26 / Cinéma-Vérité at War: Schoendoerffer, Vietnam and The Anderson Platoon

Wajiha Raza Rizvi

Historical Background

The Anderson Platoon (1967), directed by Pierre Schoendoerffer, is a cinéma-vérité account of the Vietnam War. The film makes 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 Soviet Union. The Americans followed the French into Vietnam because of their deep-rooted fear of Communism, which shaped the Second Indochina War (1954-1975) between the Communist North and the South-based National Liberation Front.
In an escalation of the war, US President Lyndon B. Johnson escalated the American troop base from 16,000 in 1963 to 550,000 in early 1968 in defence of the freedom of South Vietnam under the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of 1964. The Americans threw the first US troops into a totally alien environment where they could hardly identify the enemy or their animosity. An initial US reluctance to attack or form a clear policy for the region gave way to the full-blown commitment of American military might, just as they had beaten Indians, French, British, Spaniards, Germans, Italians, Mexicans, Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese in the past.¹

Shot in black-and-white, the film chronicles the six-week experiences in South Vietnam of a racially-integrated US 1st Cavalry infantry platoon combat unit led by a black West Pointer, Lt. Joseph B. Anderson. *Cinéma-vérité* techniques are used to avoid the fabrication of a subjective spectacle of war. The ‘cinema truth’ of *The Anderson Platoon* reflects the experiences of real soldiers without making a political comment on war, but at the same time challenging official ideologies of conflict.

The overall structure of *The Anderson Platoon* involves a loose chronological narrative. We get to know the individual and collective stories of a group of emotionally troubled soldiers fighting and dying together. Schoendoerffer does not deal with the interior or personal lives of his subjects, simply the externals of their involvement in the war. Narrative links among the sequences are made through groupings of persons involved in particular activities, and there are some startling contrasts in scenes of waking up, eating, drinking, and singing.
The Anderson Platoon depicts the uncertainties experienced by the American GIs. Close-ups freeze and transition into wide-shots to reveal a compassionate picture of their jungle plight. The freeze frames assert the significance of their names, origins, and ages (18 to 24) as they express the perpetual tension, anger, and pathos of war on young faces. In this alien environment, the soldiers eat, sleep, drink, smoke, and engage with the uncertainties of their guerilla war with the Viet Cong of the North-based National Liberation Front. They also die.

The Poetics of Cinéma-Vérité

The Anderson Platoon combines naturalistic documentary film techniques with the storytelling methods of a fiction film. It follows the chronology of historical events. It uses genuine locations and natural lighting to capture some of the unscripted and unrehearsed actualities of the Vietnam War. The movements of the subjects in the beautifully composed frames convey a sense of the atmospheric light and shade against which the war was fought. The film amalgamates the imaginative beauty of landscapes and human beings with the tension, dangers and horror of war.

It opens with a montage sequence revealing the inverted reflection of a lone farmer ploughing rice paddies, people traveling in gondolas, static images of the gods in a timeless shrine, a tree reaching to the sky, smoke, and clouds over green mountains. The inverted image of the lone farmer perhaps signifies an inversion - or subversion - of life in Vietnam. It also points to a desire for production and growth while the shot of the bulls, seen from behind, suggests the obstruction of fertility, strength, and stamina. The gondolas
suggest movement, but also the cycle of life caught between dark, sharp edges, and pointed verticals.

The gods in the shrine signify an overarching observance of lifeless lands; the lone tree implies a drive for production and growth despite its loneliness. The green symbolises creation, but the smoke and the clouds float above and mourn the vigour of the green mountains. This polyphonic montage offers abstract ideas mirroring a disturbing disparity in the visual content to draw a conceptually complex picture of the conflict. Intellectual abstraction is juxtaposed with imaginative romanticism, which is in turn contrasted with the horror of the war.

The opening sequence features a powerful narration seeking “to appease all the souls of the unburied dead, the wandering souls of the beggars, prostitutes, and soldiers” and wishes the viewer to shift from optimistic innocence to the experiential reality of war. Classic tunes are laid over shots of the South Vietnamese people during investigations, as well as shots of the wandering souls of prostitutes and beggars, but not over the enemy, the unburied dead. Period music as well as soldier soliloquies in the form of songs are part of life in the combat zone, in the bush, and in the bunkers. Sync-sound is used primarily for capturing the soldier soliloquies and conversations, the interviews and statements of the suspects, and the ambience, the original and natural sound effects of real locations.

In the absence of substantive postproduction techniques - sound effects or special effects - original sound, period music, narration, realism and extreme naturalism draw a complex picture of the war. The chirping of birds is juxtaposed with shots of soldiers trotting through streams in the jungle; the
sound of children crying is linked to shots of soldiers taking away their parents following an investigation. The sounds of the chopper’s churning fans on landing or take-off are juxtaposed with the impact of the gusts blown through the crops in the fields. The sounds of gunfire and loading launchers are contrasted with a meal, a game, a sermon, or communion as the priest commends the body of Christ to soldiers.

Questions of Naturalism and Artifice

Occasionally a sense of fiction enters the world of cinematic naturalism, as when a soldier catches sight of the camera in the low-angle shot of the soldier and his mate at the roadside during the parade. The camera and the subject relationship and distance hint at mutual awareness, however natural. The soldier’s overall behaviour from the moment he picks up the girl and spends time with her in the hotel room is mirrored by the excitement of the camera’s altered behavior during this sequence. These sequences appear to be improvised and constructed and lack the power of true Cinéma-Vérité.

Schoendoerffer assimilates certain events from the lives of the subjects who are truly occupied in their primary activities during the combat scenes, but in more casual scenes like those of waking up, picking up the letters and communal bathing the viewer is aware of the possibility of simulation and performing for the camera and microphone. In the waking up scene, some soldiers appear to improvise waking up naturally for another day of military operations – but we need to bear in mind that all this was recorded so they would live and be remembered after death.
In the letter scene, the camera is placed at a low angle to shoot the picking up of the bundle and letters. The shot looks very natural, but it is unlikely to have been accidental. In the following sequence, the GIs share letters and the picture of a nude woman in *Playboy* magazine and express their feelings. The magazine scene seems to be simulated, like the studio shots of the radio DJ. These sequences are quite unlike the rest of the film and its commitment to exposure of the tedium, treachery, and animosity of war.

In the scenes depicting the village raid, the vacated camouflaged Viet Cong camp in the jungle, and the investigation of locals suspects of spying in the village, we do not see the enemy, is who is instead implied. The enemy strategically appears in the last part of the film which leads to triumph in the trenches after a tough war. The US soldiers’ death and injury scenes are recorded with sensitivity, care and compassion, as are the scenes rendering the injuries of the Vietnamese. The images of the US cargo helicopter crashing on take-off are recorded naturally from the point of departure onwards, and intimate images convey the monotony and apathy of war as soldiers eat, smoke, sing, and chat normally at the site of the accident. The editing does not aim at slanting the meaning of the actuality and the ambience captured naturalistically by the camera and microphone.

**Images of Race and Sexuality**

*The Anderson Platoon* mirrors the wartime realities of everyday life and the sensitivity and insensitivity of race relations among members of the American racially-integrated platoon and the citizens of Vietnam. The film shows the soldiers sleeping, singing, and swimming together,
sharing food, pictures, letters, and indulging in *Playboy*, and a white soldier comforting a black wounded soldier or tending to an injured Vietnamese boy who clutches a white hat in his teeth.

Vietnamese children hover around the platoon during the pig-roasting scene, which includes inserts of a little girl licking her fingers and a naked boy coming to join them for a bite to eat, a black soldier trimming hair of a white soldier, and the GIs giving first aid to sick and wounded Vietnamese children. In another scene, the noise of a machine-gun is juxtaposed with a shot of a calm and quiet Vietnamese baby in his mother’s arms. In the concluding scene, the film reveals the tragedy of war as a white soldier falls besides a black wounded soldier while others still fight.

To build a sense of the soldiers’ desire for release from these pressures, the film follows a GI into Saigon nightclubs for rest and recuperation. There are links here with the stereotypical images of Vietnamese soldiers visiting the nightclubs and dancers depicted by Ron Steinman, who, ironically, draws a paradoxical parallel between 60s and 70s Saigon and Studio 54 in New York: Maxime, the centre for glitz, corruption, prostitution, and drugs, “looked like a set for a 1930s gangster movie, but in color”².

The film also evokes the sexual rapacity of solders at war in a foreign land. It shows nightclubs, hotels, and American soldiers pursuing Vietnamese whores. The scenes that follow the young farmer-soldier from North Carolina into Saigon are conveyed by a smooth camera movement on the crowded pavement besides the road, continuity shots from back and front, and 180-degree camera movement when we come to the kissing scene in a small room. It would obviously be
difficult to create these kinds of shots without on-the-spot planning, though the inserts of the poor people and beggars sleeping on the side of the road in this sequence are highly naturalistic.

**Ideological Outcomes**

The Vietnam War in all its original social and geo-political complexity raises questions over the capacity of film and television to handle conflict situations. While the film does not offer a direct political judgment of the binaries of war, *The Anderson Platoon* offers a chance to understand the 'culture' of war, soldiers' positions within it, and their feelings about it. The film thus promotes a humanistic picture of war. Its realism strongly differentiates it from escapist fiction and Hollywood fantasy. This technique unpacks the war history without compromising authenticity. *The Anderson Platoon* preserves a compassionate picture of war, revealing the everyday lives, in all their alternating joys, disorientation, and pain, of the some of the soldiers involved in it. The film evinces a unity between camera and subjects that determines the ultimate political merit of the film.

*The Anderson Platoon* then also amounts to “a sermon on human waste that draws the viewer into a void as objectively as any war movie ever made”, as Howard Thompson said of a contemporary documentary, *A Face of War* (Eugene S. Jones, USA, 1968). ³ As Peter Harcourt argues: “propaganda’s function to be simplistic and incantatory ... while setting out to be anti-American [The Anderson Platoon]ends up creating a picture so complex that it is hard to range ourselves on one particular side ... The film is complex in its surface simplification of the good/evil paradigm."⁴ As Harcourt suggests, while the film does not call for social action, the
sense of sorrow which permeates the film promises to leave the audience disturbed by the uncertainties involved, and may equally give rise to anti-war sentiments in its troubled spectators.

Notes and References


