

## THE CURRENT CINEMA

*A Filmmaker's Meditation on America*

WHILE I was watching Peter Davis's "Hearts and Minds" for the second time, at a noon public performance at Cinema I, a woman of about sixty-five came alone into the three-quarters-full theatre. The other people in the audience were nearly all men, also unaccompanied. The woman hurried to the row I was in. She stood stock-still beside me for a few minutes, looking at the screen with festering surprise. Obviously, when I thought about it, the title had misled her: she had escaped from the rain outside to see what she expected would be a love story; instead of that, there was a screen showing wounded Vietnamese, wounded G.I.s, assured United States policymakers in office spouting upholstered bombast, confused and skeletal Vietnamese sorrowfully quitting the debris of their American-bombed homes. The woman, who was wearing a plastic mackintosh and carrying an umbrella, a book, and two shopping bags, moved to stand in front of me with her back to the screen. She said softly, "Oh dear. I hope it isn't a war film." I said that it was an anti-war film, about the effects of Vietnam, and that I believed she'd be interested. She shook her head wanly but pressed onward and over me to sit two seats away. A three-dollar ticket is a three-dollar ticket, and it was wet outside. I glanced at her now and then. She took in everything, looked startled, cried. At the end, she went on sitting in her place, with her eyes still on the now blank screen, and said to me, without turning round, "I didn't know we'd done that." Pause. "I liked what the American woman said about a mature person's being able to make a mistake, so why can't a government?"

It would be a million pities if the inapt outburst by Bert Schneider (the film's co-producer with Peter Davis) in reading aloud a cable from the

Provisional Revolutionary Government's Ambassador to the Paris peace talks, Dinh Ba Thi, which he did in the heat of accepting an Oscar, were to debase the film into seeming a simpleminded broadsheet or a piece of penny-in-the-slot cant about the woes of imperialism. I say "a million" because before the outburst and the passing hubbub of complaints "Hearts and Minds" had every chance of reaching the minds of a million Americans likely to react with anger to a picture thus falsely branded as didactic but with interest and warmth to the reflection upon America that this picture really is. The Academy Awards incident was a red herring for a number of reasons. In the first place, it was *ex post facto*, and as irrelevant to the content and meaning of the film as the clothes that someone might wear on the Academy's platform; the picture itself is what critics and audiences need to address themselves to, and that was completely edited and finished in July of 1974. In the second place, the matter and the intention of the film are Peter Davis's, not Bert Schneider's: Schneider played no part in either the

shooting or the editing, and, according to Davis, was generous enough to refrain even from trying to have any political effect on the tone of the picture. In the third place, Schneider's speech added editorial comment to a film that Davis had been very careful to allow to speak for itself. As to Davis's credentials as a reporter—and it is vital that we trust him to be a good witness—there was courage and probity in his TV program "The Selling of the Pentagon," which had a more trenchant and maybe less fully adult structure, and I am persuaded that the even temper, the heed for justice, and the charity of spirit that flood "Hearts and Minds" give it the right to be considered not only a true report but also a work that has the individual point of view possessed by art.

Before making the bulk of the film—he had already shot some footage—Peter Davis went in 1972 to a lot of America's national parks. He wanted to clear his own head by asking people there whether they felt differently about their country then from the way they had felt at the end of the Second World War (or, if he was interviewing someone too young to remember that, at the time of Korea). Only the last of his series of questions was about Vietnam. He chose

to do his reconnaissance in national parks because he thought the people there would be in a reflective mood, with America on their minds. The broad range of their responses has been assimilated into the film, along with much, much else, for "Hearts and Minds" is not at all adequately defined if it is taken to be a mere piece of adversary journalism speaking up against the war. It is an extremely troubled and contemplative picture about some of the origins and some of the consequences of the American involvement in Vietnam. Impressive that a work so coherent and mature can have been completed when the book is even now not closed. I don't mean that the happenings since the time when the footage ends,

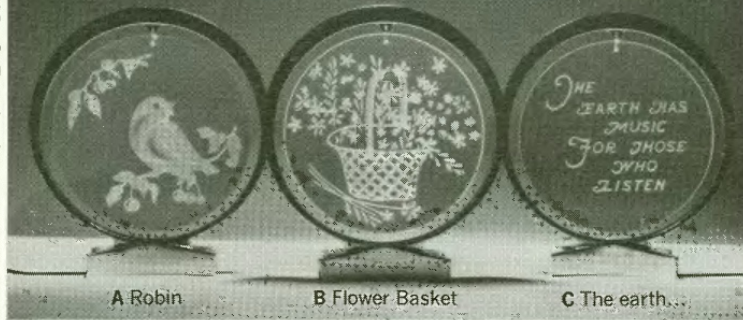


"Let's face it, Doris. This marriage is Chapter XI!"

in July of 1973, have made it obsolete—not a bit, unless a sense of history is something to be pulped when it is less than two years old. It is from the attitudes and actions depicted in the film that the present terrible debacle has flowed. The film's antennae are very alert, and the information received is not editorially interpreted: it is merely passed on to us, which is why it can powerfully affect minds as open as the mind of the woman who was sitting near me in the cinema.

Without commentary, "Hearts and Minds" emphasizes the psychically cogent fact that the Americans on combat duty in Vietnam were often fighting a battle with the invisible. When a high-flying aviator let loose a load of bombs, his imagination declined to saddle his conscience with visions of the almost impossible to take in, and decided that what his eyes couldn't see didn't exist. A veteran from Oklahoma describes "the thrill you get when you see something explode," and goes on to say, "You never could see the people. You never saw any blood. You never could hear any screams. It was very clean. I was a technician." Earlier, he likens bombing to "a singer doing an aria." Not at all a bad man. But he couldn't manage, at the time, to put himself in the position of the people on the ground who were the audience of that lethal aria. The film takes on the task in his stead. Ruined peasants, robbed of everything, speak with tragic brevity. An aging Vietnamese standing without anger in the wreckage of his bombed home says, pointing to a pile of rubble, "I used to raise pigs here." "Where was the kitchen?" asks an American voice offscreen. The man gestures to a bomb crater. And a very old woman, toothless, is asked about her dead sister of seventy-eight. "What did she die of?" "Bombs," says the woman simply, as if bombs were a natural malady. There is only one outburst against the Americans, and that is good-humored: "First they bomb as much as they please, then they film." (Peter Davis was rather good-humored to use it.) One sees footage of Nixon, and contrasts his gobbledygook with the victims' eloquence. "Throughout the war in Vietnam, the United States has exercised a degree of restraint unprecedented in the annals of war," the film shows him idiotically saying. Back in Vietnam, peasants look at fragmented bodies and at splinters of pretty crockery lying in the mud. A Vietnamese woman, crazed with grief, tries to climb into a grave. Straight afterward, General Westmoreland says

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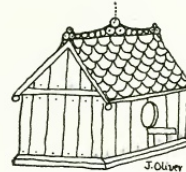
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soberly, "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is cheap in the Orient. As the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important." The cut between the two scenes is not a piece of easy pointmaking. Both things happened, and their weight doesn't lie in their juxtaposition. If all the sequences in "Hearts and Minds" were to be thrown up in the air and put together again in random order, the meaning of the film would still be the same.

Practically everyone we listen to in "Hearts and Minds" seems to be in the dark. For Americans, here or there, the war made no sense. We see an American in his own country saying, "I think we're fighting for the North Vietnamese, ain't we?" An American soldier in combat says, "They say we're fighting for something. I dunno." Everyone had to find shelter somewhere. The Vietnamese found it in religion, in doggedness, in making coffins if they could afford the wood. Most Americans found it in distance. Some of these—Daniel Ellsberg and Clark Clifford, for instance, who both speak in the film—found it in a change of opinion so violent as to amount to an act of self-ransack. Americans in Vietnam found it in willed ignorance, or in flag wagging, or in the offering of small kindnesses, or in conduct so callous that there was no chance that life in Vietnam would relate to anything they knew. We see them behaving unspeakably in a brothel. A G.I. in a street scene, after a scornful appraisal of the worth of a whore whom he assesses through a semi-curtained window, responds viciously to the price she asks. "Too much," he says. Too much to pay for *her*. A repatriated American stiffneck who has been imprisoned by the North Vietnamese finds his particular solace in not budging an inch from the mindless chauvinism he set out with. Back in America, heavily still in uniform on a rabble-raising lecture tour, he says of the look of Vietnam, "If it wasn't for the people, it would be very pretty." This occurs in a Catholic grammar school, what's more, and in answer to a question from a child, what's more. The future, if it is recoverable, lies with other sorts of mind. Perhaps the most passionately searching scenes in this most searching film are the ones that put on record the changing thought of some returned G.I.s. We are aware of their trying very hard

to take in the unassimilable at last. If they can do it, it will be an expression of some pliant natural genius. A start has been made. The same chilling aviator who talked of himself as a technician at the beginning of the film appears with a new view of things near the end. He is asked by an unseen American if he thinks we've learned anything from all this. He says, with his head down, "I think we're trying not to." Then he looks up, and grins through tears that he struggles for a painfully long time to shed. "I think *I'm* trying not to, sometimes. I can't even cry easily—my manhood image."



"Hearts and Minds" isn't really so much a film opposing the American intervention in Vietnam as an inquiry into the effect that the Vietnam war has had on Americans. It is about America's view of itself, which has been knocked into a still inchoate new form. In its essence, "Hearts and Minds" is a complex tale about possessing apparently infallible power and then finding that it doesn't work. Peter Davis has thought hard, and he sees the Vietnam war as the vehicle for that sense of power in America. After the Second World War—when America's military force had been used on a side that was, for once, simply and visibly the right one—the nation's strength seemed mighty enough to have been God-given. Now, for a growing mass of the population, the notion that any military power can be God-given has crumbled. With it has gone a crucial tenet in the established dogma of Americanness, which had come to include an almost religious notion that there was rectitude in winning. The belief developed from this unconscious popular formula in logic:

We have triumphed in the past by might.

In the past we have been right.

∴ Might will go on being right.

∴ America will go on being right.

By extension, since God's will is right (=triumphant), America is divinely selected to be right (=triumphant).

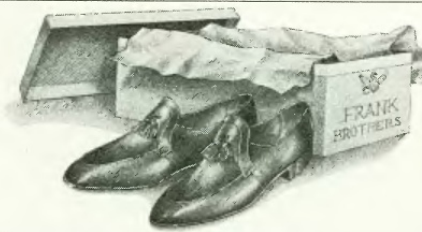
∴ America and the Almighty will go on triumphing hand in hand, equipped with the fire and the sword.

Davis's film takes another look at this edifice of fallacies. He gazes particularly hard at the step that equates blessedness and winning, and concludes that it will just about do to nourish the fervent souls of drum majorettes. The picture shows us an array of majorettes on a football field, looking as awkwardly missionary as a parade of top-

less waitresses about to be decorated by the First Lady on the twelfth anniversary of Toplessness. Quietly emphatic on the same obvious but crucial topic of winning, Davis catches a hysterical football coach yelling victory exhortations in a locker room, where athleticism and a sense of deified purpose oddly mingle; he also includes footage of a fatuous minister urging high-school boys to win a game ahead. "This is serious business that we're involved in, and that's religious, and God cares," the minister says, as if football were a dummy run for what he would probably call "the great game of life itself." He does actually say, "May you be winners in the big game, but, more importantly, winners in the biggest game of all, which we all play. Let us pray."

But the theorem about the divine right of winning has now been disproved as thoroughly as the divine right of kings once was, and more traumatically, because there are a greater number of decent, shamed, confused citizens here than there were ever despotic monarchs in Europe. Americans have had to cope for years with an instinct that something terribly important was happening in Southeast Asia, though there has never been a comprehensive attempt by a President or a TV network or a major film company to vindicate their instinct. They have had only their nerve ends to judge by; and the knowledge of the risks run by draft dodgers, who must have been empowered by a very strong idea; and the evidence of brave, prophetic independent films, like Eugene S. Jones's "A Face of War" (1968) and now Peter Davis's thematically more complex picture. Television news has sold the public short with its method of tucking shots of faraway suffering between commercials for hair shampoos and parish-pump stories about this week's Con Edison mishap. Treated so, the repeated pitiful faces on the screen have been reduced to nothing more than the insignia of suffering, for we have been given no sense of cause and effect.

"Hearts and Minds" is endowed with that sense. We have been sorely in need of it, because the once-supportive theorem about power has been in visible collapse for years. The film recalls the way President Johnson, poorly grasping the need to turn the impossible war into a police action in the public mind, subconsciously undercut the effort by falling into the trap of continuing to say, "Make no mistake about it. . . . We are going to win." The urge to "win" in the traditional



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bellicose style has revealed itself to be a dud impulse, and Peter Davis shows us that the revelation has cruelly baffled many veterans and many civilians. So far, only a few voices in the Republic have been raised to express a point of view as ample and poised as the one that underlies "Hearts and Minds." Davis understands that, by the criterion of "winning," the "loss" of Vietnam—which never belonged to anyone but the Vietnamese anyway—has dealt a body blow to a long-entertained American notion that "sincerity" is enough not only in the holding of a belief but also for insuring conquest by the use of force. Sincerity has proved itself *not* to be enough; so has the parallel American ethic of diligence and its due reward. Simple shows of devoutness and industry on the part of Presidents and their advisers aren't any longer adequate. The acts of going to church with the family on Sunday and of working on tropical holidays solve no complicated international crises. Nor does American might, which has turned out to be not at all a sacred virtue bound to succeed: it hasn't triumphed in any sense in Indo-China, and its profane exercise there has caused far more suffering than all the other unholy Holy Wars put together. But a lot of Americans still seem happily eager to remain superstitious, even if they are not devout and abjure belief in an afterlife. Faith in America's power used to be capable of deputizing for faith in God, because it helped zealots to dismiss the power of other political systems with as much beatific security as monotheists dismissing heathens. Now that the power has been found wanting, it is the superstitious here who have been most painfully affected. It is for these very people, perhaps, that there is the greatest sanity and balm to be had from "Hearts and Minds." The film takes a far kinder and longer-sighted view of the capacity of the American national character to receive and absorb tormenting new information about itself than most citizens now do in this shaken, guilt-freighted land of the fortunate.

**P**HILIPPE DE BROCA's newest film to be seen here, "Touch and Go," is not the best vehicle for his monkey-on-a-stick funniness. He moves more easily through quixotic vaudeville pranks like "The Love Game," the

mischievous sex comedy that came out here in 1960. Like all true comic characters, the three principals of "The Love Game" were embalmed in obsession: the husband figure (unmarried) was a sprightly faun absorbed in the painting of trompe-l'oeil roses; the lover was a hopelessly square real-estate agent lost in the rituals of bachelorhood; the girl was an endearingly calm pragmatist intent only on having a baby. For this trio of inseparables, happily marooned in crankiness, de Broca found the perfect setting. The action occurred in—or picked its way through—a cluttered Paris antique shop owned by the heroine. Never was funnier use made of loony furniture: one grew to know the witch balls and birdcages as if they were one's aunt's. De Broca makes fine, sweet-pitched films when he is treating this sort of idyllic self-absorption. The same tonic singularity of behavior allowed "The Five Day Lover" (1961), which was about infidelity, to seem a story without a wound. The hedonist characters maintained a quizzicality that was almost pre-moral in its link to the infant sense that nothing will go wrong. Both films were blessed by the performances of the young Jean-Pierre Cassel, his nose looking pointed enough to paint miniatures with, and his temperament readily embracing the inconsequentially odd. In "The Five Day Lover," the Cassel character was keen on country-dancing in clogs.

The unfortunate "The Devil by the Tail" (1969) was a crime comedy that teetered over the line between convincing quirkiness and preciousity. The earlier "King of Hearts" (1967) had the same flaw, yet it has proved to be a commercial stayer, especially with college audiences. Its story, set near the end of the First World War, was about a Scottish soldier ordered to dismantle a bomb in a French village that had been deserted except by the inhabitants of a lunatic asylum and of a zoo. The soldier was played by Alan Bates, who was then identified as one of the most electric listeners in the English-speaking cinema or theatre—he has since proved himself to be a wonderful histrionic actor (as in "Butley")—but even his gift for raptness could make nothing much of a role that asked him to be the confidant of carrier pigeons. The film veered from the genuinely dream-struck to the



winsome. Between interludes of reverie that seemed carnival respites from caution and mortality, the fanciful gags won overemphatic laughter from audiences, who sounded secretly scared that de Broca's grip on his sense of humor was slipping. I think it was Shaw who once wrote, with a glare, that a professional observer like him "soon gets cured of the public's delusion that everything that makes it laugh amuses it."

In "Touch and Go" ("La Poudre d'Escampette" in French, meaning "bolting;" made in 1971 but only just released here), de Broca takes on the Second World War and a serious theme about friendship. The trouble, again, is that he can't adapt the old style. It is de Broca's habit to blow dandelion clocks. In the soft breeze of his earlier pictures, that was beguiling, but in the middle of bullets it seems a caprice. His breakneck steeplechase through the hazards of an antique shop was funny; a matching sequence for a biplane in "Touch and Go" isn't. In the course of a war story like this, there is nothing but a wince to be won from a scene in which two men in danger of their lives are bumped across a large acreage of the North African desert in a plane that a pretty but unhinged woman pilots with at least one wheel permanently on the ground, as though she were adhering to the old-time tenet of movie censorship which ruled that in all double-bed scenes at least one of the characters must have at least one foot on the floor.

At the start of the film, with Michel Piccoli playing a gunrunner who comes home to North Africa, things seem to be in hand. Piccoli is his usual accomplished self. He is one of the many battered-looking and sagacious European character actors who make it seem inviting to outgrow being unwrinkled. The trouble with the film begins when we meet Michael York as a sappy English officer, accompanied by other sappy English officers, playing cards and boozing in a plane over Libya. The overdrawn Bertie Woosters very, very slowly realize, by putting two and two together about the gunfire surrounding them and the wild bucketing of the plane, that something's up with the pilot. Dead, they twig. Michael York has luckily taken a few lessons flying a glider. But into the drink the plane goes. The York character escapes somehow—you never see exactly how, just as you never see whether he tries to save his fellow-officers. Anyway, here he is again, blithely hanging on to a dinghy in the sea, though with dry



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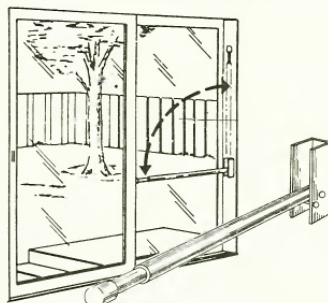
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patches on his uniform, and even wearing his hat. Piccoli, on the bridge of an attached big boat, is about to turn away from the sight of the crash when he hears a politely elocuted "Help! Help!" Michael York is taken on board and quickly changes into some spotlessly white boxer shorts that couldn't conceivably have belonged to any of the ragged rogues who are the crew. He fries himself some eggs, and tells the friendly gunrunner "*Passes le salt,*" or something of the sort. There is a lot of forced fun about the French-speaking abilities of fictional English upper-class nits. Michael York says "*Il faut bluffer*" at some point later on.

The plot is extremely long, trivial, complicated, and dependent on our accepting the notion that the characters have brains the size of peas. The tone is finally lost when the Piccoli character shoots someone by accident. The scene comes after a slow-burn joke about the discovery by Italian soldiers of one of Michael York's clearly marked British Army-issue shoes. That joke, which is an amiable but overmilked one about Italians' being reluctant military heroes, would more aptly belong in farce, where stereotypes are acceptable in place of characters. And then the structure is knocked sideways by the shooting incident, and so is the whole of the rest of the picture. A killed man is not a stereotype. He represents tragedy, calamity, the extinction of a personality. Anonymous, the corpse suddenly commands the film, and the film slinks away.

This is not to say that it is impossible—simply aesthetically difficult—to make farces that include the sight of death in battle. Richard Lester did it in "How I Won the War" and in both "The Three Musketeers" and "The Four Musketeers." But a very grown-up and bitter rage seethes under the schoolboy funniness in Lester's films. In "How I Won the War," particularly, there was the stoicism that is known only to the immovably angry—to people who admit no one's right to blow their heads off. In "Touch and Go," de Broca has made his second farcical fantasy set in the middle of a war, but he is incapable—owing to docility of temperament, perhaps—of giving an audience the feeling that any dark imperatives lie behind the action. And, just as he can't absorb war into the mode he works in, he can't make this film the story of true friendship he obviously hoped it would be. Piccoli, York, and a Swiss consul's wife (Marlene Jobert) are supposed

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to be a trio of total strangers locked together in the intimacy uniquely produced by crisis. But the intimacy isn't made palpable. The three sense nothing about one another, they ask few questions of one another, they bring no past with them, and they carry no wish for a future together. In fact, they cut the future short in its prime, through allowing themselves to be fobbed off by an easy deception and by two acts of attitudinizing lone-wolf martyrdom; and all of that happens not because of their characters but for the puny sake of giving the film a tearful finale. This is no story of friendship. The three share nothing: not a sense of humor, not even a sense of danger. When they are on the run and in sight of safety, their resolve suddenly swerves into an elfin insistence on delaying their rescue by spending a fantasy Christmas Eve in an evacuated fort. They are relegated to existing simply as the instruments of gags and the outcomes of whimsey.

—PENELOPE GILLIATT

TO OUR NEW HAVEN LINE PASSENGERS:

The first part of this week was very trying for many of you. We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience you experienced.

On Tuesday morning, some trains were delayed due to equipment and cold weather problems at the Stamford storage yard. Additional delays were caused by signal problems which blocked one of the four tracks on the Park Avenue Viaduct.

On Tuesday evening at 5:26 P.M., the Power Supervisor at the Cos Cob power plant reported an electrical ground in the Mount Vernon area on the overhead wires. At 5:42 P.M. the Mount Vernon Fire Department requested us to turn off the power because a cable was burning near the 5th Avenue bridge. Power could not be turned on again until 6:45 P.M. In the intervening period seven trains were stalled between Woodlawn and New Rochelle. Another six New Haven trains were held on the Harlem Line south of Woodlawn. Trains which had not already left Grand Central were held in the Terminal. While the power was off, the lights and heat on three of the older electric trains depleted their batteries. As a result these trains had to be assisted with emergency locomotives.

The electrical ground was caused by brine (water saturated with salt) dripping from the street bridge over our tracks and power lines. The dripping brine came in contact with the catenary system burning a span wire in half.

Again to all, our sincere apologies. We shall continue to exert all of our efforts to reduce delays and your inconvenience. —Letter distributed to passengers on the New Haven.

There may be trouble on the tracks, but in the front office there's a rising young writer.

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