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HEARTS AND MINDS
AN ENSEMBLE PIECE THAT GIVES THE VIETNAMESE A SPACE IN THEIR OWN HISTORY

BY WAJIHAR RIZVI

Forty years ago, the provocative documentary on the Vietnam War Hearts and Minds (1973) received a rapturous premier at the Cannes Film Festival. Yet its release created such vitriol due to its demonstrative anti-war stance that legal action, protests, and refusal of distribution by major theatre distributors and studios besieged the film's release. The film is a landmark piece in the history of war documentaries winning the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 47th Academy Awards in 1975 and inspiring a new generation of young documentary film-makers such as Michael Moore and Roger Weisberg.

"The ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there," said President Lyndon B. Johnson at the time of escalation of American involvement in the Vietnam War. Though Peter Davis, the director, used Lyndon B. Johnson's vocabulary to name his film, according to critic Judith Crist, Hearts and Minds, the film renders a greater concern for the hearts and minds of the American public compared to the concern expressed by the President. Edited down to about a 1:100 shooting ratio, Hearts and Minds compiles incidents, anecdotes, popular music, news footage and interviews, and Hollywood movie clips to reveal paradoxes of public rationale in juxtaposition to the Vietnamese vignettes. Hearts and Minds avoids the use of chronology because of its specific treatment. It uses the incongruity of opposing arguments to mirror the reality of the paradox of the ten-year long Vietnam War: a high number of American casualties, country-wide demonstrations and protests, unsavory international reputation, and bitter political and social repercussions. As such, Hearts and Minds challenges the notions of American ideology and dramatize, patriotism as well as personal and political ethics and principles that are amplified by the passage of time.

Hearts and Minds is a historical, anti-war, non-chronological, compilation film. It contains the highly controversial and contradictory imagery of the international and domestic turmoil over American involvement in Vietnam. The film brings together, what Judith Crist calls, "Davis' directorial style" dedicated to "even-handedness in counter-pointing the American and the Vietnamese experience." Hearts and Minds outlines the American hawkishness in Vietnam through compiling the news footage and interviews of the Vietnamese, French, and American hawks and doves, politicians, statesmen, advisers, and senior officials, that Crist says, were recorded in 1972 and 1973. The film mirrors the duplicity of the Russian as well as the American vested interests, diplomatic and economic, in the region, the key reason behind the Russian support for the Communist North and the American support for the French rule in South Vietnam. As a documentary, Hearts and Minds reveals the paradox of the American war against Communism in the contradicting statements of the American Presidents - Johnson, Nixon, Kennedy and Eisenhower - who state that the French colonial interests were taken up by the Americans to continue the export of "the tin and tungsten." This film sequence juxtaposes devastating war
imagery mirroring the Vietnamese situation, rage, frustration, suffering, poverty, prostitution and decadence, and the exiled leaders.

By contrasting the American public rationale to the Vietnamese vignettes, *Hearts and Minds* reveals the apathy of the irrational, but hilarious meanings. The shots of GIs chatting about their American girlfriends while fondling the Vietnamese women in adjoining beds are edited with GIs burning thatched huts, herding old villagers and children, or striking young men to the ground with their rifles. A sequence reveals a paradox of a Saigon businessman confused about wartime losses that can be covered through American franchises in the time of peace. A worker polishing pink plastic turns out to be a technician fitterting a prosthetic leg onto a veteran patient in a hospital. A Massachusetts couple judges the system’s performance against the loss of their son; a paraplegic veteran laments his loss of an ideological commitment; a former bomber pilot is transformed into a remorseful parent; and a “Victory in Vietnam” parade juxtaposes an amnesty debate to “give peace a chance”; and General Westmoreland devalues the “Oriental’s” morality of life and war against the West in contrast to a Native American veteran who expresses his wartime desires “to go out” to “kill some gooks!”

*Hearts and Minds* makes a moral comment by creating a huminized picture of the Vietnamese without turning them into victims of fate. The film creates a marvelous empathy by giving both North and South Vietnamese a space in their own history; for example, it does not celebrate the death of the enemy; a young North Vietnamese ingénue, or subsequently the pain of her family in a U.S. bombing raid on civilians. *Hearts and Minds* also does not celebrate the business boom of a wartime blank-eyed coffin maker from South Vietnam who, Crist says, “wonders aloud when the killing will end.” These horrific pictures of common people are loaded with grief, anxiety, fear, pain, and uncertainty that, Brigham says, challenge the “efficacy and ethics” of the Vietnam War. The intertextuality of these sequences raises a question of the policies and politics of representation of the innocent victims.

In the film, director Peter Davis confronts the stereotypes of the Vietnamese government and the military corruption, the American ideology and policies, and the media politics of specified terms and conditions. It is a political comment of the tedium, apathy, and treachery of the war of South Vietnamese independence being fought by the revolutionary postcolonial American freedom fighters who are turned into compulsive winners who desire to “kill the competition” on all grounds, from battlefields to football fields. This spirit is mirrored in the contradicting views of Colonel George S. Patton III who calls his hawks “everest, determined, a bloody good bunch of killers” and a high-school football coach who directs his team to play for victory and says, “Win! Kill ‘em, Win!” *Hearts and Minds* shows the Vietnamese as culturally resilient enemies who, Crist says, can counter the hawks’ technology with “sheer human effort and remarkable ingenuity.” The intertextuality of the narrative confronts the paradoxes of international policies, peace, liberation, and reconciliation as the last interviewee says, “Americans don’t understand that these people are fighting for their freedom.” A marvelous ensemble piece mirroring multicultural positions of Vietnam, *Hearts and Minds* desires the audience to rethink the Vietnam experience by making a political comment of the American involvement in Vietnam War.

Wajha Raza Rizvi is founding director of Film Museum Society Lahore. She collects the archives of Pakistani cinema, conducts research, produces films, and provides consultancy to established media institutions.
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