

Can documentary filmmakers be truly objective? A closer look at *Hearts and Minds**

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“The ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there.”
– Lyndon B. Johnson

The reflection upon the Vietnam War serves as one of the most controversial events in America’s recent history. Although government officials tried to justify America’s involvement throughout, there was great controversy regarding the reality, justification, and purpose of participation of the United States in this foreign nationalistic struggle. The mainstream media coverage during the majority of the Vietnam War maintains an extremely distorted and one-sided, as to gain the support of the war from American citizens. However, critics and anti-war protestors tried to publicly reveal the reality of the government’s lies and deceit. During this time, everyone was claiming truth and it was extremely hard for the American public to know what was truly occurring. This is very similar to the United States situation and involvement in Iraq; different media outlets are making distinct claims that contradict one another and often results in confusion among American citizens.

In terms of film releases, there were no mainstream films released upon the Vietnam War until 1968, when *The Green Berets* was released. Starring John Wayne, this film was not representative of what was occurring at that time and has been highly criticized for being pro-Vietnam, racist, and actually based on World War II. The majority of feature films about Vietnam were not made until the 1980s and 1990s. However, certain documentaries were made at this time to counteract the contentious events. This was very important at the time; one “advantage of film is that it provides entry into topics that seem too controversial. Film breaks through barriers and allows students to do the same”

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(Summerfield, 1). Film is an extremely persuasive type of medium; the combination of images and spoken language is more powerful than the individual elements by themselves. It is able to approach very serious topics by tapping into people’s emotions. It is not totally opinion; there are pictures and witnesses used to influence viewers. In documentary, especially when based off of historical events, there is no true objectivity, because it is all based on individual perspective, culture, and allegiances. The classification of documentary as objective is unrealistic; the individual filmmaker has the right to display information as they wish and are almost always emotionally involved, and therefore can never be truly objective. Peter Davis, a well known writer, director, and filmmaker, produced the movie *Hearts and Minds* in 1974. This documentary is based on the conflicting attitudes of the opponents of the Vietnam War. In this documentary, Davis reveals the truth and disparity of America’s involvement in the War, with no apologies for his lack of objectivity. In this film, Peter Davis, along with his combination of omniscient and personal narration, reveals himself as the true speaker. Although Davis only speaks once within the entire documentary, his personal attitude and sympathies are apparent. “He focuses on the psychological journey of U.S. citizens throughout the democratic cause” (Gordon, 2002).

In this paper, Davis’s argument and persuasive devices will be analyzed to reveal his uncompromising and challenging stance against the American government’s reasoning for going to Vietnam. With support of Davis’s application of words and images, it will present a mixed persona of the American identity and focus on his unveiling of America’s defective leadership, the single-minded aggressive mentality, and the unity of humanity. This paper will conclude by evaluating the overall effectiveness and success of these through Davis’s unapologetic subjective presentation of the Vietnam War. By using stories and commentaries, Davis takes authorial control and attempts to present a persuasive view of Vietnam that is uncompromising and challenging.

The overall plan of presentation and narration is creatively designed by Davis. He does not stick to one specific style or approach, but blends multiple techniques to make a powerful message. *Hearts and Minds* is a creative combination of expository and participatory documentary styles. Expository, which “directly addresses issues in the historical world and adopts the classic voice of God commentary” (Nichols, 105), applies because it focuses on the historical perspective of the Vietnam War. Although

there is no “voice of God” narrator, Davis’s use of juxtaposition, analogy, and imagery can be deemed as powerful enough to perform as an equivalent. The participatory aspect is relevant because of its definition of “interviews or interaction with participants and use of archival film” (Nichols, 115). There are multiple personal interviews in the documentary, as well as an extensive amount of archival footage to aid in creating the reality of the war. The collection of all this footage, evidence, and interviews take the participatory approach in terms of information compilation (Rabiger, 63). Although all of the questions, except for one, were edited out of the documentary, Davis was still personally shaping the film’s focus and message. All of these aspects combine to create the overall POV (point of view), which “denotes the impression one gets, reading a story or watching film, of the emotional and psychological point of view through which the story is being experienced” (Rabiger, 65). Davis’s POV is easily identified; he makes his attitude and perspective toward the war blatantly obvious. He combines the use of omniscient and personal POV to reveal his highly critical viewpoint, while maintaining legitimacy and interest. The omniscient POV connects with this presentation because it tries to compile a multitude of attitudes, takes the viewer all over in pursuit of the story, and has an outlook and moral purpose for creating the film (Rabiger, 70). *Hearts and Minds* is forthright regarding its subjectivity and makes no apologies for its message. “Here the viewer is on a clearer footing and can engage with the film’s propositions rather than go numb under the deluge of suspiciously uninflected information” (Rabiger, 70). Through this explanation, one can immediately recognize that there are also some degrees of personal POV used as well. Davis stays behind the camera for the majority of the time, although he does speak during one of the interviews. It is here that the omniscient POV is transferred to the personal POV; it is obvious that the filmmaker is so passionate about this message that he must speak.

Based on these uses of POV and documentary styles, many observers claim this film is too subjective, and therefore not a documentary. However, if objectivity is obtainable, there would be no historical documentaries because there is no way to gain all the information on a given event and present it in an equal way, as to not reveal a point of view. If one were to apply the standards of objectivity to Davis’s film, it could never be created. Simply by being an American, he is subjective to separate points of view and deemed an “other” in the Vietnamese culture (Martin, 2003). His

representation of them cannot be objective because he is not a member of their society. “There is no such thing as universal representation, and each society produces its own construction of the world in which different groups- however defined- simultaneously occupy specific real and imaginary positions in relation to each other” (Martin, 2003). Therefore, even if Davis tries to give a Vietnamese perspective, it still remains a product of American culture. In *Hearts & Minds*, Davis is in complete control as the director and filmmaker. There is no screenwriter, actors, or special effects; the factual information presented is what Davis personally gathered and compiled. This is an example of one major difference between documentary and entertainment film. *Hearts & Minds* is a documentary and makes no apologies for its mentality. “Documentaries are authored constructs” (Rabiger, 52). Through this construct, Davis attempts to present his ultimate goal, which is to present a message of pro-peace. Although some view it as “Anti-American,” the true purpose is quite the opposite. Although he’s against the U.S. government at this time, he is making an effort to explain the human psychology generating these mentalities.

In terms of persuasion and argument, Davis makes a direct call to human emotions, considerably more than he does their cognitive reasoning. In strategy, he uses a variety of sources and environments to set up his argument. The beginning of the film takes place in a pastoral scene of the Hung Dinh Village, where the citizens are working peacefully. This is a calming image at first, until the armed American soldier walks by and the viewer is forced to recognize the reality of this situation. He uses several transitions from the Vietnamese countryside to personal interviews with various sources. The majority of Vietnamese sources are victims of the war who have lost parents, siblings, and children. There are only a couple of corrupt Vietnamese, including one who is working for the United States military and a businessman. Although this is an attempt to balance the representation, both of these Vietnamese characters are associated with America and Western ideals, which minimize their impact. Instead of balancing the representation of the Vietnamese, they further demonize the United States. The American sources are also extremely varied. There is a large focus on corrupt government officials, including General Westmoreland, General Patton, and a variety of Presidents. There is also a select variety of citizens, ranging from a family who has lost a son to the everyday American youth. In addition, there are veterans, some bitter from their actions and now turned anti-war, as well as current

soldiers, who are shown engaging with Vietnamese prostitutes. Important sources, such as Daniel Ellsberg, present a vision of remorse of their involvement in the war. One of the primary characters is Lt. George Coker, who serves as a bridge between the emotional veteran and the dishonest government officials. He was captured during the war and was returned home, where he traveled around the country, promoting the U.S. military and necessary involvement in Vietnam. His perspective is unique; he appears to be of good moral character, yet makes racist comments and supports the war. All of these American sources were carefully picked by Davis to represent a variety of mentalities surrounding the War. Their thoughts and perspectives combine to create a glimpse at America's divergent character during the Vietnam War.

Each individual interviewed adds to the combination of rhetorical persuasion that Davis intends. He comes at the issue from so many different perspectives that a viewer must take him seriously. One major point is the focus upon racism. It becomes blatantly obvious through the intolerant language used by a variety of Americans. Terms such as "gooks" are applied haphazardly, without any thought to its racist meaning. At this point in history, America came to recognize itself as a global power, and one could possibly assume from these interviews, that the Vietnamese are viewed as inferior. In *Hearts & Minds*, General Westmoreland was actually quoted saying, "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient." This quote is quickly followed by the images of Vietnamese people mourning hysterically for their lost loved ones. Davis makes this blatant comparison and can be confident that the viewer completely understands his intentions. This use of irony is applied to multiple juxtapositions between interviews and images. There are also a variety of sources, specifically Ellsberg, that admit America's mistakes and cover-ups on-screen. With the use of archival footage, Davis shows America's most powerful leaders making claims and then cuts to Ellsberg confessing its falsity. One of the most powerful rhetoric devices used in this documentary is the multiple interviews with Vietnam veterans. Their language, pure and honest in delivery, invites the viewer to commit emotionally. Ranging from the comical, jive-talking African-American to the teary-eyed father of two little girls, the veterans' confessions reveal their train of thought and sensitive reaction to their involvement in the war. These witnesses, along with the shots of the reality of

our involvement in Vietnam, create a powerful message and images that cannot be shaken.

The images alone can speak for themselves. Davis precisely orders them to convey a powerful message. He parallels the images with important quotes and confessions, but the viewer is more likely to remember the visuals. He begins with the analysis of past conditions and stimulations for entering the war, shifts to the reality of what actually occurred there, and concludes in the devastation and result of America's participation. Some of the best images acquired come from the archival news footage that he uses sparingly. It is real, documented footage, which makes his presentation more credible to the viewer. Although this was the first war in which television played a pivotal role in portraying, there was little footage of the actual violence and events that occurred in Vietnam. This footage gave America's a shocking presentation of the senseless violence and immoral actions that occurred. This does not imply that this treatment was inflicted the majority of the time, however, the fact that it did happen needs to be recognized. The soldier shooting the Vietnamese man in the head, along with the description of throwing a young Vietnamese from a plane because of his refusal to talk, creates a harsh image of cruelty. One of the most disturbing scenes is based upon the interaction of two American citizens with two Vietnamese prostitutes. The degree of inhumanity and inferiority the soldier inflict upon the two women is overwhelming. These images, in combination with the common racist rhetoric, are extremely offensive and shameful in every aspect. It would be extremely difficult for a viewer to not identify with Davis's disgust of such an event. In addition, the images added to the division between the high-ranking governmental leaders with the realities of battle. By showing footage of America's powerful leaders in their comfortable settings, separated from the tragedies of war, and then following these interviews with pictures of destruction and intense bereavement, the comparison delivers a powerful message. "There are two types of knowledge about the war referred to here, that of the 'man in the valley' - the grunt who was directly involved in the heat of action and whose memories might be of value - and the 'man on the hilltop', the case officer whose perspective was less direct, although broader and based upon documentation (Taylor, 28).

Another important aspect of these interviews is Davis's use of the close-up. He uses this technique frequently, which adds to the idea that Davis himself is the narrator. It presents him as having an intimate conversation with each individual, and therefore by

seeing the interview through his eyes, we identify with his persuasive point of view. The use of the close-up is reversed when Davis exposes the physical reality of the veterans interviewed. Throughout the film, the veterans are shown in a close-up. It is not until the ending conversations, which maintain the most emotional content, does Davis decide to pan out and reveal their severe handicaps. It is a powerful move; the revelation strikes the viewer as a devastating truth that is undeserved.

Although some critics claim that Davis was overwhelmingly one-sided and manipulative in his juxtapositions and main points, he provides no fabrication of events. Many of Davis's persuasive appeals are blatant; he makes no attempt at disguising this type of propaganda. Alternatively, he embraces this as the narrator and filmmaker by showing his subjectivity in a realistic and true-to-life form. All of his footage and information is authentic, but it is his powerful editing that created a message that is thoroughly his own. If one takes offense to his manipulation and obvious beliefs about the event, then it is only by contradiction with their own beliefs. Richard L. Kaplan, who wrote the book *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity*, refers to objectivity a phenomenon among journalists that developed in the late 19th and 20th century. This was an interesting perspective, but is not realistic regarding the human nature. In fact, Kaplan found objectivity to often be a negative occurrence, because it took away creative involvement. Although there is an influence upon journalists, and often documentary filmmakers, to be objective it really is not possible. As the creator of this piece, there is no way to be entirely objective. Therefore, Davis takes a sense of reality and presents it in a way in which he identifies.

Perhaps the most important imagery delivered in *Hearts & Minds* is the footage of the American football players. This analogy made between the American youthful, competitive spirit to America's violence upon other countries is quite powerful. Davis sets up his argument in an influential manner. He uses scenes from coaches yelling at players, preaching the importance of winning at all costs and beating the competition. He then transfers the viewers to military scenes, of young American men in combat. Through this comparison, he presents the motives and the values expressed by the supporters of the war. It is not an attack on the youth of America, but rather the system that supports and conditions them to value such behavior. These scenes from football locker rooms are not offensive or unusual to us, but only when they are paralleled with violent war scenes, is the audience outraged. Through Davis's

camera lens, you can see his mental comparison between the two. This tactic is creative in presentation as well as frightening to the American public.

Through these combinations of words and pictures, *Hearts & Minds* was very successful in its persuasive devices and arguments. The focus was on emotional appeals (Aronson & Pratkanis, 35), which gained the audience's attention and raised questions about American culture. Davis's personality and silent narration revealed his thoughts towards the events surrounding the Vietnam War by making deliberate comparisons of contrasting situations. Through in-depth interviews and critiques, Davis displayed various mindsets towards the war. He criticized American politicians, officials, and America's obsession with competition, without any sense of regret. By doing so, Davis attempted his essential goal, which was to relay the message of valuing humanity, regardless of nationality or ethnicity. He gave the Vietnamese an identity and therefore made it a reality. There was anguish and remorse suffered on all accounts, and until there is universal compassion and understanding for humanity, then the violence will continue to happen. Ultimately, it all comes down to POV; Davis took authorial control of this film while maintaining its documentary status. It is subjective, Davis is the narrator, and it's a good documentary. "Documentaries are a construct- and they reveal as much about their makers as they do their ostensible subjects" (Rabiger, 111).

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