

STUDENT HEARTS AND MINDS: TEACHING THE VIETNAM WAR WITH DOCUMENTARY FILM

Margaret Orelup
Keene State College

"There is a power in film that just cannot be captured with words," wrote a student about a documentary on the Vietnam War, summing up the general sentiment of the class. Documentaries are invaluable tools for teaching the Vietnam War within an American survey course, a twentieth-century course, or a course on the war itself. They vivify events, present information, serve as springboards for discussion, and offer windows into the changing public memory of the war. They assist visual and auditory learners. They provide unique insights; several students have commented that they gained a more nuanced understanding of a policymaker by seeing him on film.

At the same time, teaching with a documentary film offers an opportunity to teach film literacy skills. Students tend to watch documentaries with more trust than they give other sources. One of my students once clinched an argument with "I know it's true. I saw it on the History Channel." Students tend not to question film as they would documents regarding purpose, audience, and evidence. They don't fully notice the editing, images, or music that support or undermine a speaker's credibility and create an argument.¹ Using film in the classroom can open discussions of the war and of film techniques. Below is a selection of films that present an overview of the war and stimulate classroom discussions.

Nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary, *In the Year of the Pig* reflects its 1958 release date in its sense of urgency and its assumption that the viewer has a basic level of background knowledge. For this reason, it is best watched after students have completed readings or lecture. The film is an impassioned but reasoned protest. Dispensing with a narrator, director Emile de Antonio presents a montage of film clips in which successive experts contradict each other and visual evidence contradicts spoken testimony. The emergent argument is that United States strategists erred in their initial reasons for intervention, that the war was unnecessary. If the viewer accepts de Antonio's argument, then the war's brutality as portrayed in the film becomes the more terrible because it is on behalf of mistake. *In the Year of the Pig* is strong on the historical origins of the war both in Vietnam and the U.S. The viewer might not always agree with de Antonio, but his film is rich in information and imagery that makes it both a powerful starting point for discussion and a helpful supplement to

¹For an introduction to the techniques and philosophical issues of documentary film, see Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary Film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001). Documentaries frequently make oral history their basis, an issue considered by Michael Frisch in "Oral History, Documentary, and the Mystification of Power: A Critique of *Vietnam: A Television History*," *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1990), 159-79, ch. 7.

a text. One student commented, "Although it covers similar topics as in Schulzinger's *A Time of War*, I felt that seeing these events on film helped me to understand them better."²

Academy Award winner for best documentary in 1974, *Hearts and Minds* is perhaps the best-known documentary of the war.³ It is, like *In the Year of the Pig*, a condemnation of the war. According to director Peter Davis, he made the film to answer three questions: "What in our national character led us to Vietnam? What did we do there? And what has the doing done to us?"⁴ The first question creates a broad focus; the film indicts not just policymakers but American culture and thereby ordinary Americans as well. Davis is arguing that culture creates socio-political attitudes that in turn create consent or an atmosphere of permission for foreign policies. His film suggests that culpable elements of our culture include racism, a religiously infused belief that Americans must always "win," and a complacent and ethnocentric ignorance. Structured through a montage of film clips presented without narration, *Hearts and Minds* requires the viewer to interpret the footage. Frequently point-counterpoint construction pairs contradictory film clips. For example, President Lyndon Johnson stating in his Tonkin Gulf speech that U.S. ships had been attacked in international waters is followed by Senator William Fulbright saying, "a lie is a lie ... We don't usually put the President under oath." A famous sequence shows a small Vietnamese boy and perhaps his grandmother at the burial of the boy's father. The camera lingers on their grief until the viewer is uncomfortable. Cut to General William Westmoreland stating that "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner ... Life is cheap in the Orient."

The film is a favorite with students. Often they initially voice anger at people in the film, at policy choices, and at Davis as well for scenes they judge as exploitive. Asked who is allowed to speak with authority, students identify anti-war Americans (particularly veterans) and Vietnamese. Since Davis often pairs clips of persons with similar status—a President versus a senator, a pro-war pilot with an anti-war pilot—the question arises of how Davis has elevated one while undermining the other. Exploring

²Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³For extended discussion of *Hearts and Minds*, see David Grosser, "'We Aren't on the Wrong Side, We Are the Wrong Side': Peter Davis Targets (American) Hearts and Minds," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 269-82, ch. 18; and Carol Wilder, "Separated at Birth: Argument by Irony in *Hearts and Minds* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*," *Atlantic Journal of Communications*, 13 (Summer 2005), 56-72.

⁴Pat MacGilligan, "'Hearts' director set out to measure era," *Boston Globe*, May 2, 1975, 23.

this question furthers discussion of the film's techniques and of what students believe about the answers to Davis's three questions.

Winter Soldier is the film record of the February 1971 hearings held in Detroit by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).⁵ The story of the massacre of hundreds at the village of My Lai had broken in December 1969. Political commentators and much of the public believed the brutality of My Lai was an aberration.⁶ Upset at public reaction to the My Lai massacre, the VVAW wanted to tell the public that, while atypical in its scale, My Lai was not an aberration. Other villages had been destroyed. But even more important to many was what one veteran called "the horror of the everyday, the commonplace," the casual humiliation, abuse, and killing of Vietnamese. The press largely ignored the hearings, but sympathetic Congressional representatives read the testimony into the *Congressional Record* and called for investigations into the charges made by the veterans. Organizing the hearings also laid the foundation for the growth of the VVAW into an influential antiwar organization.

The film is an extraordinary oral history and social artifact. It is a grainy, black-and-white, talking-heads documentary, but the raw and compelling content holds student interest. The soldiers speak to what they have done and to the war's terrible effect on them. They pass the microphone and testify, some breezily, some with wooden heaviness. "Some of us stoned this child to death just for a laugh because we were bored that day ... I shot her just because she was running away ... we'd cut off their ears and trade them for beers."

The filmmakers pace the content. Scenes of the hearing are interrupted with scenes of veterans talking with each other and responding to interviewers' questions, parsing out why they did these things. Some struggle to articulate a cultural construct of manhood that they believe betrayed them. Many speak of the dehumanization of the enemy, the transformation of Vietnamese to gook, to "other." For them that story begins with basic training and is completed in the field where officer accountability was often lacking and where each soldier to survive must construct a protective shell around his emotions. A long sequence addresses racism. A black audience member challenges

⁵John Kerry's association with the hearings and the VVAW made the film controversial during Kerry's 2008 run for the presidency. Challenges to its credibility were answered by historian John Prados in "Round up: Historians' Take: John Prados: the Winter Soldier Investigation Was Never Discredited," *New Republic*, August 30, 2004, reprinted on the website of the VVAW, <http://www.vvaw.org/veteran/article/?id=481&hilitte=%22winter+soldier%22> (accessed 5/3/12). For a history of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and their place in the antiwar movement, see Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

⁶"A Time-Lou Harris Poll: New Support for Nixon," *Time*, January 12, 1970, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,942132,00.html> (accessed 5/3/12).

a white soldier. The black man insists that the investigation is nonproductive because it does not focus on the racism that he sees as the root sustaining the war, the atrocities, and maintenance of an underclass at home. Their exchange captures a debate Americans had only begun about linkages between racism and imperialism.

Winter Soldier was widely viewed in Europe. But American television networks and distributors turned it down. It was seen on some campuses and in a few other venues. *Winter Soldier* was rereleased in 2005 in the midst of counter-insurgent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The film raises issues then again in the headlines: psychological damage to our soldiers, torture, treatment of prisoners, use of napalm and white phosphorous, and civilian deaths. And it raises again the central conundrums of a counter-insurgent war. Can it be won by military force? If not, can it be won by a strategy sensitive to "winning hearts and minds" if military training and the war environment create troops who will not understand, or who will actively despise, the people whose loyalty they seek? The film creates a powerful platform for classroom discussion of these issues.⁷

Dear America presents a history of the war through the letters of U.S. soldiers. It is an engaging film, the winner of two Emmys and a Peabody award. The classic rock soundtrack at times gives it a happily nostalgic feel. Basic training, for example, is represented by rock music playing over footage of new recruits getting haircuts. The tone is upbeat; unlike *Winter Soldier*, we do not hear from a soldier forced to lick a drill instructor's boots. Seeking to create a group portrait of infantry experience, the film moves from boot camp through a year of service by using excerpts from soldiers' letters. As the film moves forward through a year of service, simultaneously it moves forward by reviewing chronologically major events in the war from the arrival of American troops to their withdrawal. The tone shifts after the Tet offensive. A subtitle tells us that it was a military victory but that public opinion turned against the war. Subsequently there is no more footage of horseplay or lighter moments. Rather we see bodies in a river or in a hospital room. The letters become increasingly negative and questioning. There is anger toward anti-war protesters. But soldiers themselves cannot reconcile their experiences with the purpose they've been given for the war—to protect democracy and stop communism. Multiple constructions of the film's trajectory are possible. It might be suggesting that had the public sustained its support, success was possible. Or it could be understood as implying that the war was unwinnable. The primary message is that the war wasted young lives. The film concludes at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Dear America presented itself and was seen by some reviewers as a uniquely objective film because it was comprised of letters from men who had served in

⁷The film shows only a small part of the hearings. Additional material, such as transcripts of panels of experts and veterans on a variety of topics, are at The Sixties Project website in "primary documents." http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary.html (accessed 5/3/12).

Vietnam.⁸ But such a view ignores the pitfalls historians consider when they use personal letters or oral histories such as whether an individual experience is representative. In creating the film, at times multiple letters were excerpted and combined as one. Selective editing changed the tone of some letters.⁹ Examining these choices illuminates the subjective nature of documentaries and the construction of public memory. With the futile waste of young men's lives as a theme, the early outlines are visible of the current public memory of the war as a tragedy. Complexity and controversy over specific events and decisions are excised to create a simple policy narrative. Presenting the historical footage of officials stating policy decisions without comment or challenge, it sidesteps controversial questions of politics, strategy, and ideology. In the place of explanation, the film presents the personal stories of soldiers and seeks to engage empathy more than intellect.

Winner of the award for Best Documentary at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival, *Regret to Inform* tells the stories of American and Vietnamese widows. Used before lecture or readings, particularly in lower-level courses, the film awakens student interest and generates a deeper engagement in the politics and policies of the war.¹⁰ Even more than *Dear America*, *Regret to Inform* relies on the personal and does not attempt political explanation. It is a film about the permanence of loss and pain. The American and Vietnamese widows tell of meeting, loving, and losing their husbands. The Vietnamese speak as well of losing families, friends, and homes. The film is also about trauma and loss of self as suggested in letters from American soldiers and by the testimony of some of the widows as well as by Xuan Ngoc Nguyen who appears throughout the film. Now living in America, Xuan was fourteen when the war came to her village. She saw her five-year old cousin shot. She ignored a neighbor's pleas for help, running away and leaving him to die. She looks back in wonder: "I have a twenty-four year old son. I sometimes don't trust him with a lawn mower. But at fourteen, I decide who lives and who dies." As a refugee in the city, she was forced to prostitute to survive. Survivor's guilt and PTSD haunt her still.

When I showed *Regret to Inform*, a subdued silence prevailed as the lights came on. Then a student spoke up, "You should show this film to every class." The film is affecting and can open useful discussions. One question for students to consider is whether insight into the suffering that was the price of the war has altered their

⁸See Hal Hinson, "Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam," *Washington Post* (September 16, 1988), http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/dearamericalettershomefromvietnamepg13hinson_a0c8cd.htm (accessed on 5/3/12).

⁹Barry Dornfeld, "Dear America: Transparency, Authority, and Interpretation in a Vietnam War Documentary," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, 283-98.

¹⁰There is a website associated with the film that includes a teacher's guide and reading list, <http://www.regrettoinform.org/education/guide/pdf> (accessed 5/3/12).

intellectual stance, the underlying attitude through which they filter the factual information of books and lectures. Has the presentation of the Vietnamese couples as counterparts to American couples influenced their understanding of the war? In other words, what are the reciprocating impacts of emotional knowledge and intellectual knowledge?

While hard information is largely absent from the film, students nonetheless can mine the political and informational subtext. For example, the film presents the Vietnamese as unified; the war's origins as a civil war in South Vietnam are absent. Since the war is never explained, it appears to be the U.S. versus all Vietnamese. The simplicity would create a structure of good guys versus bad guys except there are no bad guys, even though the U.S. war is presented as brutal, in fact criminal. An American widow says that while her husband was not a murderer, what he did was murder. But even as the film incriminates the American war, it exonerates individual soldiers who are seen as unwilling participants. As we see images of terror and destruction, a widow tells us that her husband had never wanted to be in the role of an aggressor. Another tells us her husband wrote that he would tell her only about the weather. Struggling against tears, she asks, "What did he mean?" The implication is that his role is not what he had anticipated when he volunteered, that (as another husband voices) he was doing things he "never expected or desired to do." The war is a machine that would go of itself and everyone is trapped, Vietnamese and American alike.

While the focus of this review is "overview films," narrower films that address a single topic are too useful to be left out entirely. The secret war in Laos receives short shrift in textbooks and histories of the war, but a film like *Bombies* can fill in the gap. The impact of herbicides, such as Agent Orange, has been the subject of several films. *Where War Has Passed*, one of the first, is still the most powerful.¹¹ The series *Vietnam: A Television History* is far too long to be used in its entirety in most courses.¹²

¹¹For a film by a Vietnamese filmmaker about Vietnamese, see *Where War Has Passed*. For a Western film focusing on the Vietnamese, see *Battle's Poisonous Cloud*. For films focusing on U.S. personnel, see *Agent Orange: The Last Battle* and *Nightline: Vietnam's Lingering Mystery: Agent Orange*. Films no longer available for purchase, but perhaps available in libraries include the excellent *Burden of War: Women and Agent Orange* and *Vietnam: The Secret Agent*. Photographs of Agent Orange impacts in Vietnam may be seen in Philip Jones Griffiths, *Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Vietnam* (London: Trolley Books, 2004), and at <http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0401/griffiths.html> (accessed 5/8/12).

¹²This well-known series' website includes transcripts of the episodes, maps, and a teacher's guide. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/series/viewers.html> (accessed 5/8/12). The series was intended as the first objective film account. For differing opinions on its objectivity, see Frisch, ch. 7; Peter Biskind, "What Price Balance: On *Vietnam: A Television History*," *Race and Class*, 25:4 (1984), 61-69; Claudia Springer, "*Vietnam: A Television History* and the Equivocal Nature of Objectivity," *Wide Angle*, 7:4 (1985), 53-60; Nguyen Manh Hung, "*Vietnam: A Television History: A Case Study in*

But one segment serves an especially useful purpose: *America's Enemy, 1954-1957*, simplifies Vietnamese viewpoints but to a greater degree than any other film portrays Vietnamese as actors, not simply victims.¹³

Two general comments could be made about the documentary overviews of the war. First, they emphasize the American experience of the war and reveal little of Vietnamese politics and history. Second, they have moved increasingly away from specificity and political information and toward a portrayal of the war as an inexplicable tragedy. The earliest films, *In the Year of the Pig* and *Hearts and Minds*, are the richest in political history. Documentaries are following a larger cultural trend toward the substitution of stories for information. The attraction of understanding via borrowed experience can be seen in the recent surge of popularity of memoirs and in the tendency of journalists to explain an issue through the life of an individual. The approach, dubbed "personalist epistemology" by John Carlos Rowe, "presumes that the contact it offers [to personal experiences] is equivalent to knowledge and understanding."¹⁴

The approach has inherent problems. As seen most clearly in *Dear America*, in films relying on letters or oral history the criteria used to choose representatives and to edit their testimony remain opaque. And a focus on the personal sacrifices the analytical so that viewers may learn little about the economic, political, and ideological interests that created the war and little they can apply to current foreign policy questions. This is not to say that stories do not have a place in learning, particularly for young people who might not comprehend the many costs of war. At their best, stories pave the way for a larger understanding than is possible with lectures or readings alone. But they require discussion and supplementation with lectures or analytical readings lest our students join the current majority of adults who, according to polls, believe the war was

¹²(...continued)

Perpetual Conflict Between the American Media and Vietnamese Expatriates," *World Affairs*, 147:2 (Fall 1984), 71-85; and Peter C. Rollins, "The Vietnam War: Perceptions through Literature, Film, and Television," *American Quarterly*, 36:3 (1984), 427-29.

¹³Other films giving attention to Vietnamese are *Vietnam's Unseen War: Pictures from the Other Side* and *World Beneath the War: The Secret Tunnels of Vietnam*.

¹⁴John Carlos Rowe, "Documentary Styles in the American Representations of Vietnam," *Cultural Critique*, 3, American Representations of Vietnam (Spring 1986), 127-131; Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro, "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?," *History and Theory*, 36:4, Theme Issue 36: Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy (Dec. 1997), 83.

a mistake but have no clear idea of what the war was about or which side the U.S. supported.¹⁵

Eminently useful for discussion, for sparking interest, for deepening understanding, documentary film is an invaluable supplement in teaching the Vietnam War. The war is a subject that is particularly rich in film representations that convey nuance, insight, drama, and detail. As one grateful student wrote on a course evaluation, "It's always clearer in film." Particularly when they are given close analysis through class discussion, films can clarify student thinking on the issues of the Vietnam War, foreign policy, and film literacy. Close discussion of documentary film can help students understand how collective memory shapes our understanding of our past and present. One student stated, "I learned that documentaries are very reflective of their time period." It is a comment that suggests understanding of the interpretive nature of documentaries. In short, documentary film can move students toward more sophisticated thinking about both the war and nonfiction film. Documentary film is not a magic pedagogical wand, but used purposefully it is a powerful tool.

Filmography

- Agent Orange: The Last Battle*, 2006, directed by Adam Scholl and Stephanie Jobe, 45 minutes
Battle's Poisonous Cloud, 2005, directed by Cecile Trijssenaar, 54"
Bombies, 2001, directed by Jack Silberman, 56"
Burden of a War: Women and Agent Orange, 1991, directed by Nancy August Strakosch, 30"
Deadly Debris, 1999, directed by Vu Le My, 28" (sold with *Where War Has Passed*), currently available on YouTube
Dear America, 1987, directed by Bill Couturie, 83"
Hearts and Minds, 1974, directed by Peter Davis, 111"
In the Year of the Pig, 1968, directed by Emilio de Antonio, 103" (black and white)
Regret to Inform, 2000, directed by Barbara Sonneborn, 72"
Vietnam's Lingering Mystery: Agent Orange, 2007, ABC News Nightline, 22"
Vietnam: Secret Agent, 1986, directed by Jacki Ochs, 56" (VHS only, out of print)
Vietnam: A Television History, 1983, episode 6 in VHS or 5 in DVD, "America's Enemy, 1954-1967," written and produced by Martin Smith, 60"
Vietnam's Unseen War: Pictures From the Other Side, 2002, written by Brian Breger, 60"
Where War Has Passed, 1999, directed by Vu Le My, 28" (sold with *Deadly Debris*), currently available on YouTube
Winter Soldier, 1972, directed by the Winterfilm Collective, 96" (black & white)
World Beneath the War: The Secret Tunnels of Vietnam, 1997, directed by Janet Gardener, 53"

¹⁵See polls by Gallup and CBS at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/4954/support-war-terrorism-rivals-support-wwii.aspx>, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/04/28/opinion/main189880.shtml>, and <http://www.globaled.org/curriculum/viet.html> (accessed 5/8/12).