

Contradiction and irony in *Hearts and Minds*

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Peter Davis's documentary *Hearts and Minds* has been criticized for being manipulative and for using unfair juxtaposition to force the viewer to come to the filmmaker's own conclusion. Davis's filmmaking style was received with mixed reviews, as not all readers came to the conclusions he desired. However, the use of contradiction and irony in *Hearts and Minds* is justified by the contradictory nature of the Vietnam War itself.

Mixed Reviews

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 felt 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. Just as the country's feelings on the war were mixed, so were the reviews. Says one reviewer, "the picture arrives at a moment when the folly of America's cruel intervention in Southeast Asia must be evident to the most knee-jerk intelligence – I would, I think, have deplored *Hearts and Minds* two, five, even ten years ago" (Hatch, 1975).

While some reviews heralded the film as "the truth of the matter" (Francis Fitzgerald in Harrington, 1975, p. 1), "brave and brilliant" (Kopkind, 1975, p. 44), and "certainly the most significant and probably the best of all recent films" (Simon, 1975, p. 72). Paul Zimmerman writes that "Davis has a less partisan, more powerful theme: loss, both personal and national of ideals and illusions, sons and brothers, lives, limbs, liberties and, finally, of a collective ability to connect with human suffering" (1975).

¹ Kaatie Cooper, 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/grades.html>

Other reviews were much less supportive of the film. M.J. Sobran Jr. describes the film as "rather blatant piece of propaganda" and "disingenuously one-sided" and believes that *Hearts and Minds* has only garnered good reviews because "not all Americans are shown as bad: some are noble and sensitive" (1975). Robert Hatch, although he agrees with the political statements the film makes, argues that *Hearts and Minds* should not even qualify as a documentary. He says that "since it is edited from pre-existing footage, it is being called a documentary, but that is an absurd designation, for the picture makes no pretense of being an even-handed report." He goes on to say that "the fact that it operates to arouse hatred against hatred, to induce a gut reaction against gut reactions, and by so doing serves to sustain a morbid emotionalism of the very sort it claims to abominate" (Hatch, 1975). Other reviewers felt that the film was one-sided and manipulative and that it made pro-war Americans look bad and the Vietnamese look good.

When the DVD was released in 2002, reviews were almost unanimously in agreement with the film. In fact, many modern reviewers believe that the film is "actually a work of balance and nuance" (Briggs, 2004). Stuart Klawans writes that the film "will shock you not only with the truths it brings to light but with the force of its truly balanced filmmaking" (2004). Some reviewers see parallels between the Vietnam war and our current engagement with Iraq and so feel that "it's important to see and talk about [*Hearts and Minds*]; it may be a kind of template" (Slye, 2004). Davis himself seems to agree, and writes that "If the first casualty of war is truth, the last is memory" (Davis, 2002). As Paul Zimmerman puts it, "unlike our leaders who encourage us to put Vietnam behind us, Davis wants us to confront our feelings about it first and to understand the experience before we bury it. We turn away from this portrait of ourselves at our own peril" (1975).

Contradiction and the Vietnam War

in 1946, insurgents under Ho Chi Minh's leadership began fighting to defeat French efforts to re-impose colonial rule on Vietnam (Herring, 2002). 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. “There is the bewilderment of those who see themselves fighting their own war of independence only to be besieged by the very nation that won its own freedom from colonial rule barely 200 years earlier” (Crist, DVD liner notes, 2002). Further contradicting itself, the United States supported Singapore “as shining example of economic progress,” although their social policies “were far more repressive than Vietnam’s” (Davis, 2003).

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 (Herring, 2002). 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.

Richard Nixon once said, “throughout the war in Vietnam, the United States has exercised a degree of restraint unprecedented in the annals of war.” Fewer statements have been so blatantly inaccurate. As James Monaco writes, “carpet bombing (we dropped more tonnage on that country than all other sides used in World War II), napalm, and Agent Orange...do not help people on the ground understand why they must be destroyed to be freed” (2003). The United States was responsible for forcing the villagers to move to where they would be safe from our attacks. The urbanization of Vietnam was a result not of capitalism or democratization but of America’s destruction of the Vietnamese countryside. 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” (2002).

In addition to the direct results of U.S. salvation, such as death and the destruction of homes, American actions in Vietnam resulted in societal problems and had other damaging effects. “Widespread hunger and unemployment resulted in an increase in crime, suicides, and protests throughout the areas under South Vietnamese control” (Long, DVD liner notes, 2002). South Vietnamese officials who were supported by the United States actively engaged in torturing citizens who disagreed with the

government, regardless of whether they were Communists or had ties with North Vietnam. The torture of prisoners in South Vietnam was an effect, not a cause, of U.S. intervention. This “brutal repression of the urban opposition in South Vietnam...led to the easy victory by the Communists” (Long, DVD liner notes, 2002) and further undermined any efforts towards a peaceful Vietnam.

The Paris Agreement was signed in early 1973. It established two parallel and equal parties in South Vietnam and directed the parties to settle with one another under full democratic rights without U.S. interference. The Paris Agreement also stipulated that a third segment of neutralists be created that would take part in what was supposed to become democratic South Vietnam. This was never realized, though, because “as soon as the Paris Agreement was signed, South Vietnam president Nguyen Van Thieu reiterated, with American acquiescence – if not to say outright support – his Four Nos policy: no recognition of the enemy, no coalition government, no neutralization of the southern region of Vietnam, and no concession of territory” (Long, DVD liner notes, 2002). South Vietnam’s chance for democracy was robbed from them with full U.S. support.

The Vietnamese were not the only ones who suffered as a result of their government’s actions. 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” (Herring, DVD liner notes, 2002). Although the United States was confident to the point of arrogance after the victory of World War II, the “myth of American invulnerability and perseverance” was a casualty of the war in Vietnam. More significantly, however is the fact that “the war exploded the myth that because we elected a government it will tell us the truth” (Davis, 2002). “To maintain support for the war, U.S. leaders had repeatedly deceived the public about what they were doing and the prospects of success” (Herring, DVD liner notes, 2002). The government of the United States actively engaged in propaganda, lying to the American public about our reason for being in Vietnam, about how long we would fight there, and about the likelihood of victory. Propaganda is essentially lying and lying is the ultimate contradiction between what is said and what is the truth. Another way in which the United

States government worked to ensure continued support is by dehumanization of the Vietnamese. They did this because “you always have to dehumanize the enemy – to preserve a semblance of your own humanity” (Monaco, 2003). “Because of the nature of the war, policymakers usually reduced the Vietnamese to targets in the war of attrition or unworthy allies, not human beings” (Brigham, DVD liner notes, 2002). Although this characterization of the enemy is perpetrated by all countries in times of war, it is nevertheless an act of propaganda and purposeful deception.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that U.S. involvement prolonged the war and brought greater destruction than there would have been had America not gotten involved in the first place. Huynh Trung Chanh, a deputy in the Lower House in Saigon, noted that “if there were supplemental aid in order to meet this military situation, then the difficult period would only be prolonged and in the end nothing will be solved.” Father Nguyen Quang Lam, and ultraconservative Catholic Priest, wrote in 1975 that “the more the aid, the quicker the collapse of South Vietnam” (Long, DVD liner notes, 2002). In the end, there was no victor. “The Vietnamese had to throw us out, had to decolonize, before they could be recolonized; had to find their independence before they could bring back the Western economies and aspire to become Vietnam Inc. Vietnamese Communists are business partners with American corporations” (Davis, 2002).

Contradiction and Irony in Hearts and Minds

In *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 lead the viewer inexorably toward the synthesis that is the filmmaker’s preordained audience destination” (Wilder, 2005, p. 58). This counterpointing, while sometimes considered manipulative, nevertheless is an effective technique often used in filmmaking.

Judith Crist writes that Davis uses “an even handedness in counterpointing the American and the Vietnamese experience” She goes on to say that “his point-counterpoint technique that contrasts statements by Americans with searing

vignettes of the Vietnamese experience to cumulative effect” (DVD liner notes, 2002). *Hearts and Minds* draws from many sources in order to produce an expose of the war and to present a humane portrait of all of its victims. “The interviews are dispersed strategically throughout the film, resulting in the creation of a cohesive context that allows the viewer to weave hundreds of contradictory, complex, chaotic, and often disturbing images into the whole cloth of Davis’s cinematic agenda” (Wilder, 2002, p. 62). This prompts audience members to synthesize the information in a way that positions them as partners in sense-making. It allows the viewer to come to his or her own conclusions, although these conclusions will inevitably be those that Davis intended.

Hearts and Minds presents “a choreographed progression of antithetical messages...it prompts the viewer to project an invisible narrator whose function is to make meaning through resolving the dilemma” (Wilder, 2005, p. 61). In the director’s commentary on the *Hearts and Minds* DVD, Davis discusses the use of a narrator in the television footage Americans were seeing of Vietnam during the war. He says that “the more eloquent [the narrator was], the less you felt the suffering” (2002). Davis, in choosing not to use a narrator, wanted to confront the viewer with the harsh reality of what we were doing in Vietnam. He wanted not only to remove the curtain between the emotions felt in the film and the emotions felt by the viewer but also to avoid “pounding a conclusion” into the viewer (Davis, 2002).

The opening of the film establishes the first of many ironies and contradictions in *Hearts and Minds*. The film begins by showing what appears to be a peaceful and war-free Vietnamese countryside. However, a U.S. soldier walks in and jarringly juxtaposes peacetime and wartime. Another example of irony is when the upbeat World War II song ‘Over There’ plays over scenes of a burning village and tortured prisoners. In the DVD commentary, Peter Davis says that he included this scene to show the irony in our belief that we are the world’s saviors when in fact we are their destroyers (2002).

Hearts and Minds also shows that all five presidents over the course of the war lied to the American public about what was really

happening. These men (and other government officials) realized that nothing the U.S. could do would be enough and that in order to maintain support for the war, they would have to engage in propaganda and lies. Another irony exposed by the film is the fact that “the world’s greatest superpower” was ultimately defeated by the “primitive” North Vietnamese. *Hearts and Minds* presents a depressing array of official sources whose positions should virtually stand for credibility, but whose words and deeds communicate the opposite” (Wilder, 2005, p. 63). Almost all of the policy makers shown (i.e. those who have not changed their mind about the war) are lying to themselves and the American people. Davis outright shows these people lying and contradicting themselves.

Perhaps the most contentious sequence in the film is the one in which General William Westmoreland says that “the Oriental does not put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient. And the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important.” This juxtaposed with the scene of a Vietnamese funeral in which people are wailing over relatives who have died as a result of the war. Some reviewers said that the sequence was “cheap” (Sobran, 1975) and manipulative and “teaches nothing except that we should despise Westmoreland, which is a waste of nervous energy” (Hatch, 1975). On the DVD commentary, Davis says that Westmoreland made this statement three times due to problems with recording. Davis insists that no matter where the footage was placed, it would have “denoted” all the footage around it. However, this is the most forceful way Davis could have captured the attitude of American officials towards the Vietnamese. 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” (Brigham, DVD liner notes, 2002).

The film also shows a Revolutionary War celebration, which highlights the irony of the United States’ change in position on independence. While celebrating our own independence from colonial rule, we were fighting to maintain French control of Vietnam.

Davis asks “the question of how we, initially a nation of revolutionary freedom fighters, had evolved into one of compulsive winners, from battlefields to football fields, literalizing its civilian urge to ‘kill the competition’” (Crist, DVD liner notes, 2002).

Another sequence that embraces contradiction is the one in which pilots Randy Floyd and George Coker are talking about the excitement of flying and dropping bombs on Vietnam. The sequence is edited at an adrenaline pumping quick pace. The incongruity hits when the viewer sees a village that has been bombed and is forced to realize the truly devastating impacts of our engagement in Vietnam. Davis crafts this sequence using all types of ironic juxtapositions, such as contrast between pictures, sounds, and between what is seen and what is heard.

Some reviewers noticed Davis’s use of counterpointing and strongly disagreed with it. M.J. Sobran, Jr. wrote “interviews with soldiers, generals, Walt Rostow, are interspersed with embarrassing clips of Americana intended to show the rise of militarist mentality, along with anti-Oriental racism: sanctimonious football coaches, bloodthirsty cheerleaders, Bob Hope lounging amid Hong Kong beauties, World War II anti-Jap films, Boy Scouts, and so forth” (Sobran, 1975). However, Carol Wilder argues that rather than being directly manipulative, use of different and contradictory voices actively engages the audience in sense-making. However, the meaning that is made is the one that Davis intends. She writes that “typically one message is clearly intended to be meta to the other and thus governs the construction of meaning, and with repetition over time, a matrix of contradictions forms a web from which the viewer cannot easily escape” (Wilder, 2005, p. 64). Davis builds his argument through a steady stream of ironies and contradictions. The conclusion of the viewer is ideally that of the filmmaker, although this is not always the case.

Even the end of the film leaves the viewer with the message of a country bitterly divided. Veterans are protesting a Vietnam parade and fighting and yelling breaks out. *Hearts and Minds* shows a variety of contradicting opinions because American citizens held many different opinions. The United States was “bitterly divided about a bloody conflict in a distant land” (Wilder, 2005, p. 59). Even after the war

officially ended, people were confused, angry, and divided, which is part of the reason the film received such mixed reviews.

Justification

Above all, *Hearts and Minds* is a thesis documentary and therefore entitled to use any techniques it desires to convince audiences of its point. It makes no attempt at claiming neutrality. "His is a thesis documentary, political and unashamedly compassionate, its righteousness its ultimate achievement" (Crist, DVD liner notes, 2002).

Hearts and Minds is not just about how the United States government messed up in Vietnam but about human suffering on all sides. "Davis has a less partisan, more powerful theme: loss, both personal and national of ideals and illusions, sons and brothers, lives, limbs, liberties and, finally, of a collective ability to connect with human suffering" (Zimmerman, 2005). Truly, "the film's primary concern is the torment of war" (Brigham, DVD liner notes, 2002).

Hearts and Minds provided one of the American public's first glimpses of the suffering the Vietnamese endured as a result of the war. As a country, the United States had become obsessed with what the war had done to us; *Hearts and Minds* forces viewers to look at what the war, and the United States, had done to the Vietnamese. "*Hearts and Minds* was much more than an anti-American film, as some critics charged, mostly because it took the pain and suffering of all Vietnamese seriously" (Brigham, DVD liner notes, 2002). The film helped to connect American suffering to that of the Vietnamese and triggers in viewers a sympathy and understanding for the Vietnamese. *Hearts and Minds* showed the Vietnamese as victims and treated them as human beings. In so doing, the film created an empathy for the previously faceless victims of the war. "The focus on the family and the universal nature of suffering resonated loudly with Americans in 1975 who were looking inward in an effort to forget about Vietnam and deal with problems a little closer to home" (Brigham, DVD liner notes, 2002).

Most significantly, though, the film forced viewers to question themselves and their way of thinking. In trying to answer the questions raised primarily through Davis's use of contradictory opinions, forced viewers to

challenge what they had thought about Vietnam. American citizens were not only highly divided but also unsure of what to feel about the war. "In effect, Peter Davis holds up a mirror to our national conscience, forcing upon us an assessment of our own immoralities and a probe of the values that created them" (Crist, DVD liner notes, 2002). "By treating the Vietnamese as human, the film allowed Americans to explore their own humanity and forced a reexamination of the war itself" (Brigham, DVD liner notes, 2002). Davis himself believes that his film can serve this purpose. "They come away with serious questions and they do more thinking as a result of seeing the film," he says. "It's this audience that gives me both pleasure as a filmmaker and hope as an American. These are the people I want the film to reach: those who may not have thought very much about the war but who have that peculiarly healthy American trait of doubt" (Zimmerman, 1975).

The use of contradiction and irony in *Hearts and Minds*, although highly criticized for manipulation, is fully justified by the contradictory nature of the Vietnam War itself. Although the film does guide viewers toward Davis's conclusions, overall he allows viewers to create their own synthesis between their already held beliefs and the ideas presented in *Hearts and Minds*.

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