

HEARTS & MINDS: What Vietnam did to us

This critical film review's goal is to discuss the points that are made in the film as a means of explaining how the United States lost the war and how by aiding the south, they actually widened the Vietnam war. 18 pages long.

HEARTS & MINDS

Hearts & Minds, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Film in 1975, is one of the most controversial Vietnam films that has ever been made. Heart & Minds showed Vietnam for what it really was, portraying the United States as the biggest evil in the conflict. As April Coleen Orcutt demonstrated, the film was a montage extravaganza in the true Eisensteinian tradition. Hearts & Minds was realised when director Peter Davis decided to make a Vietnam film by using montage tradition which uses film clips from other sources to tell a new story by juxtaposing them side by side, thus changing their original meaning. Hearts and Minds was a 1974 American compilation documentary film which dealt with the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war, or as one critic more accurately put it, it deals with what Americans "did to Vietnam and what Vietnam did to us".

This essay's goal is to discuss the points that are made in the film as a means of explaining how the United States lost the war and how by aiding the south they actually widened the conflict. This essay is divided into two parts, the first demonstrating the war as the Americans portrayed it and the second is demonstrating how public opinion both at home and in the field turned against the U.S. involvement.

The basis of the film is its structure, that is, in true Eisensteinian tradition. The early development of montage began in Russia during the 1917 revolution. The montage style of film making developed because Russian filmmakers were unable to produce or import film stock, due to blockades, and therefore settled for editing old films. They tried to make new films by trying to change the meaning of the old film stock simply by juxtaposing them to one another. Ironically montage originally developed emphasising physical aspects of life which, meant revolution in Russia early conception of the technique. It is ironic that a film style developed in Russia would

be used sixty years later to describe an American regime, which is opposite to Russia. It essentially demonstrated how montage could be used in very different circumstances. The following quote described the beginning of montage and what it aimed at conveying; “montage directors emphasised physical conflict, in part because they sought to inculcate Bolshevik doctrine, they often chose uprisings, strikes, and other clashes in the history of the revolutionary movement”.

In essence the definition of montage as described in the film encyclopaedia can directly be transcribed to the Vietnam conflict. Notice the similarities: “the term montage as it is generally understood today is associated with the work and theory of Sergei Eisenstein, which came to represent the rhetorical arrangement of shots in juxtaposition. Therefore the clash between two adjoining images creates a third, independent entity and a whole new meaning”. Both North and South Vietnam essentially represented the clash between two adjoining images. Furthermore, the third entity could be represented by the United States, which gave the Vietnam war a whole new meaning. Peter Davis discussed a great deal about the cultural and technological differences that existed between the two groups.

The technological differences that existed were made evident from the start of the film when scenes from the Hung Dinh village were shown depicting everyday life as American soldiers quietly began to appear into the scene as the camera panned across the village. This subtle opening scene depicted American forces, as descending on a peaceful village with fully automatic weapons which those villagers could never defend against. We also saw a particular difference in both Americans and Vietnamese in this scene, as they seemed indifferent to each other.

In fact the technological gap played a great part in this film in making American pilots indifferent to what they were doing or what the consequences were when they dropped their loads of bombs. Both captains Floyd and Cocker discussed the thrill of flying, thrill of dying as photographs of planes are shown bombing what were probably innocent Vietnamese villages. They went on to discuss the thrill of seeing something explode as photographs of children who were desperately running in all directions to flee the bombs were negating their statements. Floyd made a statement that shifted the blame to the professionals as he said “there is no time for personnel thought when you are flying out at 500-600m\h”. Again Davis demonstrated the consequence of this lack of thought as pictures of children fleeing wreckage were shown.

Davis shifts opinion towards the Vietnamese as he cleverly showed the devastation that resulted from the thrill of the U.S. pilots that were flying these bombers. He

showed a Vietnamese man called Nguyen Van Tai, weeping over the destruction of his home still wondering which side of the warring parties the plain belonged to. Davis showed the remaining two sisters of three who had their home destroyed which also left one of two remaining survivors staring blankly into-space. Davis proved how successful Americans were at wrecking lives in Vietnam as Floyd discusses how the pilots were trained professionals who could “never see the explosion, the people or the blood”. Floyd states “we are experts at what we do” as, simultaneously, Davis showed devastation in the quiet villages of Vietnam particularly the two sisters weeping and Nguyen Van Tai who still did know whose plane it was. One villager said, “they are focusing on us now first they bomb, then they film”.

The scenes of devastation continued as scenes of coffin building businesses were booming. 800-900 coffins were needed weekly for children alone, whose deaths were caused from bombing raids aimed solely at destroying jungles with poison spray, without once thinking about what that might have done to the innocent people who lived in these jungles. Davis ironically followed these scenes of devastation with Clark Clifford’s announcement that “America is the greatest power in the world”. Davis’ montage techniques went to work as scenes from Hollywood musicals followed aiming at glamorising Clifford’s statement. In essence Davis did not tell a lie by depicting America’s self glamorisation and showed it’s evil by the statement “our vision of progress is extended to the world”, while demonstrating America’s jungle warfare and destruction of Vietnam as the statement is being said. However America’s devastation and destruction of Vietnam stemmed from its political motivations at home as well as its propaganda devices in place to assure that political goals were met.

Politically, Hearts and Minds dealt with four different administrations in a particular scene with each president making a statement representing his administration. Eisenhower mentioned how important Indochina was, JFK discussed how the situation was lighter then it was darker, Johnson spoke of victory and its dependence on the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, and finally Nixon discussed how the United States demonstrated restraint towards Vietnam. Davis made it clear that Johnson was most arguably the president who jumped into the war with both feet. Johnson in effect used the Gulf of Tonkin incident as an excuse to move into Vietnam with force, which allowed him to get the Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed, giving him full power to act and defend any power in Asia against the advance of communism.

These political motivations were supported by propaganda. The propaganda and the belief of the need to see communism as evil and America as free of all evil

stemmed from early childhood as Captain Randy Floyd discusses. Floyd told how they were taught from a young age to view communists as thugs while Davis simultaneously showed scenes of people being picked up out of their bed in the middle of the night. Then Davis showed newsreels depicting Jerry Holter from the Charles Hoey Air Force base who stated that "communism is tearing us down inside out". Davis re-enforced this by clips from McCarthy's "witch hunt" saying that "if Indochina falls, the rest of Asia will also fall to communism". J. Edgar Hoover followed suit by saying that there was one communist for every 1814 people in the United States. All these newsreel testimonials helped illustrate America's mind-set shortly before and during the Vietnam War. In fact America's mindset dated back to the French Indochina war where the film speculated that America was supplying 78% of French aid in 1954. Furthermore John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State from 1953-1959, mentioned how communist will not win and his determination is demonstrated by George Biddault, Foreign Minister of France, who recounts how Dulles hinted about giving the French two atomic weapons to solve the problems in Vietnam.

In fact the propaganda continued after the war as Americans were convinced that they had won. America's belief thinking they had won the war was demonstrated through George Cocker's various speeches and appearances. We were first introduced to Cocker among a cheering crowd in Linden, New Jersey where he was welcomed back from captivity in a POW camp and was received as a hero, stating that faith kept him alive. He then convincingly said that he did well in Vietnam, despite the fact that he spent eight years in captivity. Cocker then travelled around the country and toured schools where he discussed war issues. He began by telling children that everybody might have to go to war one day and that the most important issue at war is living or dying. The most interesting scene, from Cocker's appearance was the questions from the children which, in reality, displayed more intelligence than Cocker's responses. In this next scene a nun ironically introduced Cocker to a particular classroom of children.

The first child asks; How did you feel when the Vietnam War was over?

Cocker's response: I felt good. The reasons we went to Vietnam was to win and I would go again if I had to. When it was finally over and we knew that we had won, it felt great.

The second child asks; What did Vietnam look like?

Cocker's response: Well if it was not for the people it was pretty. The people there are so backward and primitive and they mess everything up.

The third child asks; how did you feel about soldiers who burned their draft cards?

Cocker's response: I don't agree. I think they were legally wrong, they were cowards and they should not be allowed back because they were telling us that they didn't like us by burning their draft cards.

These questions and responses demonstrated how the United States had essentially learned nothing from the whole Vietnam affair and still did not understand the Vietnamese people. The first question demonstrated how some soldiers and how the American public was convinced that they had won the war. Furthermore Cocker's responses to the questions, which the film does not give the exact date, was after 1973 when he was released and probably close to the fall of Saigon in 1975. The second question and response pointed out to what degree the Americans did not understand the Vietnamese after they left which was perhaps the single most important reason, why they lost the war. The third question provided the proof of division in the American public over those who were for or against the war. Soldiers disliked the men who refused to participate reflecting the lines that were drawn in society.

However while scenes progressed illustrating the United States involvement in Vietnam, as Davis demonstrated what political leaders thought, and what some of the fighting soldiers thought, the documentary took a turn and began to show how the war affected the common man. We saw a steady increase in agitation from the Americans as their successes were limited in the field and their political support began to crumble at home. Furthermore and most significantly we heard from the U.S. soldiers who began to see the war for what it really was as testimonials will demonstrate their disgust and anger. It was here that we began to see America as the greatest evil of both sides. Davis was clever because the film began by illustrating what both sides thought without alienating and directing the audience to one side or the other. However Davis' Eisensteinian techniques went to work as he used images of propaganda for the U.S. and presented them against the U.S. Through this process, half way through the film, he began to convince the audience about the true nature of the Vietnam War.

The film's turn occurred very subtly with one scene depicting Edward Sowers, an army deserter, who was reunited with his mother and announced that he had to return to the military or he would be faced with the prospect of going underground or to Canada. The scene was very subtle but was the first time in the film that we saw desertion from within the U.S. rank and file. It represents the start of political upheaval for the U.S.

Soon after we saw American points of views from soldiers who liked to kill the Viet Con because he was the enemy without knowing why they were killing him. They began to use the terminology "gooks". Furthermore we saw Bob Hope represent Hollywood with scenes from his Road series with Bing Crosby. These images began to show the U.S. beyond their surface intent, to liberate the South from communist aggression, as simply an aggressor themselves.

These next scenes however depicted the U.S. as savages and willing to kill their own, if necessary, to win the war. An observer discussed how U.S. soldiers would remove the eyes of some of the captured VC and brand them with CBS logos or how U.S. soldiers pushed a VC captive out of a helicopter, of course General Thendell denies all these allegations. Furthermore brutality was demonstrated as a statement said that the U.S. soldiers were not savages and yet a scene that ran simultaneously showed U.S. soldiers firing blindly into an area where they taught the VC was hiding, from behind a brick wall. William Marshall, a Sergeant from Detroit, discussed among a group of permanently injured GI's about how he got his injuries;

The dood in the foxhole with me, he was dead! Hear come the jets and everybody yeah yeah yeah jets, you know, do it to them and all this shit. You know, get those mother fuckers off our ass, you know, because they were diggin' in our behinds real good. So like the jet came in, yeah yeah yeah jet get em' and you see em' swooping around yeah yeah jet get em' and he came over that way and let it go. You say aw ooh, you know, and you can see those napalm canisters cause you can tell em', they spin ass over head, you know, backward as they tumblin' through the air comin' down. The thing just tumblin' down and you know the thing's just comin' right at you. It's like wow, napalm hit, I grab this dood and just put him up over my head in the hole like that. Fuck napalm went down the whole line man, just creamed everybody in the line, 35 doods, man, just burnt post toasty to the bitter, you dig. And napalm was just dripping off both sides of the dood, he's dead, you know, just hold him up, used him as a shield. So I just chumped this dood off of me and just sprung out of the hole and I didn't know which way I was goin'. I was at the back, you dig, and just ran through, burnt my pants off, and spent the rest of the battle

running around with no drores with my stuff hangin' out all over the place. You ever tried to fight a battle with no drores on man!

Following Marshall's story we heard a sentence "may the best team win" which immediately switched to a football anthem making the connection between the ideology of everyday violence in America's culture, sports, and how brutality resulted in victory. More brutal images were provided as we saw GI's setting homes on fire while grannies and their children watched helplessly. Another instance saw helicopters shooting at helpless civilians simply because the Americans could not distinguish the enemy from the friendly Vietnamese.

Following the proof of brutality on the part of the U.S. soldiers, we cut back to Edward Sowers, who began the vicious cycle in the film shifting evil towards the U.S. Supporting the images of brutality that we just saw, Sowers talked about how soldiers were systematically destroying Vietnam, treating Vietnamese as less than humans and calling them gooks and slopes. How U.S. soldiers were indeed fanatical about killing and how the leaders of the country lied to the American people about what was really happening in Vietnam. Interviews followed mentioning how little Americans knew about the war and how in good time Americans would destroy themselves.

As montage filmmaking has a tendency to demonstrate radical differences, Davis shifts from the war and showed us South Vietnam's economic leaders who were gathered at a party to discuss the future. The contrast was sharp because this occurred in Saigon and yet there did not seem to be a war or a feeling of war in the scene. Furthermore Davis used a sharp contrast of colours as he cut from jungle warfare, smoke, green and dark colours, to a dinner banquet shot against a bright sunny day, with people wearing bright coloured shirts. Davis seems to make a clear distinction between economic leaders in Vietnam who saw the war in terms of profit, and the peasant who was suffering in the jungles as a freedom fighter or just a survivor. We saw the same American contradiction where the richer get richer and, the poorer get poorer.

The next scene was yet another contrast where we were brought to an artificial limb centre in the U.S. where business seemed to be booming. The peculiarity about this scene was that everything seemed normal for these people with some country western music in the background. Davis seemed to be suggesting that the outcome of the Vietnam War, that is all these cripples, was expected and that it was business as usual. Ironically the next scene shows a football coach screaming don't let them beat us, prepare to kill. Then Johnson spoke and said we are going to win. One began

to see how the art of film montage functions, as scenes from the Tet offensive quickly negated Johnson's statement in 1968. These scene offered more scenes of brutality in addition to a graphic scene revealing how a VC got shot in the head at point blank range with images of blood gushing out of his head which got world-wide coverage. Westmoreland compared the Tet offensive to the battle of the Bulge making requests for more soldiers. Yet another turning point occurred when Clark Clifford, Secretary of Defence, stated that doubts were growing because no one knew, all of a sudden, about how many troops would be needed or when the war would end.

We began to see scenes of peace demonstrations in the U.S. along with soldiers and leaders who began to admit that they were wrong about Vietnam and that they did know very little about it. We first saw demonstrations in South Vietnam where people had gathered to denounce American imperialism that spelled the beginning of the end in Vietnam. Then Eugene McCarthy publicly said that people wanted it to stop and that it must come to an end. The first anti demonstration within the U.S. context in this film came in the form of a speech by William Marshall who talked about his regrets and anger against the system and the outcome of the war;

You know, you can let us all go off to war, yeah team, fight in Vietnam, and all this kinda' shit 1965-1968. Now 1968 comes along and, boo team, come along home, and all this shit, you know, and don't say nothin' about it, cause we don't want to hear nothin' about it, you know, it's upsettin' at dinner time, you know. Well God dam it upsets me for the whole God dam year. It upsets a lot of people to the point where their fuckin' dead, you know, and all this shit. Now you don't wanna hear about it. I'll tell you about it every day and make you sit down and puke your dinner, you dig because you got me over there and now brought me back hear and wanna forget it so somebody else could go through this somewhere else hell no. En En! Hell No! You are gonna hear it all every day as long as you live because hay it's going to be with me for as long as I live. When I get up in the morning, when Johnny gets up in the morning, when a lot of doods, just sittin' around hear, get up. This man's gut hurts because he got shot there. I gotta put on an arm and leg cause it ain't there no more, you dig. Now my man hear, got a hole in the stomach, he can't work right, you know. Do something about that, make that disappear, you dig, make it all go away with the six o'clock news, just turn it off or switch it to another channel, and all that shit and the hell with that, you dig. Its here and its real and its gonna happen again unless you get off your asses and realise it has happened!

William's second speech illustrated the passion that a lot of the soldiers felt. It also demonstrated how denial was very much a part of American history when the term Vietnam came up. In the following scene Robert Kennedy made a public statement

admitting that the war was wrong. Not long after this speech Kennedy was next on the assassins' list and Daniel Elsberg discussed, as he cried, how helpless he was when Kennedy was gunned down and how it changed the country forever. This may ironically was the way that the nation felt about Vietnam, totally helpless to change the outcome of the war. The images now became clear as the film progressed and depicted a retreating U.S. army or one that was always under fire. We saw war dead, casualties, while other soldiers pulled victims out of battles. Clark Clifford admitted publicly that the domino theory was in fact wrong and that he could not have been more wrong.

Robert Muller described his injury and how he was ordered to take a hill and got hit in the back. His testimony provided some more examples of what soldiers felt about the war. Davis as he collected several closing statements manipulated the camera where at first he showed only the upper body to make the person who was interviewed look normal. That meant that Davis did not use the sympathy of the viewers to sway their opinion. He chose to use their admissions of guilt quickly followed by graphic images of the war rather than using the scars that were left behind particularly those of the wounded and crippled soldiers that he had interviewed throughout the film. Muller's closing statement expressed what he hated the most from the war, not the fact that he's now crippled, but rather that before the war he was proud to be American, to be a Marine which meant everything to him. Now he said that whole image was gone and was the most difficult truth to live with. The same could be said for William Marshall who in his second speech was revealed as having lost an arm and leg in Vietnam. These were some of the touching scenes, which left reviews saying that a film like this about Vietnam would never be done. Andrew Kopkind said: "I would not have thought I could be so moved by a film about the war, by images I've seen and arguments I've heard and metaphors I've memorised a hundred times over. But Hearts and Minds evokes the intensity that made the movement come to life".

The next scene was ironic because it depicted American soldiers looting and hunting down while children played in the background without a worry signifying a way of life that the Vietnamese were accustomed to. However the next scene presented Robert Taylor from Bataan who fought to death as the Japanese were invading the Philippines. This could have suggested two scenarios; it could simply have meant that the Americans were fighting to death and were quite rightly dying for it or it could have meant that the Vietnamese were going to fight till the last man. This scene may be interpreted both ways where Americans comes out the loser anyhow.

Daniel Elsberg, defence department official, continued his interviews and ends his participation in the film by saying that Truman lied about the purpose of Vietnam and our reasons for being there, the nature of build up, Kennedy, Johnson's and

Nixon's involvement. Elsborg mentions that the American public was lied to month by month. For some reason the leaders perceived that the public had to be lied to. Elsborg mentions that the VC was capable of finding enough people to fight for nothing with anything to fight whereas South Vietnam was completely supplied by foreigners.

Bob Hope hosted a dinner for Veterans in 1973 where Nixon made an appearance stating that December 18 was the hardest decision of his career which began a thunderous applause as what Nixon was talking about were the B-52 raids that enabled the U.S. soldiers to pull out of Vietnam. Davis' montage techniques again played a very important role because the applause was crosscut with scenes of the air bombardment and the devastation that was being left behind. In an interview following the scenes of devastation Westmoreland said that the Oriental does not put a high price on life because life is plentiful which was yet another sign of how little was learned from Vietnam. It is not a question of putting a low price on life but rather the question of the century long battle that at one time or another, the Vietnamese were waging. The Vietnamese conflict with the U.S. was but another war in a long series of successive struggles, beginning with China, France, Japan, and France again, and finally the United States. The last interview in the film was with Randy Floyd who at the beginning was discussing how exhilarating flying plains and bombing was and how he was just a trained professional who was doing his job. He cried during most of the interview and said that the reality of screams or people dying did not dawn on pilots' minds. The sophisticated aeroplanes that they were flying were advanced enough so that the pilot could drop its load and are far away when the harm was done. Therefore it was difficult for pilots to realise what they were doing because they were so far away from ground level fighting. Images of babies that are burned from napalm with their skins hanging was never given thought to. He thought of his children today and if they were hit by napalm and just busted into tears. He mentioned that Americans have tried to escape the reality that people fighting for freedom cannot be stopped by tactics. Americans did not want to see the criminality of their actions and the damage they have caused as Davis simultaneously flashes rows of coffins before the screen. The closing scene stipulates that indeed Americans in general have learned very little as with all the devastation that has been shown and talked about the film, in reflection of reality, still manages to close with a deliriously cheering crowd as if the Americans had won the war. We saw banners that displayed home with honour, victory. We saw the same vicious cycle occur in American society as new young children were shown beginning an institution that trained to kill, the Marines. The very final scene showed a riot, which broke out between anti war demonstrators, and war advocates. It ended the film with a struggle suggesting that America be divided over the issue of war.

In conclusion America's determination not to understand the Vietnam conflict for what it was, that is, understanding the cultural differences between Americans and Vietnamese and not understanding the reason for being in Vietnam lead it to suffer a loss that still haunts it today. This has deprived Americans of any resolution to the conflict, has been a very expensive war in lives, and will be remembered by many nations as a war that America lost. Furthermore America's role in Vietnam has demonstrated how a nation with nothing could defeat the most powerful nation in the world. Vietnam has proved to be one of the most divisive topics in American history as to why America lost. Finally just the debate about how America lost the war because many Americans refuse to accept defeat, suggests that America still knows very little about the culture and that room still exists for much improvement and understanding.

by Pierre Hobson