

## Vietnam in a Different Light\*

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*Hearts and Minds* (Davis, 1974) attempts to persuade audiences. Stewart (2001) defines persuasion as “the primary agency through which a certain belief may succeed in bringing about or resisting change” (51). In this documentary, the filmmaker edits and manipulates interviews and real footage to present a one-sided story of the Vietnam War. This documentary film is expository, which does not imply that this documentary is simply propaganda, but that it can be used in that way. Expository films “assemble fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical or argumentative frame than an aesthetic or poetic one” (Nichols, 2001, p. 105). Though the film is clearly taking an anti-Vietnam stance, it is the technique and the specific footage that the filmmaker chooses to include and piece together as a method of persuasion that should and will be examined.

*Hearts and Minds* is first made in 1974 and has been reviewed many times with great interest. For instance, Bernard Weiner classifies the film as “a supremely important political film” (Weiner)<sup>†</sup>. Other critiques are mixed, saying the film is: truth, propaganda, a lie, brave and brilliant. Director Peter Davis states his intention in making *Hearts and Minds* is to find out: “Why did we go to Vietnam? What did we do there? What did the doing do to us?” (Wilder, 2005). However, the film allows for the audience to decode the events of the story and personally reflect on the images (Wilder, 2005). *Hearts and Minds* is successful at putting together images that may seem unrelated, but are stramed along to send a strong message. This view, of course, is anti-Vietnam war. For example, “there are no ‘bad’ Vietnamese, no pro-war Americans who don’t sound like idiots or worse” (Goodman, 1975).

The film includes many images of Vietnamese civilians going about their peaceful, daily routine. This is a way for the viewers to sympathize with the people with whom the Americans are desensitized. Davis

reveals United States’ soldiers as the true enemy of, not only the Vietnamese people, but the world. Because the Americans are using aggression against a seemingly innocent and peaceful people, this dichotomy of peaceful Vietnamese and “evil” American soldiers and government is especially evident. In particular, Davis uses the village of Hung Dinh Village in North Saigon to personalize his story of the innocent Vietnamese civilians. For example, he conducts many interviews and in each one, he primarily focuses on close shots in order to evoke strong emotional attachment and sorrow. Davis takes into account the heated controversy over the Vietnam War, and the impact it had on the lives of Americans, to instill his own views of opposition. Judith Crist calls this the filmmaker’s “point counter-point technique,” but as she says, it is not only the mixed messages, but Davis’ clever use of “contradictions and conjunctions” (Crist, 2002).

Specifically, it is imperative that the footage that has made its way into the documentary is examined. First, is the portrayal of American soldiers, which is clearly one-sided. Though Davis’ representation of American soldiers is probably truthful, it is not the most honest depiction. Because the images are real footage, there is no denying that American soldiers acted a certain way. However, it would be more honest if David had also shown soldiers conducting themselves in a respectable manner, which is true for many. For example, the first main scene with American soldiers is where two young soldiers are roaming the streets of Saigon. This is one of the beginning scenes in the movie, which reflects the importance Davis places on this depiction of soldiers and what he thinks Americans were really doing in Vietnam. In this particular scene, there are initially two soldiers walking through the streets, not interacting with anyone and looking better than these “savage” peoples. As the soldiers strut down the crowded, unpaved streets, they are shown holding the hands of random street prostitutes and negotiating prices for the women. In addition, there is a small child begging for money and the soldier dismisses him like he is not human. Davis furthers his view of the demoralizing, unproductive soldier by adding an almost poetic element of background music. The song *500 miles* by Peter, Paul, and Mary begins to play slowly in the background while there are different images, like a long shot of an emaciated, disabled young boy crawling through the dirty streets, and the faces of other American soldiers, mostly in close shots, looking out of place. Davis does this to make the point that the United States does not belong in this war and are infiltrating a culture that is vastly different.

\* Michelle McCullough, 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>

<sup>†</sup> Many of these citations in this paper link back to a page by Carol Wilder. They have been checked however for use.

The next portrayal of United States soldiers is again with prostitutes, but this scene serves as a more intense way of illuminating Davis' view of the soldiers as dehumanizing and arrogant. This scene is also more reflexive because there is more dialogue and interaction between the soldiers and the prostitutes. The viewer is able to get a sense of how the soldiers are actually feeling and thinking. The discourse and close shots reveal the character of these soldiers on a more personal level. For example, the viewer hears an American soldier joke that his girlfriend back home should see him now. The filmmaker is obviously portraying the soldiers as sleazy and insensitive to the fact that there is a war going on and innocent people are dying. An editing technique and obvious manipulation of film occurs when this depiction of soldiers is directly preceded by an intense clip of a football coach prepping his team in the locker room before the big game. Though the soldiers' actions are indeed crude, it is important to note that the juxtaposition of film by Davis magnifies a disapproving message. This signifies multiple ideas: Americans think of the war as a game, we can go on with everyday life while people are suffering, and finally that we are trained at a young age to acknowledge the idea of defeating the enemy. Though these ideas are not true for all American citizens, Davis shows a little girl who is overtly apathetic to the reality of the Vietnam-war to advance his argument. In addition to this immediate transition, the last line said in the football clip dealt with being number one and the first words out of the American soldier's mouth to the prostitute was, to make them feel like they are number one. This matched wording heightens the feeling that these two scenes are somehow intertwined. This intentionally negative representation of American soldiers is boxed between a football scene and followed by the pain and suffering of the Vietnamese. This is shown as a dramatic opposite to the carefree, lighthearted prostitute scene. It also helps to persuade the viewer that the American soldiers are "500 miles from home" and have no regard for the innocent civilians nor do they really understand the reasons for which they are fighting. These images of death and pain further the argument that there is little emotion on the part of American soldiers and the close shots of only the Vietnamese deaths gives the illusion that not only are they the only ones suffering, but that they are the victim of America's genocidal war. Finally, in directly cutting to these images of destruction, which are a clear contrast, it makes it seem like these events are taking place simultaneously, which is most likely not the case.

Though this documentary presents the truth, it is not the most honest representation of Americans. It is difficult to define the term American and therefore

almost impossible to speak on behalf of all Americans in a documentary film. However, because Davis chooses not to equally show both the citizens who are pro and anti-Vietnam war, he is projecting a misleading depiction of the American people. This film is a one-sided manipulation of true events. In *Time*, Stefan Kanfer proclaims that "it is all too simplified with too many easy shots about the uniqueness of American evil, the violence of our culture" (*Time*, 1975). There are several occasions of where Davis intentionally places images in order to evoke emotions. For example, in the opening images where the Vietnamese women are peacefully working in the fields Davis tries to show that the people are peaceful, real, and more human than the Americans want to admit.

Davis carefully constructs interviews with Vietnamese people to emphasize his point that the people are innocent victims of American force and ideology. The first intense interview overseas is with two elderly women. Using women could, in itself, be a tactic to draw more emotion and present the Vietnamese as helpless victims. Nonetheless, the footage with the elderly sisters is gripping. Vo Thi Hue and Vo Thi Tu are purposely shown in medium and close shots to reveal the tears and emotion on their faces. The interview is ripe with remarks like, "I am so unhappy, I am old and weak. I have nothing to sell, nothing to do, no home left" (Davis). While the other sister perpetuates this feeling of unjust loss by saying that there is nowhere to "work for something to eat" (Davis). Davis strategically leaves the camera on the women's faces for several seconds after the interview to absorb the viewer in their plight. In revealing these interviews in a documentary, Davis acknowledges that the Vietnamese are victims of American institutions and culture (Wilder).

Davis mocks the pro-Vietnam war American public via Sgt. Coker. He uses American's tendency to honor their veterans and casts the public in an almost brainwashed, mechanical state. This is done for example with the welcome home parade for Sgt. Coker. Not only is there an enormous celebration and Coker is portrayed undoubtedly as a hero, but his speech is filmed with a combination of mainly medium and close shots so the viewer can feel more attached to this "hero." This is as though the viewer can look at his eyes and identify with the message he is telling the American public. Davis takes time in the film to have the entire speech, which proves that he sees the importance of the viewer understanding this wholehearted belief in the American government and military. He implies that Sgt. Coker's perspective may be a trained reaction, developed by the military, which is reflected by the seemingly canned speech. Coker praises the military, administration, and the American

people for making him a good American. Coker also proclaims that he would return to Vietnam if it is needed because he is stopping the spread of communism. It is imperative that Davis allows the viewer to see how a “good” American is defined in the 1960’s and 70’s because he reveals it in such a way that it seems radical with parades and a die-hard speech. Later in the film, Sgt. Coker is speaking to a gathering of young students. Davis sees this as projecting a brainwashed view to a younger generation. Coker’s intense, loyal answers to the students are unwavering and arguably a frightening one-sided perspective. For instance, when a child asks what it was like in Vietnam Coker responds quickly saying that it was very pretty, except for the people. He further explains in a condemning tone that the men who flee to Canada have a right to do so, but cannot reenter into the United States because they have abandoned their duty as American citizens. These are strong statements to children and Davis films this scene with long shots, so the viewer is able to see the reaction of the young students, which is captivated and attentive. In this scene in particular, Davis reveals Coker as a puppet, who is essentially training the next generation how to think. Davis has chosen to shoot this scene with long shots, so the viewer may interpret this as Sgt. Croker’s attempt to teach young audiences how to be a loyal citizen of America. This is also evident in the dialogue David selects from this speech and the respect given to Sgt. Coker, and the overall feeling of duty to one’s country that permeated the room.

Sgt. Coker is a prime example of how Davis portrays the military in a negative light. For example, in an interview, where Coker is wearing his uniform, he shows no remorse or regret. Instead, he states that “it’s deeply satisfying to hit the target” (Davis). After this, Davis cuts directly to a scene of Vietnamese people calmly trying to get water. This is to heighten the sense that the Americans are the aggressor. A technique that Davis uses multiple times in the documentary is an ominous voice while images of Vietnamese people consume the screen. For instance, Davis shows intense, emotional images of people crying while Coker says that everything is strictly professionalism. In addition to George Coker, Davis interviews several military men, which carry the same unwavering support for America with regards to the war. This is done to emphasize that the military is essentially continually blinding the American people. Sgt. George Trendell blatantly denies that the idea of United States soldiers throwing people out of helicopters, even though there are claims supporting this accusation. Before Davis shows another military man, he purposely cuts to an interview with a Vietnamese religious figure, which signifies peace.

However, even the priest calls Americans the savages. After this brief interjection, Davis furthers his negative representation of the military by quoting Patton, who proudly states that he honors and respects the dead American soldiers and that he is “so happy” (Davis).

Davis also takes time in the film to further his argument of what he believes to be absurd by interviewing General Westmoreland. These interviews are a deliberate rhetorical strategy in multiple aspects. Westmoreland is sitting peacefully in a park discussing atrocities, which clearly presents an irony. He also looks pompous and unable to relate to the common man because of his afternoon suit and intimidating posture. Despite his visual arrogance, he is a perfect candidate for this film because of his extremist comments like “the Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is cheap in the Orient” (Memorable quotes, 2006). Davis wants to insinuate that these are the perspectives of all governmental figures of the time, though this is certainly a misleading generalization.

However, what did the American people believe about Vietnam? Davis chooses to focus on the family of a soldier who has “bought into” the government’s propaganda. This governmental viewpoint was coming from the top. President Johnson in 1965 stated that “we must be ready to fight in Vietnam, but ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and minds of the people that actually live out there” (Woolley, 1965). This implies that the United States will impose its influence overseas, but can only give the Vietnamese people the tools for change. This in turn, separates us from full responsibility and involvement in Vietnam. What is frightening is that the remarks and perspective of the government were so widely televised in the United States, that there was a huge impact on the public, which ultimately fueled controversy. “This war was covered more exhaustively on television in the US than any other topic in the history of current affairs” (Ramonet). The family, especially the father, is portrayed as a provincial, over-zealous American who believes in the threat of communism and that America is doing what is right. For example, the father praises Nixon and the previous administrations for their hard work. Clearly, Davis is mocking this viewpoint, because the man has unwavering faith in the United States government and Nixon Administration. Davis sees this as ignorant and foolish, which is similar to his portrayal of Sgt. Coker. Davis films the house, a photograph of the son, and has the mother talking about her son’s ambitions before he went to war. This is done to humanize the repercussions of war and once again cast pro-Vietnam people in a disapproving light.

Davis makes his final point toward the end of the documentary when the retired veterans interviewed admit that they were once proud of their country, but are now bitter, angry, and feel betrayed. Davis uses several techniques in intensifying these feelings. For instance, there is a cut away of Robert Muller that reveals he is in a wheelchair and an African-American veteran who is missing an arm and leg. Furthermore, U.S. Political analyst, Daniel Ellsberg, a strong supporter of the war in Vietnam in the mid-60s, is an example of how outraged a person can become from the American government's handling of the Vietnam War (Gale, 2005). Finally, veteran Randy Floyd breaks down, realizing that this war was unjust and horrific. He also highlights that "Americans work extremely hard not to see the criminality" (Davis). Davis masterfully lets the viewer witness an "uninitiated" emotional revelation by former military and government members.

Ultimately, *Hearts and Minds* is like a language with many facets that must be acknowledged. The interviews are an essential part of the film and "are its conjunctions, a device used to connect diverse and sometimes divergent pieces of sound and picture. The extensive use of interviews provides coherence and continuity to the Davis montage. The film includes thirty-five original interviews with nine of the subjects appear three or more times", which is probably, in part, to gain legitimacy (Wilder). "In effect, these interviews simulate a voiceover narration whereby the viewer assumes the role of an imaginary narrator" (Wilder). Davis places emphasis on a collective story, which is why there is not a continuous fluidity in the narration. Namely, there is a great mixture of voices. Davis presents the truth of what happened in Vietnam, but through manipulation and editing, furthers his anti-Vietnam war point of view. This documentary is a one-sided perspective, which is meant to persuade the viewer that even veterans admit America's wrongs. Davis makes a mockery of those who, he believes to be a puppet of the system and represents American soldiers in Vietnam as uncompassionate aggressors. *Hearts and Minds* still has an impact on latter generations, which is why it is imperative to understand that, while these images are real, they are meant to persuade and evoke emotion.

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