ELOQUENT IRONIES: NARRATORS DISRUPTED IN THE ANTI-WAR DOCUMENTARIES HEARTS AND MINDS AND THE FOG OF WAR

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ABSTRACT: Two important documentaries, Peter Davis’ Hearts and Minds (1974) and Errol Morris’ The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara (2003), oppose American intervention in Vietnam, but they do so in different ways. Whereas Hearts ends up disrupting, through the editing, every narrator who champions the war, Fog is more subtle in its eventual destruction of former secretary of Defense McNamara. Both films disavow their subjects through the use of irony, contradicting laypeople’s opinion that documentaries can (or should) be neutral. Davis and Morris certainly take their stand and let us know what they think of several relevant military figures of the time.

KEYWORDS: documentaries; war; irony; narration.

As a genre within the genre of film studies, documentaries have always struggled with the issue of objectivity and of “showing the other side,” even when they are clearly partial. One of the most acclaimed documentaries ever, Hearts and Minds (1974) never tries to pretend it is neutral. It brings an unabashed, and thus powerful, condemnation of the American intervention in Vietnam. The Fog of War (2003), on the other hand, filmed almost three decades later, gives a more objective view of the Vietnam War. Or does it? I would like to analyze the strongest points of rupture in both films, when the documentarians get far away from any attempt at neutrality and, through the use of irony, clearly state their opinion. I am talking about the devastating funeral scenes towards the end of Hearts and Minds, followed by general Westmoreland’s well-known declaration that “life is cheap in the Orient,” and the egg moment in The Fog of War, when former secretary of Defense Robert McNamara narrates his experience at Ford.

Hearts and Minds, directed by Peter Davis when the Vietnam War was still going on, is just about the most anti-American film I have ever seen, much more than, say, Lars von Trier’s Dogville or Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11. Far worse than exhibiting three presidents lying, Hearts depicts how American society is brainwashed to be a bellicose nation. Marine-turned-pacifist Daniel Ellsberg summarizes U.S. involvement in any war by stating, “The question used to be: ‘Might it be possible we were on the wrong side in the Vietnamese War?’ We weren’t on the wrong side – we are the wrong side.” It is impossible not to notice that he keeps the verb in the present tense. Besides, Hearts gives a rare voice to the Vietnamese, who are allowed to express all their grief. Oddly enough, when Columbia, the studio behind it, found out Hearts was going to be a documentary, it tried to back out, adjourning the film’s release date several months (BISKIND, 1998, p. 185). The film finally won an Oscar in 1975, and it says a lot about how consistent liberals can be that, only three years after choosing an unequivocally anti-war film like Hearts for...
Best Documentary, the Academy picked the rather fascist *The Deer Hunter* for Best Picture. Pat Aufderheide claims that, in spite of its Oscar, *Hearts* “fell victim to post-Vietnamization consensus and was rarely seen” (1990, p. 101). Therefore, the documentary’s influence in changing the American public’s mindset about the Vietnam War is open to debate.

If *Hearts* concentrates more on emotions, *The Fog of War* stresses rationality. We move from the total irrationality of war shown by *Hearts* to the logic of the secretary of Defense, though the fog remains. Also known as *Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara*, this documentary, an Oscar winner as well, practically only has ears for an 85-year-old McNamara. The director Errol Morris uses a device called the Interrotron, in which the subject is interviewed without the presence of the documentarian in the room, thus talking only to a camera. By fleeing the scene and extinguishing the presence of the interviewer, Morris tries to give the subject a sense of control. The final result is McNamara talking to us in quite a confessional way. We also end up with an old man full of experience lecturing and wagging his finger at us. As a critic points out, “the effect is not unlike that of sitting in the classroom of a professor you despise” (MORRIS, 2003, par. 3).

Errol Morris decided to make this documentary after reading McNamara’s 1995 memoir *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (FOX, 2004, par. 1). The filmmaker reports:

> I like to think of this film as a perverse kind of biography and history. It omits the standard things you usually see. It includes things that are incredibly subjective. This has been a dream of mine, to make a movie with one person. There’s no attempt at what we consider journalistic balance. [...] You’re forced into another place—you’re forced inside [McNamara’s] head. You’re forced to think about that person and what he’s thinking and why he’s thinking it. You’re forced to do things that you can normally avoid doing because you’re always on the outside often being told what to think. (qtd. in HALTER, 2003, par. 5)

Though the film was highly praised, getting an 83 average out of 100 from 36 reviewers at www.metacritic.com, some critics complained of Morris’ non-confrontational approach, permitting McNamara to give “a teary performance he’s polished to perfection during countless interviews” (FOX, 2004, par. 1). That may be true, but I am more inclined to agree with the *Boston Globe* reviewer, who thought, on a first viewing, that Morris did not fight McNamara enough. But, “after a second sitting,” he concludes, “you realize that the film’s central drama is not between the former secretary and the filmmaker. It’s between McNamara and history” (MORRIS, 2004, par. 9).

Throughout the documentary McNamara tries to save his face, and his is the only voice. Occasionally we have glimpses of what newspapers said about him (Mac the Knife

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2 Legendary critic Pauline Kael calls Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978) a “romantic adolescent-boy’s view of friendship, with the Vietnam War seen in Victorian terms [...], as a test of men’s courage. This is the fullest screen treatment so far of the mystic bond of male comradeship” (1987, p. 141). Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner consider the film “multivalent politically,” in which one of its many missions is to incorporate Vietnam “not as a defeat from which lessons can be learned, but as a springboard for male military heroism” (1990, p. 200). Multivalent politically or clearly fascist, the fact remains that *The Deer Hunter* ends with American heroes singing “God Bless America,” without the slightest hint at irony.

3 However, in stressing rationality, *The Fog of War* exposes some of the emotional and/or irrational aspects of rationally-made decisions. We could even say that McNamara progressively undermines the rational story he wants to tell.
etc) and even more rarely we hear Morris asking questions. One of his first interventions is about the Bay of Pigs, and that seems to put McNamara on the spot, so we tend to believe the interviewer’s voice is antagonistic yet unobtrusive. The opening of Fog itself, exposing a young McNamara checking the microphone, already informs us that this is a man who is used to being in control and to manipulating his listeners. And there is the “drowning-by-numbers” moment in which figures, instead of bombs, get dropped on Tokyo during World War II. This appears to be Morris’ veiled critique to McNamara’s rationality. But there is one key scene, I think, that disrupts the secretary’s narrative and makes us pay even more attention to his contradictions. The whole introduction to “Lesson 6 – Get the Data” starts like this:

Morris: “At some point we have to approach Vietnam, and I want to know how you can best set that up for…”
McNamara: “Yeah. Well, that’s, uh, a, a hard question. I think, uh…”

By his suggestion for McNamara to “set up” the scenario to talk about Vietnam, Morris, who does not ask a question at all, takes us back to the beginning of the film. But McNamara insists on returning to the end of the Second World War and to his job at Ford. It is at this point that the documentarian seems to lose his patience, and his editing lets us know. The entire sequence that follows is already quite ironic because McNamara is bragging of having invented seatbelts and thus saving 20,000 lives a year right after he discussed the 100,000 Japanese killed. As we know from Hearts and Minds, American and Oriental lives do not carry the same weight.

McNamara starts explaining how he got to work at Ford. First he mentions an aptitude test applied at the time, where he had to choose whether he would prefer being a florist or a coal miner. McNamara says, “I put down coal miner. I think the reasons are obvious to you.” His reasons, however, are far from clear, yet Morris lets him get away. But, at the same time, by not asking him to clarify, Morris is raising doubts about him. We can also see this unclarified moment as a distancing mechanism on Morris’ part. After all, McNamara has tried, through a personal anecdote, to make a connection with the interviewer and by extension the viewer, but Morris essentially lets him fail in his attempt. The filmmaker does not allow the Secretary of Defense to “connect” with the viewer on any emotional level. McNamara then tells us how he asked his employees to get data on car accidents, and they tell him that the secret is in the packaging. His monologue continues excitedly:

They said, you buy eggs, and you know how eggs come in a carton. I said no, I don’t buy eggs, I never… My wife does it. Well, you talk to her and ask her when she puts that carton down, on the drainboard when she gets home, do the eggs break? And so I asked Maggie and she said no, so Cornell said they don’t break because they’re packaged properly. Now if we package people in cars the same way we can reduce the breakage.

4 This is a perfect opening for the one-man-show intended by McNamara. But it is also a perfectly ironic statement by Morris, as if the filmmaker were allowing the narrator to prepare his stage and set the scene. By choosing these clips, Morris is telling us that McNamara is a control freak. The irony resides in the fact that Morris will not let him get away with it. It may be McNamara’s version of history, but it is still Morris’ film.
What follows are two shots of a carton of eggs being thrown from a high floor and obviously getting smashed when they hit the ground. Even though McNamara’s narration resumes after twelve long seconds to explain how he experimented by throwing several objects from high places, and observing their impact, the harm is already done. These twelve seconds of silence, underscored by Philip Glass’ music, and in connection with the images of the destroyed cartons of eggs, let us know what the documentarian thinks: this guy is lying.

By cutting from a talking head to smashed eggs, Morris, in fact, makes the eggs be more than mere eggs. The graphic scene and the sound of eggs breaking pretty much dialogue with the violence that came before (airplanes destroying Tokyo) and with the one that will come shortly, about Vietnam. We have just heard McNamara’s recollection of how eggs do not break due to the packaging, and here are the images to prove him wrong. Because the images do not correspond with what McNamara the narrator says, and we tend to trust images more than words, we suspect irony (KOZLOFF, 1988, p. 102). As Sarah Kozloff demonstrates, if there is a discrepancy between the voice-over narration and an image, the viewer always believes the images are speaking the truth, due to our strong bias against an oral tradition. We learn since childhood that “a picture is worth more than a thousand words,” that “film is a visual medium,” or that “the camera does not lie” (1988, p. 102). Of course, after decades of critical studies we have learned that editing means choosing, and that depending on the choices made and on what is left out and in, the camera may lie as well as any speech. McNamara’s voice-over narration is slightly behind, but this lag is sufficient to discredit him. And, as Wayne Booth reminds us, “Once [we] have learned to suspect a given speaker, [we] are tempted to suspect every statement he makes” (1974, p.185). According to New York University professor Anna McCarthy:

Here we get to something specific to documentary films of this sort, which extends Booth’s claim even further. What we see is the fact that McNamara does not really understand the way that his words are made to work against themselves through the editorial juxtaposition of images. It calls our attention to a particular function of irony in speech. Speech can never be “taken back”—any attempt to modify one’s position is necessarily additive, and the documentary is structured so that McNamara must constantly say more in his defense. And this has something of the opposite effect—it undermines the sense of certainty he’s hoping to convey. Booth doesn’t quite get at the way speakers respond to the climate of suspicion that irony creates, and I think your reading here is moving us in that direction.

However, if anybody missed the montage’s irony in this scene, Morris follows with McNamara’s claim that nobody wanted to use seatbelts, while the images actually show people using seatbelts. Most of the editing in Lesson 6 makes us believe that Morris does not forgive McNamara for talking about his auspicious career when he should be talking about Vietnam. I do not think that, after this sequence, we need to wait till the end of the film to see Morris directly doubting McNamara. He has done so already, and more elegantly than, for instance, Michael Moore arguing with Charlton Heston in Bowling for Columbine. It is never nice, after all, to see an old man beaten.

In Davis’ Hearts and Minds, another senior citizen, former aide Walt Rostow, does the filmmaker a great service by getting so furious. At this point early in the film, we already know Davis is antagonistic to the power elite. Davis’ question, and also his first
interruption, “Why do [the Vietnamese] need us then?”, is enough to trigger Rostow’s anger. And, to make it clear that Davis does not care about what Rostow is saying, he cuts him right after he starts explaining. There are then various other moments throughout the film that disturb the narrative of the right-wing. For Ryan and Kellner,

If *Patton* [1970] demonstrated that the conservative militarist pathology is inseparable from male self-aggrandizement, an authoritarian model of social discipline, and the skewing of the personality away from a composite of affectionate and aggressive traits and toward a hyper-tropism of violence, *Hearts and Minds* by combining clips from war films with scenes of football games, shows how militarism emerges from a culture that promotes aggressivity in young men and furthers a racist attitude toward the world. The film juxtaposes defenders and critics of U.S. policy, and the accompanying documentary footage of the ravages of war positions the prowar speakers as being arrogant and cruel. (1990, p. 197)

Certainly no other scene in the documentary is as eloquent as the one involving General Westmoreland and the suffering Vietnamese. This sequence starts with black and white images of a destroyed Vietnamese hospital, focusing on two dead Vietnamese boys. Then it moves to the ruins of a village where Vu Duc Vinh, a North Vietnamese peasant, says that his 3 year-old son and 8 year-old daughter have been killed by American bombs. “What have I done to Nixon so that he comes here to bomb my country?” he asks in Vietnamese, and we hear the translation in English. While other Vietnamese watch silently, he calls Nixon “murderer of civilians” and states there were no targets there, only rice fields and houses, and his daughter was killed while feeding the pigs. “My daughter is dead. The pigs are alive,” he says desperately. He also wants to give the interviewer his daughter’s blouse. “Throw that shirt in Nixon’s face,” he adds. All of these hard phrases are met with shots of his and other destroyed houses. Vinh is like a tour guide showing the route of chaos. The repetition here is in the words “my daughter,” which the desolated father stresses several times. This makes us empathize even more with him, giving us a bigger sense of his loss, while also making Nixon more of a villain. Vinh is a Vietnamese given not only a voice and a name – which already would be much more than what usually appears in American films about Vietnam – but also given control of the images. We see what he shows us, and we have no reason to doubt him, since he presents evidence, including the shirt of his little girl. It is curious we never get to see the shirt, but we are convinced it exists due to his poignant words. The sense of drama that Sasha Torres mentions as part of documentaries is stronger here (2003, p. 32). This sequence is very hard to take, and I would guess it is at this point in the picture that we, who have been struggling with tears throughout, finally break down. We lose all defenses. As Bruce Berman points out, watching the documentary becomes a masochistic experience (1975, p. 24).

But the Vietnamese’s suffering – and ours as well – goes on. Now we are transported to the National Cemetery in South Vietnam. Here we have no translation, but there is little said. A boy cries, holding his father’s picture. Soldiers prepare the man’s burial. A woman wants to get into his grave. The soldiers have to remove her. This sequence breaks what was left of our hearts. It shows that war is most certainly something made by and for men (HALLIN, 1994, p. 46), but its victims are women and children. Then the film cuts to peace and quiet, a bucolic passage with General William Westmoreland in civilian clothes, talking to the camera, with lots of hesitations, as if he were actually
thinking before speaking. And this is what he comments: “Well, the Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient. And, uh, as the, uh, philosophy of the, uh, of the Orient, uh, uh, expresses it, uh, uh, life is, uh, is not important.”

Davis could have placed this striking declaration before the scenes of the Vietnamese suffering, or show the scenes with the general’s voice overlapping. He chose to have the general after the scenes. In reality, the effect would have been devastating anywhere. Carol Wilder says,

Davis reports that Westmoreland made the now-infamous statement not once, but three times. In response to criticism of Davis for juxtaposing that scene next to the Vietnamese funeral, he insists that no matter where the footage was placed, it “detonated” all the footage around it. Given the contribution of this moment to the film’s impact, Davis could not have constructed written narration that speaks more forcefully. The highest ranking American military man in the film saying the most ignorant thing in the most matter-of-fact way captures the soul of *Hearts and Minds* more any other single moment. (2002, par. 32)

By placing the general’s comment after the scenes, Davis stresses the general and his prejudice. He is given the last word, and the message that will linger on is his. But, of course, no one will remember him for his wisdom. The images are too blatant, and they speak much more strongly than the general’s hesitant words. Moreover, the general offers us nothing but his biased opinion, especially if compared to Vinh’s proof (his daughter’s blouse that we never see, debris of what is left of his house). Vinh gives us evidence that he is telling the truth, that he really cares for the daughter he lost, and that their lives are indeed valuable. The contrast is so obvious that, as a result, the general’s reasoning crumbles before our eyes.

The irony in this sequence is so evident that it is almost overt irony. It is as if the filmmaker were saying “it is ironic that some people in high positions feel this way.” Detecting irony has never been so easy. For Linda Hutcheon, “the five generally agreed-upon categories of signals that function structurally are: 1) various changes of register; 2) exaggeration [hyperbole]/understatement; 3) contradiction/incongruity; 4) literalization/simplification; 5) repetition/echoic mention” (1995, p. 156). That is, if we find any of those signals in a text, we may suspect irony. Well, the scene with the general covers all these five categories, making it undoubtedly ironic. It shows a change of register, from a place full of despair to a calm lake, from wailing to a quiet voice. The general’s declaration is both an understatement and a false simplification, and it visibly contradicts the sequences that come before (and after). It also echoes other instances in the film where Lt. Cocker, a prisoner of war, claims the Vietnamese are primitive and mess everything up. A similar prejudice can be seen in *The Fog of War*, lesson 4, when McNamara mentions Chinese labor during World War II: occasionally one Chinese would fall under a huge roll, the others would laugh and just move on. In a way this also echoes one of the mottos of

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5 For McCarthy, “another element of this speech’s corruption is the way that [the general] is essentially channeling mainstream ideas about non-western religion and spiritual practices (e.g. Buddhism) in a distorted way. He speaks with a sense of authority, much as McNamara does, and this is one crucial place where the film really gets at the terrible limits of the white, upper class, masculine position of supposedly all-knowingness” (2004, email).
American heroism not only in Vietnam but in any war: “no man left behind.” The parallel is that, since “life is cheap in the Orient,” men can be left behind all the time and no one cares – very different from the U.S. sense of individualism.

Naturally, if the spectator feels the same way as the general, s/he will not see the irony. But is it really possible to still go on believing that “life is cheap in the Orient” after seeing those images? I imagine some spectators could have thought so before watching the film, since Americans are used to final scores such as the one in *Black Hawk Down*, 1,000 Somali civilians killed versus 19 Americans soldiers, and the closing credits include the names of our 19 heroes. But the change of mind after suffering with *Hearts and Minds* is then inevitable. The effect of Davis’ documentary is thus very pedagogical. It is possible that he uses this irony not only to destabilize and mock the general, but also to emphasize the sense of Us versus Them. After all, understanding the irony present in this sequence makes us bond with others who were against the Vietnam War. We are part of this ironic community simply because we got it (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 18).

I would argue that both *Hearts and Minds* and *The Fog of War* make us part of this ironic community, especially in the aforementioned scenes. Both films become more powerful by using irony to defend their cause. Morris’ cause, whatever that is, is not as evident as Davis’, but the effect he accomplishes during the egg scene clearly contests what McNamara has to say. Both documentaries show distrust for figures of authority and their discourse, and express so through their editing. For Booth, “all truths are dissolved in an ironic mist” (1974, p. 151). Mist, fog – it is all the same. No truth is left standing about the Vietnam War but this: that it was a gigantic, shameful mistake that will forever haunt Americans, and that any new war they create, any country they invade, will inevitably be compared to the Vietnam experience.

References


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6 Not surprisingly, the tagline for *Black Hawk Down* is “Leave No Man Behind.” However, in Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers*, the director deconstructs this myth by showing an American soldier falling from a ship on its way to Iwo Jima. The ship does not stop and the man is seen struggling against the waves, which makes another soldier comment, “So much for ‘no man left behind.’”


McCARTHY, A. Personal communication through email. 16 July 2004.


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VON TRIER, L., dir. **Dogville**. Denmark / Sweden / France / Norway / Netherlands / Finland / Germany / USA / UK, 2003. Isabella Films B. V.