Cinéma-vérité at War: Schoendoerffer, Vietnam and The Anderson Platoon

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The Anderson Platoon (1967), directed by the French Director Pierre Schoendoerffer, is a black and white cinéma vérité film that offers the realism of the Vietnam War: a deeper truth that cannot be seen with the naked eye. The film makes a direct reference to the French defeat in the First Indochina War (1947-1954) by the nationalist Vietnamese with military and financial support from China and the Soviet Union. The Americans took up the French interests and faults in Vietnam that shaped the Second Indochina War (1954-1975) between the National Liberation Front and the Communist North because of the deep-rooted American fear of Communism.

President, Lyndon B. Johnson, in the torrent of American “militarily invincible muscle,” escalated the Vietnam War from 16,000 American soldiers in 1963 to 550,000 in early 1968 in the defense of the freedom of South Vietnam under the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, 1964. The first US troops were thrown into a complete alien environment where they could hardly identify the enemy or the animosity. Schoendoerffer chronicles the six-week experience of an American, racially-integrated 1st Cavalry infantry platoon combat unit, led by a black West Pointer, Lt. Joseph B. Anderson in South Vietnam. The cinéma vérité, a fly-on-the-wall, unobtrusive filming technique is used to avoid the fabrication of a subjective spectacle of war. The Anderson Platoon reflects real experiences of the real soldiers without making a political comment on war, which challenges the paradox of the ideology of war.

Lt. Joseph B. Anderson

The Anderson Platoon combines naturalistic documentary film techniques with storytelling methods of a fiction film to shoot anxieties of the American GIs in an alien environment. It is nonepisodic, and follows the chronology of historical events. It uses genuine locations and natural lighting to capture scriptless and unrehearsed actualities of the Vietnam War. The movements of the subjects carry the sense of atmospheric light and shade, and changes that give an insight in the world of war. The film deals with the rhythm of the movement without getting into the complexities of individual stories.
The sync-sound technique is used primarily for capturing real conversations of the soldiers, the interviews and statements of the suspects, the soldier soliloquies in the form of songs, and the ambiance, and the original and natural sound effects of the real locations. The birds’ chirping sounds juxtapose with the shots of the soldiers trotting through streams in the jungle. The sounds of the chopper’s churning fans while landing or taking off are juxtaposed with the impact shots of the gust blown through the crops in the fields. The sound of children crying is juxtaposed with shots of the soldiers taking away their parents following an investigation. Guns firing and the sounds of launchers being loaded are juxtaposed with a luncheon, a game, or a sermon or communion by the priest as he reminds each soldier ‘the body of Christ.’ Classic tunes are laid over the very few shots of the South Vietnamese people in the film during investigations, the opening as well as the ogling shots of the wandering souls of prostitutes and beggars, but not over the enemy, the unburied dead from North Vietnam. The era music as well as the songs made by the soldiers are part of life in the combat zone, in the bush and bunkers. Original sound, little music, narration, realism and extreme naturalism, and the absence of substantial postproduction techniques—unnatural sound effects or special effects—draw a complex picture of the war.

This Polyphonic montage offers abstract ideas mirroring a disturbing disparity in the visual content to draw a conceptually complex picture of the war. The pure intellectual abstraction is juxtaposed with the imaginative romanticism, which is in turn juxtaposed against the horror of the war. This sequence juxtaposes the powerful narration desiring “to appease all the souls of the unburied dead, the wandering souls of the beggars, prostitutes, and soldiers” and desires the viewer to transition from optimistic innocence to the experiential reality of war.

The Anderson Platoon draws a complex picture of the uncertainties of the American GIs. The unobtrusive, repetitive sequences expose close-ups that freeze and transition into wide-shots to reveal a compassionate picture of the American jungle-ridden soldiers. The ‘freeze frames’ of their close-ups assert the significance of their names, origins, and ages (18 to 24 years) to mirror the perpetual tension, anger, and pathos of war on their young faces. In this alien environment, the soldiers eat, sleep, drink, smoke, fight the uncertainties of the small group wars with the Viet Cong of the North-based National Liberation Front, and die. The realism of their circumstances challenges the legitimacy of war. Robert McConnell says the cinéma vérité tradition revolts against the classic conventions of seeing life as rational and orderly and the romantic traditions of seeing life emotionally more satisfying than it really is. The Anderson Platoon deals “with the general folly and daily grind of [war]” (Salamon). The film amalgamates the imaginative beauty of symbols, landscapes, and humans with danger, horror, and tension: the experiential reality of the American militarily invincible muscle in Vietnam.

The Anderson Platoon is Schoendorf’er’s political comment on the world’s most fundamental issues. Its complex subject matter offers a chance to understand war culture, and soldiers’ positions within it, and their feelings about it. The Anderson Platoon is concerned with reality rather than ideology of war in the name of peace, and the perfection of actions that condemn the American dream.