

An Interview with Peter Davis

By Sarah Katz

*How did you come to make **Hearts and Minds**?*

I was working for CBS news after having made this controversial documentary on the defense department propaganda called *The Selling of the Pentagon*. It was because of that that *Hearts and Minds* came about. As a result of *Selling of the Pentagon*, there were congressional investigations and a lot of response after the film - hostile response from the government and pretty positive response from everywhere else.

The production company of *Hearts and Minds* was a company in which Bert Schneider, Bob Rafelson, and Steve Blauner were partners. Bert Schneider called me about a film that would have something to do with the trial of Dan Ellsberg and Tony Russo as a way of getting at the whole issue of the Vietnam War. They were about to go on trial for having stolen and having released to the press the so-called "Pentagon Papers," which was the secret history of the Vietnam War written by people within the government, mostly within the Pentagon I think, maybe exclusively at the Pentagon. Anyway I thought that was intriguing so I flew from New York to California to meet with Bert.

Over the course of several days talking, Bert decided that I would be the person that he wanted to make the film about this trial and I decided that he would be a great guy to work with. He really wanted me to be free. He didn't hover over me. He was just a great, enabling, inspiring producer.

I quit CBS news and went to California. I hired some people and began to make *Hearts and Minds*. Almost immediately it became evident I could not make that film about the trial because neither the defense nor the prosecution was going to let me see their witnesses when they came to Los Angeles for the trial. So I moved back to New York which was the place that was much more congenial to me and much more stimulating to me as an atmosphere for working on a serious documentary film.

For the next year we shot *Hearts and Minds* which meant going to Vietnam, France, and traveling all over this country to see people and to film different situations that appear in the film. Most of the interviews don't appear in the film because we had over 200 hours of film footage, which at that time was an awful lot. Now it's nothing to have 100 times more footage than you can use because the digital makes it so easy and cheap. At that time it was amazing to have a shooting ratio of 100 to 1.

After that year I moved the operation back to California where the cutting rooms were more economical than in New York. After two years the film was finished and we went to the Cannes film festival in the spring of 1974.

Did your focus change as you filmed?

I had three questions I wanted to address with the film. The film doesn't necessarily answer those questions, but every sequence is about one or more of the questions. The questions were; "Why did we go to Vietnam?" "What did we do there?" and "What did the doing in turn do to us?"

Those questions formulated after several months of research when we did very little filming. Those questions guided me for the most important filming and especially during the editing.

The film was very different stylistically than your television work.

Yes, it was completely different. The networks cannot stand quote, dead air unquote. They have to have a narrator, they have to have a guide, a correspondent, a reporter, who stands between you, the audience, and the very thing being described or depicted. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to present the war as directly with as little intermediary interference as possible. It wasn't until I got to Vietnam that I had that moment of revelation about dead air. I realized that I didn't want anybody talking over this footage.

I wanted the subjects to be the focus, not me as filmmaker. In other words, just as I did not want a correspondent I also didn't want as a filmmaker to be trampling all over my subjects. As horrified as I was when General Westmoreland said, "Oriental doesn't put the same value on life", instead of arguing with him, I just wanted to draw him out.

Was it difficult at all to get people to work with you?

Well, not everyone I approached said yes. I asked Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, Robert McNamara, all of whom said no. I asked people who had had decisions to make during the Vietnam War, and the people who answered yes were General Westmoreland, Clark Clifford, and Walt Rostow. I was very fortunate to get those decision makers. I also filmed a lot of people that I never used. For example, I filmed a long interview with George Ball, who had been a high official in the state department, and someone whose council was sought by the White House and he opposed the war from the start. I didn't use him because I only used people who had fought the war or at one time been in favor of the war. There is no one in *Hearts and Minds* who was not at one time in favor of the war.

How did audiences respond?

That's a good question. Audiences responded in a variety of ways, some seemed very moved by it. Some cheered it because it was an anti-war film. It is an anti-war film but it's not just anti the Vietnam War, it's an anti-war film. And

others refused to go see it because they heard that it was too strident or that it was pro-communist because there were people then like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly who would say, don't go see this film, it's a pro-commie thing and there were people on the left who didn't like it either. Emile De Antonio, a great filmmaker who made a number of films that I admired, wrote a scathing review about *Hearts and Minds*. There were other people on the left who said, "This film does not support the liberation fight in Vietnam, it certainly does not support a revolution in Vietnam which is underway, there's no agenda here, what the hell is the guy trying to say?" It got lambasted from both the right and left but it got more good reviews than bad reviews.

Do you think documentary filmmaking is journalism?

Well, there are many kinds of journalism. Tom Wolfe and his fellows opened up journalism in the '60s so that journalism was not just "what the President said today" or "what the White House announced". It became more than that. I don't regard *Hearts and Minds* exactly as journalism. It's a non-fiction film that is an inquiry into motivation and actions and ethics and results. The questions that frame that inquiry are my three questions; "Why did we go to Vietnam?" "What was it that we did there?" and "What did the doing in turn do to us?" That's how I look at it. I wouldn't attempt to put a label on it, other than it's a non-fiction film. If you call it journalism, I wouldn't argue. If you say it's something beyond journalism, I wouldn't argue. Or if you say, it's more like a non-fiction book, I wouldn't argue but I don't know exactly how to label it.

Did you want to inspire people to act or to try to change what was going on?

I wanted to inspire people to feel and think about going to war. I do think, not because of *Hearts and Minds* or certainly not more than just in some kind of ancillary way that the American public learned a lesson in Vietnam and the lesson was, don't fight wars unless they're really necessary to your national survival. I think that that lesson lasted for 25 years and for a whole generation we didn't go to war.

Did you have other films that you were inspired by or have you seen others since?

The War at Home, which came out a little bit after *Hearts and Minds* is a very inspiring film. It was all about Madison, Wisconsin and what the war meant there. Also before my film, the other films on Vietnam that I liked were *The Anderson Platoon* made by Pierre Schoendoerffer and broadcast on CBS news while I was there. And the Emile de Antonio film, *In the Year of the Pig*. You know if you look at enough films about the Vietnam War you'll see a lot of the similar footage because there was only so much stock footage. *Sad Song of the Yellow Skin* is a film that I admired portions of too. I looked at all kinds of films, and I did every kind of research you can imagine, talking, reading books,

watching other films and then most of all thinking. I was able really to think about what I felt, how to express it and I did a lot of worrying.

On all the films I've made I have never celebrated after a day of shooting. I start worrying and after shooting, no matter how good it is, I always think well jeez, sorry we did that but what didn't we get, what do we still have to get while we're here or in this situation or at this school or in this firehouse, wherever I happen to be filming.

Always worry, that's just advice to a filmmaker.

I never feel reassured until the film is over, mixed and released. Reassurance is not something that I as a filmmaker have felt or as a writer, until the whole thing is over.

*Please feel free to contact interviewer Sarah Katz with any questions or comments.
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