Vietnam than was used by all other sides in World War II, and chemicals such as napalm and Agent Orange not only killed many Vietnamese but also destroyed the countryside. In addition to the direct results of U.S. "salvation," American actions in Vietnam resulted in societal problems such as widespread hunger, unemployment, and an increase in crime, suicides, and protests throughout the areas under South Vietnamese control. South Vietnamese officials who were supported by the United States actively engaged in torturing citizens who disagreed with their government, regardless of whether they were Communists or had ties with North Vietnam. Peter Davis, in the liner notes for the *Hearts and Minds* DVD, points out that, ultimately, "we learned the contradiction in a policy that was willing to destroy a country in order to 'save' it."

The Vietnamese were not the only ones who suffered as a result of their government's actions. The war resulted in the death of over 58,000 Americans (over 3 million Vietnamese also lost their lives). What began as a war fought for credibility abroad destroyed America at home and temporarily estranged the

United States from much of the rest of the world. The war also destroyed the myth that the American government tells its citizens the truth. Five presidents (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon) lied to the American public about the country's reasons for and level of involvement, as well as when U.S. troops would be withdrawn.

Hearts and Minds examines the Vietnam War through multiple perspectives from both sides of the conflict. In the process, it questions the war and the justifications given for it, and shows Americans what the war was like for the Vietnamese.

2. Questions to keep in mind before watching the movie

- What do you know about America's involvement in the Vietnam War? Did you learn what you know about the Vietnam War in school or did you learn it from other movies and from television? What other movies and television have you seen about the Vietnam War? As you watch *Hearts and Minds*, think about how it is similar and different from other media (both fiction and nonfiction) you have seen regarding the Vietnam War.
- When *Hearts and Minds* first came out, the country was divided about the Vietnam War. *Hearts and Minds* presents many different viewpoints about the war. As you watch the film, think about which viewpoints seem to get the most emphasis and which viewpoints Davis seems to agree with. How does he convey his opinion through other people?
- Much attention has been given to the editing style of *Hearts and Minds*. Some critics call the film's editing "manipulative" and use it as an argument against the film, while others feel that it is one of the movie's great strengths. As you watch *Hearts and Minds*, pay attention to the way it's edited. Do you feel manipulated or do you think that Davis is a master at his craft? Why?

3. Where to obtain copies of this film

- The [OCLC World Catalog](#) identifies 1,012 libraries worldwide that contain this item.
- New and used copies on [Amazon.com](#).
- New and used copies on [eBay](#).
- Rental listings at [Netflix](#) and [Blockbuster](#).

***Hearts and Minds* – Post-Viewing guide**

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1. Overview

When *Hearts and Minds* was first released, the Vietnam War was still going on. The film was greeted by a country who felt ambiguous towards a war that many now believed might have been a mistake. American citizens were beginning to question not only the logic of the war itself but also the politicians who orchestrated it. The documentary was understandably received with mixed reviews. While some reviews heralded the film “brave and brilliant,” others believed it was “disingenuously one-sided,” “cheap,” and “manipulative.” However, *Hearts and Minds* went on to win the 1974 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Hearts and Minds is not just about how the United States government messed up in Vietnam but about human suffering on all sides. *Hearts and Minds* was the first film to show the viewpoint of the “enemy” during a time of war. Many Americans were oblivious not only to what the war was costing the U.S. (monetarily and in military casualties), but, more importantly, what the war was doing to the Vietnamese people. One way that the United States government worked to ensure continued support was by dehumanization of the Vietnamese. In contrast, *Hearts and Minds* helped to connect American suffering to that of the Vietnamese and triggers in viewers a sympathy and understanding for the Vietnamese by showing them as victims and treating them as human beings. In so doing, the film creates an empathy for these previously faceless victims of the war.

When the DVD of *Hearts and Minds* was released in 2002, reviews were almost unanimously in agreement with the film. In fact, many modern reviewers believe that the film is a work of “balance and nuance” and that it was crucial in bringing to light truths about the Vietnam War. With the perspective of history, *Hearts and Minds* can be viewed in a much different light. It serves as an indictment of a war that the United States never should have fought and it forces viewers to recognize the universal nature of the suffering that results from any war. Most significantly, though, the film forces viewers to question themselves and their way of thinking. In trying to answer the questions raised by *Hearts and Minds*, viewers must challenge their own feelings about the Vietnam War and about war in general.

Many parallels have been made between the Vietnam War and the current military engagement in Iraq, and so it is important to see and talk about *Hearts and Minds* as it may be a kind of template for the present conflict. As Peter Davis

himself writes in the DVD liner notes for *Hearts and Minds*, “if the first casualty of war is truth, the last is memory.”

2. Useful resources

a. Related resources about the Vietnam War

Veterans for America (<http://www.veteransforamerica.org/index.cfm>)

Formerly the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, Veterans for America seeks to unite veterans from past wars to address the causes, conduct, and consequences of war. Together, the veterans offer a crucial perspective when addressing public and political concerns about war in the 21st century.

The Vietnam War – Photographs and Information
(<http://www.vietnampix.com>)

This website includes a war timeline and pictures and analysis of the conflict in Vietnam. It contains various pictures and information about the Vietnamese during the war, U.S. soldiers, and American hippies, as well as some graphic photographs of the consequences of war.

The Vietnam War – Information and Discussion
(<http://www.vietnamwar.com>)

This website about the Vietnam War provides information about the various players and events of the war. It contains extensive searchable articles, as well as a glossary about the Vietnam War. This website also includes a Vietnam War discussion forum where veterans can share their stories and issues related to the conflict can be discussed.

b. Related resources about the documentary film genre

Corner, J. (2000). What can we say about “documentary”? Media, Culture, & Society, 22(5), 681-689.

This article re-examines several articles on the production and direction of documentary films published in the United States. It also discusses the differences between the scholarly and television appearances of a documentary and includes excerpts of several articles on documentary films.

Wang, Y. (2005). The amateur’s lighting rod: DV documentary in postsocialist China. Film Quarterly, 58(4), 16-26.

This article examines the cultural politics of DV documentaries emerging from postsocialist China, discussing the documentary-makers as amateur-authors. It also argues that the documentarians' self-consciously deployed aesthetics of cruelty constitutes a socio-political claim for an alternative "real," derived from a subaltern "structure of feeling."

Wiseman, F. (2001). Privacy and documentary filmmaking. Social Research, 68(1), 41-47.

In this article, a documentary filmmaker discusses some practical problems and privacy issues involved in obtaining the consent of people to their inclusion in his documentary films and the procedures he follows in regards to privacy issues. He argues that in a democratic society, the need for the citizens of a community to have access to information about the way their public institutions function takes precedence over individual privacy rights.

c. Glossaries of useful film terms

Illustrated Film-Making Glossary and Dictionary
(<http://filmsite.org/filmterms.html>)

This glossary is designed to make the fundamental vocabulary and language of film studies as accessible as possible to the average person. The glossary is a compendium of the most basic and common film terms and provides illustrations and examples for many of them.

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

This is the Internet Movie Database's online film glossary. It contains definitions of the terms and phrases frequently used in the world of movies, film, acting, and cinema-going. It is open to user submissions, corrections, and feedback.

Independent Film Channel's Film School Multimedia Glossary
(<http://www3.ifctv.com/filmschool/students.htm>)

This multimedia glossary was created by students for students so that others can learn terms used in the filmmaking industry by actually seeing video clips of those terms "in action." The glossary includes video clips that explain and demonstrate filmmaking terms such as cross-cutting and cutaway shots.

d. Film reviews

Roger Ebert

(<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19740101/REVIEWS/401010317/1023>)

This is Roger Ebert's review of *Hearts and Minds* from 1974. He gives the movie three out of four stars, but his main criticism of the film is that while the images in *Hearts and Minds* are powerful and compelling, Davis's use of editing is "too heavy-handed" and gives the viewer a "feeling of manipulation."

The Village Voice

(<http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0442,atkinson,57660,20.html>)

This is a recent review (2004) of the film from the weekly newspaper *The Village Voice*. This free, weekly New York newspaper was the first and arguably the best known of the arts-oriented tabloids that have come to be known as alternative weeklies. The review argues that *Hearts and Minds* is a documentary that "no American should be able to finish public school without seeing."

The Washington Post (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A51347-2004Oct21.html>)

This is a recent review (2004) from *The Washington Post*. The author argues that Americans should not only watch *Hearts and Minds* because it is "one of the best documentaries ever made" but also because of its "disquieting timeliness" in relation to the Iraq War.

e. Scholarly treatments of the film

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

This paper, written by the author of this discussion guide, presents the argument that Peter Davis's use of contradiction and irony in *Hearts and Minds* is fully justified by the contradictory nature of the Vietnam War itself. The paper provides examples of contradiction in both the film and in the Vietnam War and synthesizes them.

Casey Tyler Hill, "Hearts and Minds: A masterpiece that oversteps its bounds," 2006.
(<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/c.hill.2006.hearts.and.minds.pdf>)

In contrast to the previous paper, this paper argues that Peter Davis oversteps his bounds because *Hearts and Minds* uses an exaggeration of facts to create a skewed view of the truth. The author also contends that while Peter Davis did juxtapose the American ideology with the Vietnamese ideology, he did not present any of the many other conflicting thoughts and opinions that existed on both sides during the Vietnam War.

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 paper presents the argument that by utilizing contrasts between the interviews and war footage in *Hearts and Minds*, Peter Davis constructs a revealing compilation of the propagandistic manipulation that was used to persuade the American people into war and justify the killing of the Vietnamese.

3. Video-clip analysis

a. Explanation and set-up

Throughout *Hearts and Minds*, Peter Davis uses the techniques of juxtaposition and incongruous messages to form an argument from antithesis that directs the viewer to come to Davis's own conclusions. Davis builds his argument through a steady stream of ironies and contradictions that are intended to lead viewers toward the synthesis that Davis wants them to make. This counterpointing, while sometimes considered manipulative, nevertheless is an effective technique often used in filmmaking.

This clip from *Hearts and Minds* has been criticized for juxtaposing General Westmoreland's comments such as, "the Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as the Westerner," with a scene of a Vietnamese funeral.

b. Link to the video clip



Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huFh760p-MA>

c. Analysis

This argument-by-antithesis editing is characteristic of *Hearts and Minds*. Throughout the movie, one message is placed next to its opposite, leaving the viewer to draw his or her own conclusion. Some have argued that this editing style actively engages the audience in sense-making, but others characterize it as manipulative because the meaning that is made is typically the one that Davis intends. Other examples in the film of Davis's point counter-point technique include the jarring intervention of the American soldier walking into the Vietnamese village at the beginning of the film, the song "Over There" playing over scenes of a burning village and tortured prisoners, and Bob Hope making jokes at a White House dinner for American POWs juxtaposed with shots of bombing and dead children in Vietnam.

On the DVD commentary, Davis says that Westmoreland in fact made his infamous statement three times due to problems with recording. Davis insists that no matter where the footage was placed, it would have "detonated" all the footage around it. However, Westmoreland's statement being juxtaposed with the Vietnamese funeral is the most forceful way Davis could have captured the attitude of American officials towards the Vietnamese. This moment contributes much more to the film's impact and speaks more forcefully than constructed narration ever could. To detractors that say that Westmoreland's words are taken out of context, Davis argues that in no context would these words be acceptable or accurate. Davis allows Westmoreland's own words to effectively

destroy whatever credibility he might have had. In the process, viewers are compelled to question Washington's official explanation and justification for the war.

In questioning the attitude of the United States government, viewers are also forced to make an assessment of their own immoralities and examine the values that created them. By treating the Vietnamese as human, *Hearts and Minds* allowed Americans to explore their own humanity and compelled a reexamination of the war itself.

4. Discussion questions

- *Hearts and Minds* has been criticized for its “manipulative” editing. What are some examples from the movie that might be considered manipulative? What is it about these scenes that causes you think of them as manipulative? Do you feel like the director edited the movie in a way that unfairly forced you to feel a certain way towards individuals or events?
- Richard Nixon once said, “throughout the war in Vietnam, the United States has exercised a degree of restraint unprecedented in the annals of war.” Having seen *Hearts and Minds*, what is your opinion of this statement's accuracy? What implications does this have for trusting what the government (past and present) says regarding military conflicts?
- Was the United States government honest with American citizens about the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam? Is it acceptable for a government to lie to its citizens in times of war? Why or why not? What reasons might a government have for lying to its citizens in times of war?
- How did *Hearts and Minds* make you feel towards the United States military? Do you think that they were unfairly or inaccurately portrayed? What can you infer from the film about the military's attitude towards the countries that it is engaged in conflict with?
- One scene in the film shows a Revolutionary War celebration in the United States. Why is this ironic in relation to America's role in the Vietnam War? What do the scenes of high school football games reveal about the American psyche?
- Many parallels have been made between the Vietnam War and current U.S. military engagement with Iraq. After seeing this film, what similarities and differences can you see between the two conflicts? What implications do these similarities have for the future of the Iraq War? Do you think that the Vietnam War should be used as a guide to avoid the mistakes of the past?

5. Closing thoughts

A courageous and startling film, *Hearts and Minds* unflinchingly confronts the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Using a wealth of sources, Davis constructs a powerfully affecting portrait of the disastrous effects of war. Because it is explosive, persuasive, and shocking, *Hearts and Minds* is an overwhelming emotional experience.

Hearts and Minds is every bit as relevant today as when it was made because it allows viewers to explore their own humanity and reexamine wars past, present, and future. This film was made and first released towards the end of the Vietnam conflict and captures the feelings of depression and anger on all sides. *Hearts and Minds* shows us that should be avoided at all costs.

6. About the author of this guide

a. Short biography

Kaatie Cooper will graduate from Trinity University in 2008 with a double major in Biology and Communication. She enjoys making media as well as consuming it and is an avid fan of a number of television shows and movies. She currently directs the Shamu (killer whale) show at SeaWorld San Antonio.

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c. A note to teachers, students, and anyone who uses this material in a group setting

If you plan to use this discussion guide as a resource in a classroom or group setting, please inform the author via the email given above.