

Hearts and Minds: Analysis of war propaganda and dehumanization

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“We are just beginning and we won’t stop winning, till the world is free” (Davis, 1974, 3:16). This line, like many more in the beginning clip surrounding it, is used by Peter Davis in a farcical manner to portray the superiority that many Americans felt after the success of World War II. From the onset of *Hearts and Minds*, the viewer is presented with a mix of old footage from a variety of sources. News coverage and journalistic film were integrated carefully, but more substantially, clips from old mainstream movies and television shows reveal the permeation of dominant ideologies in mainstream commercial media. Using this footage and numerous interviews conducted for the purpose of this film, Davis is able to portray the sentiments and issues that were relevant to the American people at the time, often displaying them in a negative way in order to shine some enlightenment into several areas of ignorance that pervaded current ways of thinking. 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 Vietnamese through dehumanization.

When a film carries a title as heavy as *Hearts and Minds*, it is crucial not to overlook its importance in labeling the film and its significance to what happens within it. When the issue of hearts and minds arises in the film, it is not only concerned about the emotions towards the war at home, but also on the dedication of those far away in Vietnam. Lyndon B. Johnson carries this point forward: “So we must be ready to fight in Vietnam, but the ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and the minds of the people who actually live out there” (Davis, 1974, 5:30). From a limited audience perspective, Johnson seemed to lose sight of the Vietnamese hearts and

minds at some point after this speech because his apparent attitude about the Vietnamese people’s morale was never changed and his determination to stay at war no matter what the feelings of the Vietnamese looked unfaltering. So often in this film, the real perspective of the Vietnamese is brought forward in order to show the American people that the Vietnamese do in fact have a viewpoint and are capable making decisions themselves. On the opposite end, this point of view is shown in contrast with how frequently the United States was playing war related subject matter that discredited the intellectual ability of the Vietnamese people. This propagandistic view was clear in several children’s cartoons and in some films in which the Vietnamese were stereotyped and made to seem less intelligent and self-sufficient. In this way, some very few similar speeches given (like that of Johnson’s) failed miserably in communicating the dependence this nation had on the locals in winning the war.

To take another look at the title would be to interpret from the other end, that of the American audience viewpoint. While I believe that one of Peter Davis’ main goals was to reveal the humanity of the Vietnamese in *Hearts and Minds*, it cannot be ignored that this film was made primarily for the American audience and targeted American rationality. Creating this documentary was a way of attempting to inform the uninformed of the fallacy of the conflict our leaders had pushed us into. Judith Christ addresses this in her essay when she says: “Davis’ triumph is that he is even more concerned with the hearts and minds of Americans... His work endures as a touchstone for our concept of Americanism, patriotism, and personal and political principle” (Christ, 2002, p. 3). In making such a film, Davis forces those of us who watch to confront the cause and effect relationship of what our policy and leadership is doing here to effect a different kind of people with a radically different culture half way around the world. A clear sense of responsibility and illumination of truth (objective as is possible) is bestowed on the audience and a call to action for the proceedings of this country is delivered. “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. He does so with the total engagement of our hearts and minds” (Christ, 2002, p. 5)

The film itself presents itself as anti-propagandistic of dominant Vietnamese stereotypes in combating the largely one-sided political view of the war that the government and media were so ready to distribute to the mass American audience. While

¹ Charles Tallent, 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>

nothing that seeks to persuade an audience can ever be free from propaganda undertones, I feel that Davis is entirely justified in editing his film together so that the Vietnam conflict can be considered in a different and largely unexplored light. Documentary film must seek to serve a purpose the same way that fictional Hollywood blockbusters must serve a function. Where the latter seeks to entertain and make money on often shallow amusement, documentaries are supposed to engage their audience and either teach them something about the world that is not already well known or get their audience to explore and (if only briefly) entertain a contrasting viewpoint in a relatively small amount of time. This, of course, was Davis' goal exactly: to get Americans to sit down for two hours and see the victims of Vietnam in a different light - one much more revealing than the vague news coverage and biased government briefs that were fed to the public in such small and consumable pieces so as not to upset their stomachs.

Davis does not try to hide his point of view, he lays it on thick and passionately with all the material he decided to shoot and include in postproduction. Desson Thompson of the Washington Post remarked on Davis' intentions that "-he's morally outraged and against the war. But that's the value and the endgame of most documentaries. They are about points of view, presented as powerfully and compellingly (and many critics would add disingenuously) as possible" (Thompson, 2004). Desson captures the purpose of documentary film perfectly here by arguing against the notion that complete objectivity is needed. More importantly, it is impossible to obtain uniform objectivity in a medium that places such reliance on the artistry of the filmmaker and the interpretations of a diverse audience. In a really interesting article on Pier Paolo Pasolini, Fabi Vighi observes about the nature of documentaries that "this is not to say that they should be regarded in an uncritical fashion. Rather, issues of objectivity and referentiality, as well as historical documentation and preservation, always at the heart of any plausible analysis of the non-fictional form, will be addressed both from within and outside." (Vighi, 2002, 492). To question the objectivity of the creators of the documentary is in no way unreasonable, but one must keep in mind that some subjectivity is needed for the film to have any distinguishable purpose or thought-provoking structure. The filmmaker's presence is also addressed in Bill Nichols' introductory book with the following: "Documentary filmmakers often take on the role of public representatives. They speak for the interests of others, both for individuals whom they represent in the film and for the institution or agency that supports their filmmaking activity... documentaries may

represent the world in the same way a lawyer may represent a client's interests: they put the case for a particular view or interpretation of evidence before us." (Nichols, 2001, 3,4). While struggling to portray something objectively from outside, it is impossible as a human being to completely avoid attaching some bit of perspective or analysis from within, rather it is a fundamental and necessary practice in the documentary form. I feel that the very best which can be asked of or attempted by the documentarian is to approach the subject ready to explore it in whatever way it has been neglected or left unknown to the audience. It is this rationality that attributes the most compelling and significant result on film.

The propaganda used in mass media and by the government (in contrast to the obviously interpretive purpose of documentary mentioned above) was much more shameful and irresponsible in years leading up to and including our involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Much of the war was fueled by the incessant finger pointing of those in power basing their judgments of people and countries as either communist threats or partisan allies and consequently placing themselves in positions of dominance. This is hardly a new concept in the annals of history. Germans relied most strongly on such propaganda techniques during the build up and recruitment of committed soldiers before and during World War II. Kay Hoffman elaborates: "Up to the end, the 'Führer' wanted the newsreels to be a medium that showed successful combat, although that had nothing to do with the reality of the eastern front. For example, Peter Bucher analyzed the

German newsreels about the battle of Stalingrad, in which the commentaries always described the battle as a successful move forward." (Hoffman, 2004, 140). Such lies and misleading information about the true nature of the war were presented in order to raise support and favorable opinions that were unjustly earned. This concept was utilized in a strikingly similar way during the height of the Vietnam War by the American administration. Barry L. Gan would agree with this commonplace notion when he says: "Many wars fought by the United States have been possible only because the mass media provide the public with lies that paint opponents as evil, thereby generating popular support for previously unpopular or unknown causes." (Gan, 2005, p. 341). He then goes on to list various conflicts including The Gulf War and Iraq in which information has been skewed or altered to benefit the cause for war. Through manipulation of widespread mass media, this process has become all the more

routine and less difficult to carry out with the advancement of technology.

During the mid twentieth century, American society became so overwhelmed with the “communist scare” that many failed to mind the violation of their freedoms and fundamental rights in fear that they too might be labeled a communist or associate with one. Through relentless reinforcement of the perils of communism, the very idea of a communist government immediately carried evil connotations for most of the nation. Peter Davis includes a reasonably good chunk of time early on to expose the ridiculousness of this blanket way of thinking. Lt. George Coker addresses a field of people listening intently to him and mentions that before he went off to Vietnam, communism was trying to muscle its way into the “free” United States. It comes across to me as ironic that an ideology such as Communism, Socialism, or Democracy should ever be under attack in what is supposed to be a freethinking and free speaking country. Former Captain Randy Floyd talks about his experience studying Communism in school to Davis: “The high school had bought a John Birch package on Communism... with the big red map with the flowing out of the disease and so forth. And learned how Karl Marx was a very cruel man and used to make his family suffer...” (Davis, 1974, 11:25). Immediately following this interview, Davis cuts to a video where Ronald Reagan speaks of the “communist conspiracy to subvert the world,” which then cuts into an enactment of what it might look like if Communists ran America. In retrospect, this all seems slightly funny and ridiculous, but at that time it could not have been a more serious topic of discussion - and by discussion I mean of course the single minded propaganda that many people and departments were in charge of spreading around the nation, including the John Birch Society and the McCarthy hearings on Communist involvement.

Barry L. Gan recounts his past view of Communism in his piece *Pressed Into War* with the following: “I believed the media: that there would be a domino effect, that the communists were out to take over the world, country-by-country, as part of some worldwide conspiracy. Even when I turned against the Vietnam War in 1967, I remember meeting a real live communist in college... I remember feeling frightened by such close contact with a communist. The media had done its work, and I hadn’t realized it.” (Gan, 2005, p. 341). It is a frightening idea to think that one day in the future I could wake up and realize that how I had always felt about something was not my true feeling at all, but instead the product of repetitive propaganda being carefully utilized to

convince me to feel a certain way. It all sounds rather Orwellian, but propaganda is a fact of everyday life, so much so that back then it was blatantly integrated into the curriculum and constantly ridiculed in the news. If nothing else, the film’s exploration of this allows the audience to reflect on the importance of debate and drawing rational conclusions as opposed to submitting to an ideology that is neatly packaged and presented to them.

One reason why a good portion of the United States may have remained on the side of the war for so long was the need to justify the loss of so many American lives. Many times throughout the film, the loss of American soldiers is represented as patriotic and heroic when in fact the deaths are unnecessary and the war is considered by a plethora of resisters to be unjust. Col. George S. Patton III describes a memorial service he attended in which four men in a squadron were killed by saying: “My feeling for America just soared... They looked determined and reverent at the same time. But still they’re a bloody good bunch of killers.” (Davis, 1974, 42:30). This kind of thinking is just shocking, especially when it is coming from an officer as high ranking as Patton who is in charge of so many American soldiers’ lives. Dying for one’s country is one thing, but dying as an American soldier for a remote cause that one does not whole-heartedly support is another. In *Interchange*, one of the scholars engaging in debate says: “Depending on their political perspective, Americans might have very different sets of people toward whom they felt anger and very different reasons for their feelings of loss and disappointment. However, they all seem to partake of an emotional tenor of resentment compounded by uncompensated grief.” (Hagopian, 2006, p. 489). This widespread honoring of those killed in Vietnam is another form of propaganda altogether. It is unorganized and roused across the country sporadically much the same way Hagopian describes. Those with any relation to the deceased are bound to want the life of their departed to be for a good cause. So when events are held like the one in *Hearts and Minds* where President Nixon speaks at the White House about the “brave men” who went in and “did the job” – death for the sake of victory is glorified, whatever the cost of life attached may be. All the more surprising is the fervor with which many American families buy into this way of thinking, such as the Emersons (the old couple who had lost their son in the war). David Emerson illustrates this exactly when he says: “Certainly, to me, the day that you can say that a sacrifice such as that is not worthwhile is the day that you’ve destroyed all your real values... there is no sacrifice that is in vain. Absolutely none.” (Davis, 1974, 1:33).

Saying there is honor in death is not false, but claiming that all deaths involving a uniform are honorable is a dangerous way of thinking.

About thirty minutes into the film, Peter Davis shows a collage of images that depict the Vietnamese as less than human beings. A whole section of clips reveal the prevalence of anti-Asian stereotypes that were allowed to pervade many old films. The terms used to describe them include: Stinking little savages, the Eastern race, Poon Soons, hideous yellow monsters, Gooks, and other such terms. References are made to wiping them off the face of the earth and destroying them. What is happening in old propaganda pieces like this is that the Vietnamese, along with the Asian race in general, are being dehumanized on a massive scale. The same way that many people today relate the Arab race with dirty and sneaky connotations, around this time Asians were not represented much better. Many times they were referred to as less than human beings. Hooks and Mosher address this in their *Outrages Against Personal Dignity* piece when they cite: "A letter written by Paul Glen... explains how dehumanization of the Vietnamese contributed to the rape and massacre of men, women, and children. 'Far beyond merely dismissing the Vietnamese as 'slopes' or 'gooks' in both deed and thought, too many American soldiers seem to discount their very humanity.'" (Hooks & Mosher, 2005, p. 1639). Americans had demeaned the Vietnamese people so badly that extreme criminal acts including brutal beatings, rape, torture, and senseless killing of villagers were of no more consequence than abusing an animal. In some cases, scholars say that they were treated much worse than animals since they were already reduced to a sub-human state and additionally soldiers had been taught to hate them and maliciously destroy them (Filardo, 2006). *Hearts and Minds* combated this destructive way of thinking by portraying the Vietnamese for who they were as people instead of soulless targets for Americans to destroy. Robert K. Brigham maintains: "When the film first appeared in 1974, its sympathetic and complicated treatment of average Vietnamese created a sensation. For years, the news media and policymakers had given Americans their only view into the lives of Vietnamese peasants, and that presentation was crude... *Hearts and Minds* did what no other film or text had – showed the Vietnamese as victims and treated them as human beings." (Brigham, 2002, p. 7, 9)

In what is arguably Peter Davis' greatest attack on dehumanization, a Vietnamese family funeral for a dead soldier is contrasted with Gen.

William Westmoreland's depiction of the cheapness of life in Asia. The sequence begins with footage of the funeral with many family members weeping, mourning, and losing themselves in the horror of their loved one's death. Following this, Gen. Westmoreland says: "Well the Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient." (Davis, 1974, 1:43:00). I believe Roger Ebert, in his analysis of the film for the *Chicago Sun Times* answers this the best when he reflects: "In this and his other comments about what he calls "the Oriental philosophy," Westmoreland comes over as not only racist and stupid, but incredibly lacking in awareness of how his remarks will sound. This man ran a war for years in a country he didn't begin to understand." (Ebert, 1974). Ebert makes a magnificent point ever so subtly here. Part of the reason we lost the war (as is later said by Clark Clifford) and had trouble dealing with the enemy is that we truly did not understand the Vietnamese, and more importantly, we never took the time to. They were practically a lesser species at the time and often times, simply asking them right out about things would have worked better than bombing them into submission and destruction. At an earlier point in the film, Thich Lieu Minh retorts "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." (Davis, 1974, 40:10). This is one of the few times in the film that a Vietnamese person stands up and defends himself and his country and I think this is because it is simple, but very effective. In bringing up the circumstances from his point of view, we (the audience) are able to identify with his plight and see it from a point of view that is entirely foreign to us. America has never been invaded since the Revolutionary War and to even think it could be is a strange idea from which we have no adequate frame of reference.

Parts like these are the attributes of this film that make me love *Hearts and Minds* the most because of how unflinchingly honest they are. Occasionally it is healthy for everyone to withdraw from their comfortable, opinionated selves and explore what someone else feels like or how useful another idea or way of thinking might be. *Hearts and Minds* is the type of documentary that allows us to do this. It is the underdog's rebuttal to the giant, military machine that uses propaganda to dominate the debate. *Hearts* greatest triumph is that it depicts the Vietnamese for what they really are: human beings like everyone else, with their own culture and history. Mr. Callimachus says it best when he observes: "They are

human, they are real, they have feelings, they look small and vulnerable, not menacing. This other -- all but ignored by mainstream media -- is a sympathetic victim. The film reverses the figure/ground context of American popular culture by foregrounding the Other and bestowing it with value. Davis adopts the point of view of a knowing everyman, able to see the tragic story with a wide angle lens, where the "enemy" is as human as the viewer." (Callimachus, 2005).

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