

Brokenhearted

**An essay on the cultural effects
of the Vietnam War as portrayed
in the documentary “Hearts and Minds”**

By

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When the documentary “Hearts and Minds” was released in 1974 Vincent Canby, a journalist for the New York Times wrote about it that it: “has a lot to say about an average American's education and, indeed, about his ability to reeducate himself as conditions change.¹” Indeed as the documentary was released America was going through a lot of changes in a lot of different areas not least of which was the still ongoing Vietnam War. But change was inevitable and therefore the lessons important. But how did Americans reeducate themselves with regards to the Vietnam War? By what process and to what result? This paper will focus on the cultural effects of the war in Vietnam, effects on both the Vietnamese and Americans, as presented in Peter Davis’ “Hearts and Minds”. The socio-political context of the documentary as well as the scope of the documentary genre itself will be analyzed so as to better understand the changing face of contemporary America and what lessons were learned from Vietnam, if any.

The documentary genre when related to the Vietnam War was almost taboo in American society: “Until the late 1960’s, the U.S. networks studiously avoided the Vietnam War; they also avoided any recognition of documentaries done around the world, including in Cuba and Vietnam, on the subject.²” There was a lull in what material was shown of the war and what the networks wanted to show. Yet the lull would soon dissipate: “CBS’s *Morley Safer’s Vietnam* (1967) finally broke the silence, with uncommented but damning footage of a war far different from the one represented by the government, and this film seemed to open up possibilities.³” Both Hollywood producers and major networks interested in making movies on the subject of the Vietnam War were quick to grab the contemporary momentum and use the possibility of making movies about the Vietnam War. After his success with the controversial movie “The Selling of The Pentagon”, dealing with American political and military interests in Vietnam, Peter Davis had garnered the attention of Hollywood. Bert Schneider, a famous Hollywood producer, “wanted to produce an antiwar documentary focusing on government lying and the Pentagon Papers trials.⁴” In the early seventies there was growing sentiment that the war in Vietnam was an ever-deepening calamity committed by a series of presidents, and their respective governments, into what seemed an unmitigated quagmire of despair. “Despite its successes, the antiwar movement in the early seventies was in a desperate mood. The majority of Americans opposed the war on pragmatic

¹ Canby: “Hearts and Minds”

² Aufderheide: Documentary Film – A Very Short Introduction (p. 61)

³ Aufderheide: Documentary Film – A Very Short Introduction (p. 61)

⁴ Dittmar and Michaud (Editors), *From Hanoi to Hollywood – The Vietnam War in American Film*: Grosser, David: “We Aren’t on the Wrong Side, We Are the Wrong Side”: Peter Davis Targets American Hearts and Minds (p. 270)

grounds – more out of war weariness than principle.⁵ Bert Schneider and Peter Davis shared this desperation, because they saw the Vietnam War as an inherently immoral and oppressive campaign against a people struggling to be free. As a result “Hearts and Minds” took a different approach to persuading those Americans who were neither against the war nor against it on moral principles: To persuade the American people by showing them how the lives of the Vietnamese (in both North and South) had been disturbed by American military presence. The documentary focuses primarily on the effects the war has had on the people of Vietnam, the atrocities committed as part of organized strategy and how the Vietnamese people are overwhelmingly opposed to American presence. The intention of the documentary is thus to convince the (American) audience that Vietnam War is working against the very principles that America was founded on: The promise of freedom and representative government by the people and for the people. The same principles that America is preventing the Vietnamese from achieving based on the fear of the so-called “Domino-effect”. As such the documentary is “a part of a strategy to force apathetic, uninformed Americans to confront the reality of what the U.S. had done to Vietnam.”⁶ Indeed the failure of the antiwar-movement to persuade the American people to protest the war on moral grounds is one of the many major traumas of the Vietnam War and many who opposed the war were so appalled by their fellow Americans lack of involvement that they withdrew from lives of public protest and never returned. The form of the documentary “Hearts and Minds” follows some of the classic documentary genre’s conventions and leaves others out. There is no narrator, “voice of God” as it were, and thus there is no single account of the material presented. That is by no means saying that the material is not carefully crafted to elicit a particular response, as the director and producer behind the movie have strong feelings about the war. Rather, the lack of clear narration has a two-fold effect: Firstly to allow the viewer to form his or her own opinion and secondly to create a “Babylonian confusion” within the documentary itself, letting a cacophony of different voices underline the chaotic and profoundly obscure nature of the Vietnam War. With regard to the first aspect it is of incredible importance to note that even though the lack of narrative guidance suggests the viewer makes up his or her own mind, something quite democratic, there is no denying that the documentary has the clear and stated goal of persuading Americans of the folly and immoral character of the war. As such the documentary is not letting the viewer entirely off the hook: The viewer might think that it is

⁵ Dittmar and Michaud (Editors), *From Hanoi to Hollywood – The Vietnam War in American Film*: Grosser, David: “*We Aren’t on the Wrong Side, We Are the Wrong Side*”: Peter Davis Targets American Hearts and Minds (p. 270)

⁶ Dittmar and Michaud (Editors), *From Hanoi to Hollywood – The Vietnam War in American Film*: Grosser, David: “*We Aren’t on the Wrong Side, We Are the Wrong Side*”: Peter Davis Targets American Hearts and Minds (p. 270)

merely a movie documenting the Vietnam War, but it has a specific vantage point that is by no means open to democratic opinion-building.

Indeed, the documentary genre itself is not as straightforward as it might appear at first glance. One of the very first founders of the genre, documentarian John Grierson, defined the documentary genre as representational of a truth. He strongly believed that documentaries could be “a tool of education⁷” that could help a broad public to understand the specific topics for the genre. From the very start of documentary films the genre's claim to the concept of truth has been strained at best. It is always important to note that any documentary represents images, sounds and statements that might be completely truthful, but in the editing process the overall story told depends on the filmmakers. As such truth as a concept in documentary films is always representational and highly susceptible by the intentions of the filmmaker's choice of form and content.

Returning to the idea of “Babylonian confusion” it is apparent that Peter Davis plays on the initial confusion of the viewer with his choice of form. The documentary consists of various tracks that are woven together and fiercely juxtaposed to underline the filmmaker's points and to underline those opposing them. These tracks consist of actual footage from Vietnam, both archival and that made by Peter Davis and his crew, interviews, archival footage of presidents' speeches, intimate observations and news footage. To add further to this idea of “Babylonian confusion” the material is not presented with any clear chronological sequencing and at first glance severely confuses the viewer. Nevertheless, everything is very carefully prepared to have the tracks merge towards the end. There are six tracks throughout the documentary and none of them are mutually exclusive that is to say they do overlap and intermingle. The first track is “the military track” that incorporates clips from old war movies and war musicals from WWII, clips of military parades in the US and interviews with military officials and GIs. The second track is “the political track” that deals with clips of presidents and politicians describing their positions on the Vietnam War, journalists and experts describing the Vietnam War as well as the marches on Washington by antiwar protesters. The third track is “the American culture track” that deals with the various aspects of American culture at home such as football games, parades, ordinary peoples' lives, churchgoing and school and family structures. The fourth track is “the Vietnam War track” that combines archival footage of the war, some of which has now passed into iconic status, as well as interviews with GIs on the front lines, bombings and strafing runs from helicopters. The fifth track

⁷ Aufderheide: *Documentary Film – A Very Short Introduction* (p. 35)

is “the Veterans’ track” that deals with returning veterans and their experience of Vietnam. Finally the sixth and most important track is “the Vietnamese track” that goes in depth with the feelings and opinions of the Vietnamese people towards the American presence and the Vietnam War in general. This group is comprised of peasants, villagers, exiles, businessmen and clergymen. In different ways the juxtapositioning of these tracks broadens the scope of the “Babylonian confusion” mentioned above and in other ways it helps to underline certain points without a narrative as well as undermine statements made by the interviewed or by those presenting arguments in archival footage.

The movie opens with scenes from the village Hung Dinh, which we are told is northwest of Saigon. The villagers there are going about their everyday life as farmers while Vietnamese music is added to give the sense of a Vietnam with ordinary people. The scene’s purpose is to put the viewer, from the very beginning, in Vietnam. But not only the geographical Vietnam, but also the more abstract concept: the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people. Having the audience identify with the Vietnamese is essential to the movie. These scenes are in a sense idyllic, but their picturesque nature is soon disturbed by the ominous presence of American GIs walking through the village. Though there is no interaction between the villagers and the GIs the clip foreshadows what the viewer already knows: namely that the Vietnamese and the Americans are on a collision course with each other. Indeed as the movie changes into various presidents describing the Vietnamese people and the Vietnam War itself a clip from a press conference given by Lyndon B. Johnson underlines the very idea of the movie: “So we must be ready to fight in Vietnam, but the ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live over there.⁸” This quote has quintessential significance as it has provided not only the title for the documentary itself, but it proposes the thesis of the film: The war can only be won if the people of Vietnam can be won over to the side of the American cause. If that is impossible the war is a lost cause. In the early parts of the documentary Peter Davis attempts to give a clearer picture of how the Vietnam War began and one of the people interviewed is Walt Rostow who was National Security Advisor under Kennedy and Johnson and a strong anti-communist throughout his time in that office. Rostow is asked what the reasons for going into Vietnam were and Rostow becomes increasingly aggravated at the question: “Are you really asking me this goddamn silly question?⁹” Rostow is clearly upset that he is being asked what he, one of the key architects of American policy in South-East Asia, perceives to be basic question and he goes further and

⁸ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [5:25]

⁹ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [7:52]

describes the question as “pretty pedestrian” and “sophomoric stuff”. Peter Davis in the one time his voice is actually heard in the documentary responds to Rostow posturing by saying: “There’s a lot of disagreement...¹⁰”, but he is immediately interrupted by Rostow before he has a chance to finish: “No there’s not. There’s no doubt.¹¹” Peter Davis does not go further into an argument with Rostow, but lets Rostow describe what he sees as the reasons for American involvement in the war. However, the viewer never sees Rostow’s description as Peter Davis cuts away from the interview. The effect is clear: The clip was never intended to show Rostow’s answer, but show his reaction to the question. In that light Rostow appears arrogant and derogatory towards Peter Davis and by extension to the audience. Though the comments are indeed his own Rostow looks belligerent and thus Peter Davis is successful in portraying a major architect of the Vietnam War as angry and impetuous. Rostow of course is not evil personified, but this portrayal of him is symptomatic of the editing techniques Peter Davis uses in “Hearts and Minds”. The viewer never gets to hear Rostow’s full answer and he is only presented in two other scenes in the movie, so there is never a full analysis as to his specific role as National Security Advisor. All the viewer is left with is a very skewed perception of Rostow based on the emotional response Peter Davis had intended.

Two interviews juxtaposed of the two Vietnam veterans Lieutenant George Coker and former Captain Randy Floyd describes their time as pilots during the Vietnam War. Though the two men describe their experience of flying planes and dropping bombs very similarly, it is their subsequent reflection on their actions that diverge and show two men that provoke very different emotional responses from the viewer. Lieutenant Coker describes his missions as “strictly professionalism¹²” and Captain Floyd says: “You never heard the explosion. You never saw any blood or screams. It was clean. You’re doing a job. (...) I was a technician.¹³” Through their descriptions we are presented with two servicemen who did not consider themselves soldiers per se as they did were never confronted with the consequences of their actions. Unlike GIs they were far removed from the fighting on the ground and they never saw the craters or the bombed out landscapes their missions caused. Peter Davis ensures that the viewer is not afforded any such luxury. Juxtaposed with the interviews of the two men describing the technical ingenuity of their missions are clips of bombers dropping ordnances on the Vietnamese landscape and villages. This is again juxtaposed with images of children at play in a peaceful village. The juxtapositioning is intentionally eerie. The documentary cuts to scenes of the village Hung Dinh that was idyllically

¹⁰ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [8:29]

¹¹ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [8:30]

¹² Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [24.36]

¹³ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [24:46]

portrayed at the very start. It is now ruined by American bombing raids, the very same that Lieutenant Coker and Captain Floyd conducted. Peter Davis interviews the inhabitants of the village as well as film them in the town and he shows haunting images of destruction. There are no more children in Hung Dinh village, but there is a pair of small shoes at the outskirts of a bomb crater as well as grieving parents, families and homes destroyed. Lieutenant Coker is throughout the film appearing in what appear to be army public relations functions or giving talks to groups of people. As such much of what he is saying is blind optimism and faith in his country. Peter Davis uses the fact that Lieutenant Coker is speaking as a public relations-puppet rather than necessarily giving his own thoughts on the war against him. Lieutenant Coker is represented as the worst of American patriotism: A man who, apparently, has given little if any serious thought to the nature of the American involvement in the Vietnam War. Perhaps the thoughts Lieutenant Coker describes in “Hearts and Minds” are his own, the viewer will never know, but for every line of public relation material he delivers he is portrayed even more as unwitting puppet, especially considering the ideological context inherent in the documentary. Peter Davis portrays Captain Floyd with much more empathy, as Captain Floyd seems to have spent time conceptualizing his actions in Vietnam very succinctly: “I never dropped napalm, but I dropped other things just as bad. I dropped CBU’s, which can’t destroy anything. It’s meant for people. It’s an anti-personnel weapon.¹⁴” Captain Floyd clearly acknowledges his own physical removal from the actual combat, but acknowledges his complicity in a campaign specifically designed to kill people. Completely unlike Lieutenant Coker Captain Floyd goes even further and shows a great deal of empathy himself to the situation of the Vietnamese, by reflecting on how he would feel had his family been the victims of a napalm bombing: “But I look at my children now and, uh... I don’t know what would happen if, uh, what I would think about if someone napalmed them.¹⁵” He barely finishes his sentence before the very thought of his kids being napalmed overwhelms him. He hangs his head and wipes away tears.

Father Chan Tin, a clergyman from Saigon, who describes the Vietnamese effort to keep invaders out for over a millennium and how the Vietnam War changed in the hands of the American: “ (...) this war became a war of genocide. The people of North Vietnam and South Vietnam fight only for freedom, independence and national unity.¹⁶” Shortly after this interview Peter Davis injects scenes from Croton, New York where people are celebrating the American war of independence and a man dressed in contemporary uniform tells a small crowd: “What we are

¹⁴ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [1:45:08]

¹⁵ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [1:45:43]

¹⁶ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [27:06]

trying to put across here this afternoon is to get you to realize that these (...) were very real people.¹⁷” This is perhaps the most poignant piece of juxtaposition in the entire documentary. Though the man is talking of the Americans who fought the war on American soil it is striking that this sentiment could be expressed by the Vietnamese people. It could very well have been Peter Davis saying these words. It is synergetic of what is at the core of “Hearts and Minds”: Americans, even some of those who are soldiers in the war in Vietnam have lost sight of the fact that the Vietnamese are human beings and that their wanton destruction has become an act that is scarcely reflected on. This point is even more sinister when the Vietnamese struggle against the Americans is compared to the American struggle against the British. Peter Davis suggests that not only have Americans lost their sense of history, but that they themselves have tragically become the same kind of belligerent and warlike nation they themselves sought to escape. American’s interference in the politics of Vietnam becomes even more deeply tragic when the documentary shifts to how Ho Chi Minh, the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, after having visited the United States felt that the two countries shared many similarities and that surely the Americans would support a democratic rule in Vietnam. The fact that he is a Marxist-Leninist prevents any real cooperation from America. Walt Rostow comments on Ho Chi Minh: “The Ho Chi Minh of ‘56 I don’t think could have got elected dog catcher in South Vietnam.¹⁸” As Rostow is a part of established government policy the viewer makes the connection that Rostow extremely dismissive of Ho Chi Minh as the administrations have been that Vietnam would ever want to be a country lead, even if democratically, by a communist government. Rostow’s comment is immediately followed up by a comment from Daniel Ellsberg, a former military analyst who released the controversial Pentagon Papers in 1971, who has a different take on the popularity of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam: “Ho Chi Minh dead [laughs] could beat any candidate we’ve ever put up in Vietnam.¹⁹” In this sense Ellsberg’s comment completely undermines Rostow’s and indeed the ideology that Rostow stood for and the policies of the administrations he worked for. It is Peter Davis’ explicit point that the administration was so blinded by a fear of the domino effect that they were unable to face the apparent truth: That the Vietnamese people would fight indefinitely against the American presence and that they would never accept the puppet government of South Vietnam installed by the Americans. As Muc Duc Giang, a carpenter in Saigon, says when talking about the atrocities committed by the Americans: “(...) we can’t talk about it. We can’t talk about it, because we are

¹⁷ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [27:40]

¹⁸ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [31:05]

¹⁹ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [31:10]

afraid of the government.²⁰” The cultural effects of the American war of attrition in Vietnam are clear. The Vietnamese people portrayed in “Hearts and Minds” are brokenhearted, disgusted and afraid of the Americans. Whatever role the Americans think they are playing in the liberation of the Vietnamese people they are misguided. As Daniel Ellsberg remarks later in the documentary: “Basically we didn’t want to acknowledge the scale of our involvement there. We didn’t want to realize it was our war, because that would have been to say that every casualty on both sides was a casualty caused by our policy. The question used to be: Might it be possible that we were on the wrong side in the Vietnamese War? But we weren’t on the wrong side. We *are* the wrong side.²¹” Americans quite literally had blood on their hands, but the public was only slowly backing out of the Vietnam War and as mentioned earlier not due to moral qualms.

Despite the fact that *Hearts and Minds* won an Academy Award for best Documentary in 1975 it was received with a storm of controversy. The controversy was to be expected and had to do with both the intentions of the producer and director, but also the form they used as well as the controversial topic. The documentary is extremely one-sided in its perspective insofar as it gives credence and credibility to those points of view the filmmaker agrees with, such as Ellsberg, and makes a mockery of those they disagree with, such as Rostow. It does not, nor does it intend to, line up both sides of an argument and discuss and analyze the reasons behind the war and why it was still being fought. It is assumed in the movie that the war is a perversion that is a clear result of a combination of the fear of the spread of communism in the world, an unprecedented military force in history and an American public that only slowly rose in opposition, if at all, to the policies of their government. Everything else flows from that assumption. But even as the documentary tries to convince Americans that the “Hearts and Minds” they were supposed to be winning in Vietnam are lost it does not try to point a specific finger of blame in a clear and meaningful way. The documentary, and Peter Davis by extension, places some of the blame on the policies of various administrations, but never goes into depth with why this dissemination of these policies into the public sphere were never questioned. Though in several instances Americans not involved in the war effort are portrayed as almost willfully ignorant of the war and its consequences there is no clear discussion of how the unengaged American public are at fault in the horrendous calamity of the war effort. In a very tragic way the documentary emulates the antiwar movement’s desperate grief and outrage. The documentary is too belligerently liberal, in the American sense of the word, to open a discussion with the “other side”. And though it was probably for many an eye-opening

²⁰ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [34:15]

²¹ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [1:22:59]

experience it did neither dramatically alter the course of the war effort, nor the moral apprehension of the war to those who weren't already initiated in the antiwar movement. Peter Davis had a major operation set in motion but it can be argued whether or not the movie actually changed American hearts and minds. As the American journalist Peter Biskind described the documentary: "Hearts and Minds is the Vietnam film to end all Vietnam films, a million dollar Vietnam spectacular. By deploying the vast resources of a major Hollywood production company, wildly beyond anything imaginable by the anti-war film-makers who labored doggedly on their grainy black and white documentaries during the sixties, it reveals the aspiration to have the last word, to get, finally, to the root of the problem."²² Peter Biskind is very critical of this aspiration and it can certainly very open to discussion whether or not that specific aspiration has been met. Considering what was mentioned earlier it is certainly improbable to consider "Hearts and Minds" the definitive account of Vietnam. To that end it is too biased and too viscerally emotional to bring understanding of the behemoth construct the Vietnam War became, both in Vietnam and America. That is by no means an implication that "Hearts and Minds" is worthless as a simulacrum of the Vietnam War, but it is incredibly important when considering the documentary to remember the contextual intentions of the filmmakers. They represent a contemporary desperation over an incredibly horrible war and at an American people that, in their minds, is inattentive to the tremendous suffering on both sides.

The quote by Lyndon B. Johnson about winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese that Peter Davis chosen so centrally for his documentary is now clearly crystallized for the audience: Their hearts and minds have been lost and with that the war itself. At the time the documentary was released the Vietnam War had not ended and though Peter Davis wanted the movie to fuel the anti-war movement he also wanted Americans to consider their nation's, and by extension their, actions. Returning to Captain Floyd's reflections on the war and if anything has been learned from Vietnam he says: "I think we're trying not to. I think I'm trying no to sometimes. I can't even cry easily. From my, uh, my manhood, uh, image. I think American's have tried, we've all tried very hard to escape what we've learned in Vietnam, to not come to the nat- the logical conclusions of what, what's happened there." Captain Floyd's statements make up apart of the conclusion of "Hearts and Minds" in the sense that he, through Peter Davis, expresses the most bitter lesson of the Vietnam Conflict: "(...) people fighting for their own freedom...uh, are not gonna be stopped by just changing your tactics (...) those kind of forces are not gonna be

²² Jacobs, Lewis: *The Documentary Tradition, Second Edition*: Peter Biskind: *Hearts and Minds* (p. 551)

stopped.²³” This point that again is so tragically ironic considering American history is the climax of the documentary. Though individuals like Randy Floyd have learned dearly bought lessons from the Vietnam War it is unclear, however, what lessons Americans will have learned from the Vietnam War. The political controversies surrounding the Vietnam War linger to this day and are largely unresolved in American history. The nation has not yet fully recovered from the Vietnam War to this day, in part because of vitriolic differences, to which “Hearts and Minds” certainly have attributed and because of the lack of reflection on the lessons of the Vietnam War, America has to some extent continued similar policies ever since. And thus “Hearts and Minds”, though it is contextually and contemporarily bound to the 60’s and 70’s it is still tragically relevant to this day.

²³ Davis, Peter “Hearts and Minds” (1974) [1:47:08]

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