"WHAT WE WERE REALLY DOING IN 'NAM": FILM AS POLITICAL ACTIVISM
DOCUMENTARIES ON AND AGAINST THE VIETNAM WAR[1]

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On July 28, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke at a press conference in which he further justified American involvement in Vietnam. Bolstered by the clear popular mandate that American voters had granted him the previous year, he told of a letter he received "from a woman in the Midwest."[2] This nameless American citizen explained that if she could understand the reasons why the United States entered the war effort during World War II, she was at a loss to answer the basic question: "Why Vietnam?" Patiently, didactically, the president then set up to remind his national audience of America's "history of commitment" based on a "golden promise." For the successive American governments involved in the war, the key to winning the war was in trying to capture the "hearts and minds," to quote another presidential speech made on May 4, 1965, "of the people who actually live out there" in Vietnam and of those at home.[3] During the Vietnam War, the president's role became that of a "communicator in chief." Helped in that respect by the mainstream news media, which mostly repeated official statements in the first stages of the war, the government aimed at hammering out the main narrative that could explain the war: the continuation of the explanation of America's foreign policy, started during World War I and perfected during World War II, based on a commitment to freedom. Among the communication strategies developed by the Johnson administration, the films directly produced by the Department of Defense actually articulate the official answer to the simple question asked by many Americans at the time.

Two films were released in 1965. The first one, entitled very simply *Why Vietnam?*[4] "was used to indoctrinate Vietnam-bound draftees, and was also loaned to schools" (Barnouw 272). As for *Know Your Enemy – the Viet Cong*,[5] it was produced directly by the US Army and was geared mostly to soldiers who were taught about the military strategies of the Vietcong. As can be expected in a decade that witnessed the public challenging of official discourses, these films were criticized for their oversimplification of issues and for their reliance on overt simplistic propaganda (Barnouw 272). Consequently, activist filmmakers decided to use the medium employed by the government to offer a clear counter-narrative that would try to offer a more detailed explanation for the war by placing it back in its wider historical and ideological context. Some directors indeed used the specific tools of cinema as part of a larger political discourse that was meant both to counter the dominant point of view on current debates and to offer fresh alternatives. These documentaries belong to what Michael Klein calls "independent counter-hegemonic documentary films," the record of which "is one index of the consciousness of the broad and representative movement that flowered in the 1960s and early 1970s." (Klein 36)

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[1] The quote in the title is from Scott Camil's testimony in *Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm Collective, 1972).

[2] http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27116

[3] http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=26942

[4] http://archive.org/details/gov.ntis.ava08194vnb1

[5] http://archive.org/details/Know_Your_Enemy-The_Vietcong

These films include in chronological order: *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968), *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (Joseph Strick, 1970), *Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm Collective, 1972), and *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974).

The purpose of this article is to describe and study the various ways the question of "Why Vietnam?" was answered by documentarists during the war and its direct aftermath. Following a discussion of the two official films released by the government in its effort to justify its military policy publicly, the counter-documentaries will be assessed by focusing more specifically on the way each of them tries to use the specificities of the cinematic medium (editing mostly, but also the potential discrepancy between sound and image and direct addresses to the camera) to educate the American people and make them realize the intricate complexity of the situation. This article will strive to pinpoint what Bill Nichols terms the "voice" of all the films under study here:

> That which conveys to us a sense of text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense, voice is not restricted to any one code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moirélike pattern formed by the unique interaction of all the film's codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary (Nichols 18-19).

Ultimately, the point of this study will be to show that these filmic voices can be added to the concert of the oppositional discourses that characterized the American counterculture, here understood in the wide sense of the term, that of "a counter to the dominant cold war culture." (Anderson 241). In other words, can film be understood as a weapon or as a political statement bent on directly affecting the moral consciousness of its spectators?

1. Vietnam propaganda

Why Vietnam? opens on a slight low-angle medium close-up of Johnson's left profile. The president, surrounded by aides, tells of the anecdote of the letter from an American woman, mentioned earlier. As the question "Why" is uttered the camera zooms in and the frame freezes accompanied by dramatic suspenseful music; then the voice-over of the president, as a distant echo, is repeated three times over still photographs that become alive before freezing again: an American soldier walking through the jungle, a crying Vietnamese baby, and rumbles seen through a window, over which the title of the film is finally superimposed. This brief succession of shots points at the physical impact presidential decisions have on human beings far away from home (soldiers, innocents, at the exclusion of the enemy). It also grants to the film an aura of presidential authority. In that respect, the voice-over of an anonymous narrator never escapes the constraining framework of the official explanation given by the administration. The meaning of the images that follow is strictly controlled by the voice-over as if, left to their own devices, they could be interpreted in a radically opposite way. As David James writes, "the mendacious history of the sound track closes the visual text and encloses the plenitude of meaning it is supposed to contain" (James 202). This foreclosure of interpretation relies on a contradictory belief in the power of images: they are first too powerful to be left uncommented and, at the same time, they are the pure unmediated capture of reality. It is precisely this belief that later documentaries will try to challenge.

The style of *Why Vietnam?* follows and extends the one put in place in the *Why We Fight* series (1942-45), seven documentaries directed mostly by Frank Capra and produced by the Department of War. Both are composed of the editing together of various source materials: pre-existing footage, mostly coming from newsreels, including by enemy countries, and some fiction films (when the commentary would not be supported by actuality footage); segments staged specifically for the series; animated maps made at the Disney studios. The didactic dimension of those films is very clear: all the images are considered as simple proof that what the voice-over claims is true because the reality of the situation has been recorded by cameras. As can be expected, the voice-over and the editing establish very simplistic and reductionist comparisons: after its introduction, the film focuses on images of Hitler and Mussolini, and their "dreams of dictatorship" to suggest that the situation in Vietnam is similar to that of World War II. Ho Chi Minh, behind his status as the "kindly smiling" grandfather of the nation, is described as responsible for a "reign of terror." Vietnam is thus understood as the logical continuation of a commitment made against aggression and in "defense of sovereignty." World War II is described as a history lesson: "aggression unchallenged is aggression unleashed." The presence onscreen of Chamberlain, as the voice-over recalls his belief in "peace in our time," is a visual reminder that the United States cannot accept a new aggression lest it trigger a complete "Asiatic dominion of communists." Implicitly, Johnson is thus portrayed as the absolute antithesis of Chamberlain, as the one who stood up to aggression. When the film becomes more specific as to the actual causes of the war and moves beyond general references to the American values of "commitment," "solemn pledges," and "promise," it "blatantly misrepresent[s] history" (James 202) and even "made historians fume" (Barnouw 272). Erik Barnouw quotes historian Henry Steele Commager who deemed the film to be "not history…not even journalism…as scholarship it is absurd…When Communists sponsor such propaganda, we call it 'brainwashing'" (Barnouw 202). What is suggested here is the absolute similarity of the filmic techniques used by both belligerent countries. The images offered as proof that the United States was actually attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin lack specificity and context: a boat being bombed is enough to sustain the claim that Americans have to "take action in reply."

The film presents a clear-cut dichotomy: whereas Hanoi is said to be "not ready for discussion," Secretary of State Dean Rusk's voice-over explains that the United States is "ready to talk" as the camera cuts to shots of Ho Chi Minh. Resorting to sentimental simplification abounds: for example, images of injured babies and children as the narrator's voice explains that their "future is in the balance" or a montage of a cross-section of American faces (a white cowboy, an African-American worker, an interracial couple) as Johnson explains he does "not find it easy to send the flower of our youth, our finest young men into battle." Similarly, the point of view of the enemy is constantly derided as a "so-called war of liberation." This absolute reverse-shot, the point of view of North Vietnam, is precisely the subject of the second film meant to ease American soldiers into battle.

Know Your Enemy: the Viet-Cong is described by James as "one of the most interesting of all the films produced by the war" (James 204). Its main interest lies in the re-appropriation of Vietcong propaganda films for American purposes by a voice-over that constantly undermines the content of images and its rather explicit description of political film as hypnotism. After the credits, the film opens with the medium close-up of a white man (Conrad Bain) surrounded by film projectors. The camera then slowly zooms in on his eyes as a light, the source of which remains invisible, emphasizes his features. Conversely, the film concludes by an extreme close-

up on the man's eyes directly looking at the camera, which proceeds to zoom out progressively to place the man back in his original location (a projector's booth). The centrality of the narrator's face in the frame, the emphasis on his eyes, and his direct address to the camera strangely undermine the very intent of the feature: what the spectator witnesses is implicitly depicted as an exercise in visual manipulation, which is precisely what the film aims at doing.

The narrator explains that the images represent how the Vietcong "like to see themselves" and reminds the spectator that "this is Vietcong propaganda." Thus images of the reconstruction of hospitals or of weapons being transported on bicycles, "all scenes in which [the Vietcong] appear to be proficient soldiers and fully human people" (James 204), are balanced by shots on the sabotaging of railroads in the "Republic of Vietnam" or of killed American GIs. The blatantly simplistic representation of the enemy in *Why Vietnam?* is here transformed into a more complex portrayal of a resourceful but manipulated people. In both cases, the authoritative voice-over imprisons the spectator into a forced and imposed meaning.

This official meaning of the war was to a large extent extended and amplified by the way it was covered by the media, especially television. Chester J. Pach Jr. contends that:

> To be sure, television's view of the war was limited, usually to what the camera could illustrate with vivid images. Too many film reports on the network newscasts dealt with American military operations, and, too often they concentrated on immediate events– a firefight or an air-strike– with little, if any, analysis of how those incidents fit into larger patterns of the war. Yet television also showed the war as it was– a confused, fragmented, and questionable endeavor. (Pach 91)

The very short film vignettes broadcast on the nightly news indeed offered very little commentary about the context and, when they did, the anchors supported the war effort. Apart from the controversy following one vignette by CBS reporter Morley Safer, aired in August 1965 (Safer contended that American casualties at Cam Ne had been killed by friendly fire, a theory which military authorities immediately tried to discredit, see Pach 102-103), the network mostly supported the war effort until the Tet Offensive in early 1968. It was only then that some anchors, such as CBS's Walter Cronkite, expressed some doubts about the validity of Johnson's argument that the end of the war was near, thus creating a breach in his credibility.

All in all, the two films produced by the government and the representation of the war on television expressed an official narrative, based on historical distortion and more or less explicit hypnotism. The presidential authority of the voice-over and sensationalism made it extremely hard to challenge official discourse. It is in this context that a series of documentaries by activist filmmakers thus wished to reposition the Vietnam War in a wider historical context, which was largely obscured by the government, bent on offering a positive image of the war's outcome, and the dominant media which at first simply parroted the official message of the army.

2. Compilation documentaries

One of the goals of the series of documentaries under study was the indulgence of the networks in what Todd Gitlin calls the "aestheticizing of violence": "a steady exposition of violence severed from meaning, purpose, or reasonable cause" (Gitlin 201). Activist documentaries specifically tried to reconnect the violence of war images that had compelled anti-war protesters to wonder why the United States unleashed the might of their institutional violence, to their historical and ideological context.

Chronologically, the first documentary form that was used to counter the official version of the war was the compilation documentary, which consists in "reusing footage in broader context" (Barnouw 53). In that respect, *In the Year of the Pig* and *Hearts and Minds* are not dissimilar from *Why Vietnam?* The only difference lies in the role devolved to the authoritative voice-over, which is completely absent from the two documentaries. At this level of the analysis, it is necessary to clearly describe the filmic strategies put into place by the two directors in order to educate the spectator before focusing on the way both deal with key aspects of the war.

Filmic strategies to engage the spectator

The first filmic strategy lies in the juxtaposition of contradictory sources so as to belie the validity of one speaker's affirmation. Concerning the "alleged attack" on the USS Maddox and the USS Turner Joy, in *In the Year of the* Pig, a shot of Vice-President Hubert Humphrey explaining that the intent of America's enemies was to "force us [Americans] out" and that "they misread America once again" is followed by the avowal made by the soldier in charge of the sonar on the USS Maddox that there were "no torpedoes" in sight. In the same film, President Johnson's claim that the Vietcong and North Vietnam were "keeping [them] from free elections" in 1967 is immediately contradicted by Professor David Wurfel, who contends that the official observation team, sent by the American government (among whom the spectator can see Governor Richard Hughes of New Jersey and Whitney Young of the Urban League) to control the electoral process, had no knowledge of Asia or Vietnam and that they only spoke to people introduced by the South Vietnamese government. Similarly, in one of the most commented scenes of *Hearts and Minds*, a painful scene at the National Cemetery of South Vietnam, shot according to the principles of direct cinema (a forswearing of profilmic manipulation), where very young children carry the photo of a man who is supposed to be their dead father and where his widow crawls into the grave, clashes with General Westmoreland, sitting in front of a peaceful pastoral lake, claiming in a hesitant voice: "Well, the Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does the westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient. As the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important." Davis' painstakingly slow zoom in reveals the complete disconnection between high-ranking generals and the brutal reality of the war. Such reliance on melodramatic and sensationalist editing in *Hearts and Minds* was criticized for its lack of "sympathy in looking at those Americans who support or are indifferent to the war" (Grosser 278). Paradoxically, Davis' sensational editing that appeals to the emotional identification of the viewer was made after the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, whereas de Antonio's focus on intellectual identification, which, in a way, is much less dramatically efficient in making the spectator react, was directed in the first stages of the war.

Another filmic strategy used in both films is the potential discrepancy between sound and image. In some instances, there is an absolute correlation between sound and image. At the beginning of *In the Year of the Pig*, Paul Mus, described by a caption as a professor of Buddhism at Yale University, explains that Ho Chi Minh should be understood as a "Marxist economist" and a "Confucius scholar," "while de Antonio's cutaways to Vietnamese countryside evoke an affiliation between Ho and his land and people that is absent from the words and images of American spokesmen" (Nichols 26). Instead of a connection with the American landscape and people, those American spokesmen are affiliated by the film with the modern apparatus of political and media communication. The correlation between sound and image is largely absent from *Hearts and Minds*, a film bent on discrediting any official discourse. Davis focuses for a

long time on re-enactors of the War of Independence in Croton, New York. One American citizen disguised as a revolutionary soldier explains that the reason for this celebration is to make people understand that the soldiers who fought for independence were "not mythical hazy people from the past" but that "they rose up against the most powerful army in the world" and they "put everything on the line." At this moment, the voice of the documentary is rather explicit: the spectator is given to understand the potential similarity between two historical events. The irony is completely lost on another re-enactor who refuses ("Oriental politics? Don't put me on, man") to see any link beyond the fact that "men are getting killed, men are killed." Davis' camera then cuts to a half-naked wounded Vietnamese as Daniel Ellsberg's voice-over contends that the Vietnamese are "fighting for independence." In *Hearts and Minds*, the discrepancy between sound and image, made at the level of the shot or at the level of the cut between shots, is mostly the symptom of the film's "moralism and condescension" (Grosser 280) toward the American people. *In the Year of the Pig*, on the contrary, "is notable for its appeal to a rationality that is identifiably American" (Renov 262).

The reasons for the War in Vietnam

If, at first sight, the two documentaries share common features (the juxtaposition through editing and the discrepancy between sound and image), they are very different ideologically and in their conclusions. As shown before, the way they directly engage the spectator vary from rationalism for de Antonio to sensationalism for Davis. The historical and political reasons they give for the war and its continuation are also radically different. *In the Year of the Pig* places the war in the context of anti-colonial struggles. In fact, de Antonio clearly made the film "from a consciously left viewpoint" (Crowdus 95). This is why, the film explains at length, although not from a Vietnamese perspective, the formative years of Ho Chi Minh. Jean Lacouture stands in front of a Parisian locksmith and explains that this is where Ho, in 1917, founded and edited *Le Paria*, subtitled "Tribune des populations des colonies," and how he moved from being a "peasant to revolutionary and internationalist." This is also why de Antonio included early on in the film a scene where

> These absolutely arrogant Frenchmen in their colonial hats and white suits [are] being pulled in rickshaws by Vietnamese. They arrive in front a cafe where there is a tall Moroccan with a fez – the scene encapsulates the whole French colonial empire– and when the Vietnamese put their hands out for payment, the Moroccan sends them away like trash. (Crowdus 96)

As the film follows a rather strict chronological narrative, the next step in the description of the war is the battle of Dien Bien Phu, symbolized by the playing of *La Marseillaise*, "plaintively rendered by a Vietnamese stringed instrument" (Renov 267), over images of the defeated French army and of French graves from the Sino-French War (1884-1885). The cyclical and repetitive view of history that the film espouses then becomes clear. The film sets the stage to describe the various articles of the Geneva ceasefire of 1954, the formation of the National Liberation Front, the government of Diem, the various claims made by the successive American administrations, to conclude by military operations all the way to 1967. The film very rarely leaves the dialectical tracks it sets for itself, except, perhaps, in a few scenes that betray its own fascination with the figure of Madam Nhu (Diem's sister-in-law). Ultimately, the film suggests that the involvement

of the United States is literally incomprehensible, as the Vietnamese are also fighting for their independence in a war of liberation.

As for *Hearts and Minds*, it mostly explains the war within the context of the Cold War and American anti-communism. It includes a long succession of scenes in which various people describe what would happen if world Communism became a reality: Ronald Reagan talking about a "communist conspiracy," the goal of which is to "subvert the world," an extract from a propaganda film showing "what could happen if Communism took over" (brutal arrests of supposedly innocent citizens at home, marches with banners calling for "one Party, one Leader, one Nation"), two soldiers from the U.S. Air Force stationed in Saigon who believe that "if we turn our back," it could lead to "riots, drugs, you name it," J. Edgar Hoover giving dramatic numbers aimed at proving the presence of Communists in America ("1 for 1, 814 persons") before concluding on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy who believes that America could become an "island" lost in a Communist sea. One of the problems of this segment is that these various extracts, though distinguishable stylistically, tend to equate leaders and the American people at large.

The representation of American people and their government

What is at stake here is the implicit accusation that American culture in general is at fault or, as David Grosser writes, "in assessing responsibility for the war, Davis suggests that there is something malignant, racist, and warlike in American culture that infected the population as a whole and ultimately 'caused' the war" (Grosser 278). Davis indeed insists on military parades at home, on a celebration for the return of POW Lieutenant Coker in Linden, New Jersey, and, metaphorically, on a football game in Niles, Ohio. What may be hinted at here is that America is essentially a violent nation and that its inhabitants are either supportive of the war or completely unaware of its political implications. Twice in the movie, Davis includes interviews with supposedly random and representative Americans in the street: the first segment exclusively chooses people who claim they are "not affected" by the war, sometimes to the point of ridicule, such as when a bus driver thinks they "are fighting for North Vietnam," or they believe it is important to "obey our government." Later in the film, another cross-section of Americans, once again chosen for the symbol of their location (Mount Rushmore, a busy street, and a national park), now claims that a "mistake" was made and that the United States "shouldn't be there." The inclusion in *Hearts and Minds* of extracts from Hollywood World War II movies point back to the general guilt of all of American culture. Toward the end of the film, Daniel Ellsberg explains: "It's a tribute to the American people that our leaders thought it necessary to lie to us, it's no tribute that we were so easy to fool." The film suggests that Americans were fooled by propaganda in general, fiction movies, and the lies of the government but, as Grosser concludes, "ultimately *Hearts and Minds* only sizes one side of that insight– that the American people are easy to fool" (Grosser 280).

To the credit of Davis, however, the film does show the lies told by the government and the complacency of those politicians and experts who made the war a reality in the first place: he indeed edits in extracts from major presidential speeches all the way back to a conference by President Truman explaining that the American "vision of progress" should be "extend[ed] to all peoples of the world." Probably the most criticized figure in the film, Walt Rostow, former aide to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, accuses Davis, in one of the rare occurrences in which the director's questions to his interviewees have not been cut, of asking a "God-damn silly question"

and of being interested in “pedestrian” and “sophomoric stuff.” The question asked by Davis concerns the reason why the Vietnamese people need Americans when, according to Rostow, no analysis has shown that a “majority of people want to be Communist.” After refusing to answer, Rostow finally yields and embarks on what is probably a long and detailed explanation but Davis cuts him after the reference to Sputnik in 1957. The portrait that is painted of Rostow is of an arrogant man, a feeling emphasized by his house perched on top of a hill overlooking a city that can be seen in the background. All officials, in general, are shown as violent or shallow. On the contrary, de Antonio tries to represent what Mary Sheila McMahon calls “a genealogy of power” (McMahon 45) by linking the several decisions made by the American government in a clear pattern of cause and consequence. The underlying narrative of the entire film is indeed on the progressive transformation of the war from a colonial war to a civil war and finally to an international war.

Davis tends to present the entire government as responsible for the Vietnam debacle. Apart from the controversial figure of Senator Fullbright who explains the meaning of a lie by referring to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution (but the film does not mention that he not only voted for the resolution but actually sponsored it), most officials are shown as completely disconnected from the consequences of their decision. In that respect, a very telling segment is the crosscutting between a scene at the dinner for returned POWs held at the White House in May 1973 (during which Bob Hope makes a joke about liking “a captive audience”) and an image of North Vietnamese anti-aircraft shooting down American planes, quickly followed by images of the destruction of Bach Mai hospital including close-ups of dead children. At the dinner, Nixon is seen reminding his audience of the “most difficult” decision of his presidency, the one taken on December 18 of the previous year, a remark that prompts a massive round of applause. The reference is to Operation Linebacker, otherwise known as the “Christmas bombing,” when the U.S. resumed its bombing of North Vietnam. Once again the sensationalist editing is very powerful but it fails to explain the reasons that led Nixon to make that decision. On the contrary, de Antonio always tries to put political and military decisions into perspective by showing the disagreement with official policies inside the government: for example, his film includes an interview with Senator Ernest Gruening, Democrat from Alaska (who voted against the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, the only one along with Senator Wayne Morse).

More problematic in both films is the representation of soldiers. Rick Berg contends that in *Hearts and Minds* “anyone in uniform is portrayed as vulgar, politically naïve, or reactionary” (Berg 48). In fact, the movie clearly distinguishes between soldiers who still profess their love for the United States, such as Lieutenant Coker, who still wears his uniform after being released and who is shown addressing children at a Catholic school and a group of mothers, telling them that they should be proud of themselves because POWs think about their mothers while in captivity, and deserter Edward Sowders, who is shown testifying at the Congressional Hearings on Amnesty, or former captain Randy Floyd, in full hippie regalia, who is seen holding back his tears after recalling some of his missions. Another very uneasy scene, shot in direct cinema style, shows two GIs in Saigon making jokes about their girlfriends at home while in the company of two Vietnamese prostitutes. *In the Year of the Pig* does not dwell too long on soldiers but when they are shown, they appear as victims of brainwashing orchestrated by the government and the media. For example, in an interview in which a soldier explains that he likes his job, “the clear visibility of ABC microphones (…) lays bare the superimposition of station advertising upon ostensibly objective documentation” (James 210-11). What is at stake here is the visible

framework through which the voice of the soldier reaches people at home. De Antonio refuses to make the audience believe that the voice of the soldier is unmediated, whereas Davis tends to use interviews done by the media as indictments of the soldiers' lack of political consciousness. The treatment given to the same footage of Colonel George S. Patton III in the two films is quite revealing. Patton recalls a "sobering thing," a ceremony held for some of his soldiers: he explains that the feeling of pride he witnessed made his "feeling for America just soar" before concluding, with a huge smile, that his men are a "bloody good bunch of killers." In *In the Year of the Pig*, the scene is edited in between an indictment of "search and destroy" and a violent attack against the treatment of prisoners by American soldiers. In *Hearts and Minds*, it appears in between a soldier in mid-battle describing his "worst day" in Vietnam and his uncertainty concerning the cause of the war and a preacher talking to young men before a major football game. In the first case, Patton is clearly the agent of a military policy that has been consciously devised, whereas in the second case, he is simply the symptom of a national culture of violence. Davis concludes his film, after the final credits, by a military parade, including very young cadets, organized by the Victory in Vietnam Committee. The camera briefly pans to a group of veterans protesting for more compensation and jobs. According to Rick Berg, this "placing of the vet *after* the credits and on the *margin* of the screen and film" tends to repress "Vietnam's counter-memory," which is thus "marginalized as the state obscures the 'voice' of those who fought in the war" (Berg 48).

The representation of Vietnam and its people

Contrary to the soldiers who actually fought in the war and whose memory may be different from what the government would like the people to remember, Vietnamese people are given some screen time in Davis' film. From a Buddhist monk explaining that Americans will ultimately defeat themselves in Vietnam to Vu Duc Vinh, a grieving father who asks the cameraman to take the bloodied shirt of his daughter and throw it in Nixon's face, through former political prisoners or two old sisters who lament the loss of their family, while the camera refuses to cut even as they cry, the film quite consciously plays with the emotions of the spectator. Its clear aim is to turn abstract military notions or even dead American soldiers, as shown on the nightly news, into concrete, physical, human dramas. This filmic strategy is obviously very powerful, especially when children are involved, but it operates a sort of emotional blackmail that fails to account for the complexity of the stakes involved. The path chosen by *In the Year of the Pig* is radically different: Vietnam and Vietnamese people as such are not represented directly but only through the mediation of Western experts– mostly Americans and a couple of French journalists and scholars, who all speak English, contrary to *Hearts and Minds*, which allows its foreign subjects to speak in their native tongue. In a way, de Antonio's film is not about Vietnam *per se*, which is why it does not include any direct Vietnamese point of view, but a film about the United States and how it views the world. Vietnam is thus represented "as a site of competing discourses" and "geographically and discursively a space of endless lexical and militaristic invasion, contestation, and, ultimately, appropriation" (Abramson 209-210). Davis' Vietnam is alive and inhabited, which makes the spectator react instinctively, while de Antonio's Vietnam is a discursive construct, which makes the spectator react intellectually.

Quite logically, de Antonio was very critical of the way Davis played with emotions for political purposes. De Antonio's film domesticates the war and makes it an American issue. He thus opposed Davis' sensationalist rhetoric for expunging politics from what was meant to be a

political film. He condemned "a political film without politics. The style betrays the political emptiness: no style at all, amorphous sequences strung together" (de Antonio 359). He then criticized the film for being

> Heartless and mindless. Heartless because of an inability to understand either the United States or Vietnam. Heartless because it sneers with a japing, middle-class, liberal superiority when it should be doing something quite different. […] Mindless is worse. […] How can you make a film about Vietnam and leave out their revolution? How can you leave out the dissent here that cost LBJ the presidency and forced Nixon into lies and Vietnamization? (de Antonio 359).

Ultimately, *Hearts and Minds* is more complete in its portrayal of the war, as it includes themes that are not even broached by de Antonio (such as war profiteering by South Vietnamese investors), but more powerful thanks to its reliance on emotional identification with the victim. *In the Year of the Pig* is less compelling as a *movie*, precisely because it refuses to use classical Hollywood strategies, but its voice is consequently more rational and political. What has largely been left out of the documentary subgenre studied here (compilation film interspersed with interviews), that is the voice of those who actually fought in the war, in all its complexity and paradoxes, is precisely the very basis of the second type of activist documentary made to counter the official discourse on the war and to make the audience protest against what de Antonio and Davis have described as an unfounded illegitimate policy, bordering on criminality.

3. Documentaries as oral testimonies

In order to include the experience of the veterans within the filmic discourse, some films have indeed based their entire form on the progressive enfranchisement of the soldiers. *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* is entirely built on the oral testimony of "five of the American soldiers who were at My Lai on March 16, 1968," as explained by the initial voice-over. Each of the five soldiers is first presented in a medium close-up that includes the spatial context in which the testimony is given: in what appears to be a park for Gary Garfolo of Stockton, California and Vernardo Jackson of Jackson, Mississippi, on the patio of a wooden house for James Berghold of Niagara Falls, New York, inside an apartment overlooking skyscrapers for Michael Bernhardt of Tarpon Springs, Florida, and inside a moving car for Gary Crossley of Del Rio, Texas. The inclusion of these filmic subjects in their natural environment conveys a sense of plenitude to the emergence of the voice: these are full-fledged people who are the emanation of a culture. As the faceless interviewer asks questions off-screen, the camera crosscuts between the five soldiers and creates an implicit narrative from the training of soldiers to their experience of the massacre of civilians before concluding on the reaction of officers: it allows the spectator to gain a complex understanding of the event. The voice of the interviewees is never considered as proof in itself but as one personal memory in a larger textual pattern. These voices sometimes offer very different accounts. For example, concerning their training, Crossley keeps repeating that what a soldier has to do is to "take orders," thus refusing to admit his personal implication, whereas Bernhardt recognizes that the induction included many "pointless things." At times, the voice-over pushes the former soldiers to be more explicit, especially about the killing of children. This off-screen voice is never condescending or condemning. The goal of the movie is not to indict or accuse the soldiers but to understand the conditions that led to this massacre of civilians: it insists on the training and the military culture, for instance when Garfolo compares what happened at

My Lai to an “Indian trip.” In fact, all the soldiers are represented as rather articulate in the way they try to make sense of something in which they were involved but over which they had no control.

The multiplicity of answers given to attempt an understanding of the event parallels the chaos of the massacre itself: the soldiers talk about the fear of landmines, the call for revenge by superiors, the dehumanization of the enemy, and the general feeling of disconnection from reality (one soldier evokes “senseless” shooting practice) as possible explanations for the onslaught of violence. This giving of a voice to the voiceless, to those who have been silenced and made into tools by the media and the government, is precisely the political function of the movie. One of the final questions is about the necessity “to prevent this kind of thing from happening again.” The ultimate answer is given during the ending credits as white letters appear on a red background, to suggest in a rather pessimistic fashion that images have lost their power to make people react and that only the voice of individuals can function as a political weapon. The terrible answer then ends the film: “I don’t feel like this was some isolated circumstance. It’s happened many times before and many times after.” If *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* focuses on one specific event that was revealed to the American public several months after it actually occurred, *Winter Soldier* describes various atrocities as told by veterans who have decided to act against the continuation of the war.

The film records the public and collective testimonies of Vietnam veterans held in Detroit, Michigan on January 31 and February 1 and 2, 1971. The cameras of the film collective also focus on the organization of the event and on its immediate aftermath. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War as an organization was created in 1967 to voice their opposition to the war and the way it was conducted by the government. The *Winter Soldier* Investigation was aimed at making their experience and their political involvement known to a larger audience. The title of the film is based on a quote by Thomas Paine, written after the War for Independence. The sentence appears on screen at the beginning of the movie and is read by the voice-over of a woman: “In the winter of 1776 at Valley Forge, Tom Paine wrote: ‘These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country but he that stands by it now deserves the love and thanks of men and women.” The voice of the film, in the sense given by Bill Nichols, implicitly tells the audience that the veterans who are about to testify are the true patriots, those who have not shrunk from their duties and who paradoxically continue to fulfill them by questioning their very validity.

Although the movie is directed by a collective of filmmakers with the help of some veterans and although the investigation was meant to be a collective event, the film nevertheless focuses on individuals. Scott Camil is thus granted much more screen time than any of the other soldiers who testified. He is usually shown in close-ups that tend to exclude the context of his testimony: this type of framing suggests a direct address to the camera as if testifying in front of a live audience was simply the first step in a wider attempt at raising the consciousness of all American citizens. His story is also one of the most vivid ones recorded in the film. Camil explains at length his training at boot camp and describes the mind-numbing exercises that all future Marines had to go through. Other witnesses confirm this and go as far as talking about “brainwashing” and “indoctrination” to describe their training. They also criticize the conduct of the war and its “inflated system” of body count. But for the most politically articulate soldiers, the goal of the investigation lies beyond the room as they call for action to be made to stop the war.

Without any apparent logical order, the film shows soldiers describing their first-hand experience of the war in such harrowing details that some members of the audience are sometimes shown wiping away tears. The atrocity of the things described is indeed almost unbearable (rapes, evisceration, killing of civilians, torture of prisoners, use of chemicals) but the film suggests that it is just one fragment of the truth. Just like in a collage, each testimony is one piece of a much larger truth: the horror of all wars but the specifically violent nature of the war in Vietnam. The soldiers also explain how the war had desensitized them to the violence they were inflicting. One of them accuses the government of having turned him into an animal. Another one, on the verge of tears, describes his very difficult return to civilian life. He emphasizes the unconscious repression of his memories and how the return of this repressed violence affects him in his daily life. The film is also a testimony to the soldiers as political subjects who are capable of articulating their beliefs and ideas, far from the common-held image of soldiers as stupid war machines.

In this respect, one of the most powerful scenes occurs toward the end of the movie when an African-American veteran starts arguing with a white veteran. He contends that the entire investigation completely misses the point by refusing to address the underlying cause of the war, racism. He describes the life of many African-Americans who are forced to enroll in the army out of despair due to the absence of jobs or to the racism of American society in general. It seems that the organizers heard this criticism by forming a final panel of soldiers from different ethnic minorities. There a Native American veteran recalls the phrasing of treaties made between the U.S. government and some tribes: they were supposed to last "as long as the grass shall grow, as long as the river shall flow." He then predicts that there will be a day when the grass will stop growing and the river will stop flowing, which triggers the most passionate round of applause of the entire film. His testimony emphasizes the belief, shared by other veterans, that something must be done to change the course of the war and that even in a time of national dislocation there are still reasons to hope for a better future.

Steve Pitkin, another one of the veterans present, criticizes the army for claiming that the "biggest detriment to the morale" of soldiers is the activism of those "long-haired protesting pinko sympathizer types." On the contrary, he claims that for him the biggest boost he felt was when he learned about Woodstock, which generates another round of cheers and applauses. Quite symptomatically, almost all of the veterans who testify are dressed in hippie regalia, with long hair and beards. The film even acknowledges the possibility that their general appearance might make some people "disregard" what is being said. A soldier then replies that the purpose of the investigation is precisely to encourage Americans to talk "to people who are different." Against all odds, the film still believes in the possibility of creating a utopian community of similarly-minded people that obviously includes the spectator.

Whether all of the films discussed here actually had an impact on the protests against the war and helped some spectators to join the ranks of activists remains to be demonstrated. What is certain is that all the filmmakers thought of their film practice as included in a larger political action. To counter the 10,000 prints of *Why Vietnam*? they felt that the specificity of film itself should be implemented, by using editing to show the contradictions between the claims of politicians and the physical consequences of their decisions or by simply asking those who were involved in the war to testify. All of those films are, with their respective aesthetics, "film weapons" (Abramson 208) that were born "out of anger, outrage, and passion" (de Antonio 94).

Their explicit goal was to raise the political awareness of American citizens and in a way they were successful because they were actually seen, despite serious restrictions on their distribution: David James recalls that *In the Year of the Pig* was used by groups such as the Moratorium and that some of the profits made by the film were used to help the Chicago Seven at the beginning of their trial (James 211). *Hearts and Minds* won an Academy Award for Best Documentary: during the ceremony, one of the co-producers read a telegram of friendship to American people sent by the Vietcong, which enraged presenters Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope. In 1971, *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* also received an Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. These critical awards show the capacity of mainstream cinema to include and digest the most violent form of dissent made against the Hollywood form of representation. However, the cinematic medium should be analyzed as an integral part of the political and cultural protests of the 1960s. The theoretical debate between Davis and de Antonio shows that there was no united front of filmmakers against Vietnam as there was no real unity in the opposition to the war. The political films against the war reproduced the contradictions of the movement against the war itself. In the final analysis, the power of images as well as the ambiguity of political activism by Americans are best demonstrated by a short scene in *Hearts and Minds*: it features two Vietnamese men walking through ruins in the rain. One of them spots the camera and exclaims: "Look! They're focusing on us now. First they bomb us as they please, then they film us."

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