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- 1 As she was, in her own words, sent to Vietnam as "a correspondent for *The New York Times* when the war was at its oldest" (2014 xx), Gloria Emerson interviewed people directly affected by the Vietnam War, American and Vietnamese soldiers and civilians alike. In a passage of *Winners and Losers*, the non-fiction book that was the result of these interviews, Emerson describes how "a woman whose house [she] visited during the McGovern campaign" (14) perceived no difference between World War II movies and the TV treatment of the Vietnam War. Emerson then mentions a war movie with Errol Flynn¹ shown "late the other night on television": "The movie has nothing to do with Vietnam, but I pay strict attention" (15). Beyond the sophomoric assumption that interpretation lies exclusively in the eyes of the beholder, this innocuous quote also points to the fact that the filmic representation of a war is far removed from the experience of those who lived it. If the unnamed woman sees no difference between war films and how TV represented another war, then the narrating "I" knows best because she has seen the war up close, albeit as a journalist and not as a soldier. The necessity to distinguish between the potentially confusing filmic representations of the war and the testimonies of those who witnessed the war firsthand will constitute a guiding principle of this article.
- 2 Among other topics, Gloria Emerson focuses on ruins, the last topic covered in the long title of *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses and Ruins from the Vietnam War*, as if to suggest that ruins, whether the material ruins caused by destruction or the "ruins of memory" (Rabinowitz 119), are the only visible and felt traces that can remain of the experience of war. Robert Ginsberg's definition of ruins suggests that they can be perceived as more than mere remains: "Aesthetically speaking, a ruin is the irreparable

remains of a human construction that, by a destructive act or process, no longer dwells in the unity of the original, but may have new unities that we can enjoy" (285; author's emphasis). In the case of ruins that are the products of destruction, such as war ruins, destruction implies a double process: both the destruction of "the unified original" and the creation of "a new unity" (294). Ruins thus point back to what was and forward to what may arise. The aesthetic framework used by Ginsberg can lead to political interpretations of ruins, such as when he details the function of "the symbolic war-ruin" (108). Similarly, when Michel Makarius claims that ruins "implicitly become figures of the erasure of the direction toward which history was marching" (9),² he offers an adequate framework in which aesthetic concerns turn into springboards for political analyses. The ruins in Vietnam War documentaries are not the ruins Vietnam veterans (on both sides) witnessed or caused, but they can be read as the signifying traces of larger political forces. Indeed, these filmic representations of ruins have to be read as signifiers of how the sponsors of the films and their critics envisioned the march of history.

- 3 The history of Vietnam War documentaries began in 1965 when the Department of Defense released *Why Viet-Nam*,³ one of the "very few government-sponsored films" (O'Connor and Rollins 27) made about the war. The very existence of this documentary even contradicts the reluctance of the federal government to justify its military actions. It is because President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk "believed that a World War II-style public information campaign would make it difficult to wage a limited war" (O'Connor and Rollins 27) that the federal government rarely agreed to publicly explain its strategy in films. As escalation became the main military policy until early 1968, the Vietnam War was soon everything but limited. One of the last Vietnam documentaries contemporary to the war itself is Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (BBS Productions, 1974). In this controversial film, the lies of the US government are brutally exposed and juxtaposed to the daily lives of Vietnamese civilians. Both *Why Viet-Nam* and *Hearts and Minds* use war ruins as part of their formal and rhetorical strategies, albeit in very different ways and for opposite purposes. This article aims to analyze how war ruins are inscribed in the ideologies and the narratives of two documentaries that circumscribe the war itself. A comparison of the two films' reception will lead to a focus on two symptomatic scenes that visually foreground war ruins. In the end, the visual inclusion of war ruins in Vietnam War documentaries clearly displays for the audience what the soldiers nominally responsible for those ruins did not see, which is the consequence of their actions.

Why Viet-Nam vs. Hearts and Minds

- 4 As the potential meaning of war ruins depends largely on the context of production and reception of the documentaries in which they are used, it is necessary to focus on why the two films selected for this study came to be and on how they were received. Part of this contextualization means to show that two ideologically opposed documentaries have triggered similarly polarized reactions. In another sense, this necessary contextualization intends to return films that can be seen as cinematic ruins from the past to the plenitude of their unity. For Robert Ginsberg, film can indeed be analyzed as a ruin: "A film, looked at from the creative process, is a ruin made with seamless unity from a superabundant mass of sophisticated materials created by the prior labors of

performers and director as captured by the cinematographer" (244). It is precisely these "materials" that need to be recovered to try to understand how and why *Why Viet-Nam* and *Hearts and Minds* came to be.

- 5 *Why Viet-Nam* was part of the Pentagon's communication campaign to explain the legitimacy of the war to the American public. The title of the film is inspired by the opening remarks Johnson made at a press conference on July 28, 1965. The beginning of those remarks constitutes the pre-credits segment of the film:

My fellow Americans:

Not long ago I received a letter from a woman in the Midwest. She wrote:

"Dear Mr. President:

"In my humble way I am writing to you about the crisis in Viet-Nam. I have a son who is now in Viet-Nam. My husband served in World War II. Our country was at war, but now, this time, it is just something that I don't understand. Why?"

(00:00:04-00:00:39)

- 6 By positioning this question at the outset, the film justifies its very existence. If US citizens are still unsure about the reasons why the country is at war, then it becomes necessary for the government to explain its official justification anew. The film proposes to furnish this explanation and thus replace the press conference as the main means of political communication. The question mark, however, was dropped from the title of the film. Tom Engelhardt sees in this disappearance a sign of the government's defensive posture.⁴ For him, "a question mark seems to tremble behind every clip of the film" (12). In a sense, the film fails to answer the question asked by an absent "oppositional bod[y]" and to gain "the support of abstract 'opinion'" (13) precisely because the question had to be asked in the first place. Engelhardt writes:

In the inability of government propaganda to evade this question mark lay an unnerving change in consciousness. Despite an unrestrained desire to represent the government's point of view, the film's producers could find no stance beyond a defensive one. Every statement was essentially a response to a question that would not go away. Doubt, not confidence, was where you now had to begin. (12)

- 7 Quite paradoxically, the opening question that justified why film propaganda was necessary in the first place, also pointed out that its official answer may always be inconclusive.
- 8 Without a question mark in its title, as if to assert the affirmative stance of *Why Viet-Nam* regardless of its anecdotal interrogative origin, the federal government circulated ten thousand prints of the film, which was shown to departing GIs (James 202), loaned to schools (Barnouw 272) and to colleges (Commager 81). As suggested by the anecdote chosen by President Johnson, the American public, as the implicit audience of the documentary, did not understand the Vietnam War because it did not follow the clear rules of opposition of World War II. In her analysis of US propaganda during the Vietnam War based, among other sources, on the *Pentagon Papers*, Caroline Page contends that the government, especially in the "crucial" (8) year of 1965, tried to change the "framework" of public perception of the conflict into one of "aggression and infiltration" by North Vietnam and "self-defence" by South Vietnam (57). By insisting that "the conflict was *not* a civil war" (57; author's emphasis), the administration painted the Vietnam War in an easy-to-identify conflict with clear enemies and friendly allies, just as it had done during World War II. In order to bridge the supposed deficit of understanding hinted at by President Johnson, *Why Viet-Nam* thus closely matches the formal and rhetorical strategies of much of World War II film

propaganda: archive material culled from various sources (former US government-sponsored documentaries, battles scenes from US, Ally or Axis military footage, Hollywood fiction film, scenes made specifically for the film); evidentiary editing dictated by a male voice-over framing the visual material – in other words the strategies of expository documentaries in the typology of Bill Nichols (167-171). The main difference with the *Why We Fight* series (1942-1945), to which it is often compared, is that *Why Viet-Nam* includes direct addresses to the audience, made specifically for the film with simultaneous sound, by politicians (Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk) explaining their reasoning. Despite this form of direct address to the audience, which is meant to be engaging, "the preponderant response by theatergoers was negative" (O'Connor and Rollins 28). Without explaining how they measured the negative reception of the film, O'Connor and Rollins imply that the government-sponsored documentary did not match the audience's expectations, potentially raised by the claims of direct cinema to reveal the truth about the life of public figures or of more traditional TV documentaries that showed the plight of real people. When compared to the novelty of *Primary* (Robert Drew, 1960) or the emotional appeal of *Harvest of Shame* (CBS, Fred W. Friendly, 1960), *Why Viet-Nam* might have felt preachy and bombastic at the same time, partly due to what Claudia Springer called the film's "turgid orchestral score" (156).

- 9 *Hearts and Minds* was released without a musical soundtrack or a voice-over in limited theaters at the end of 1974, just in time to be considered for the next Academy Awards ceremony. Its director was Peter Davis, who was known at the time for a TV documentary for CBS entitled *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971) and aimed at demonstrating the PR efforts of the Department of Defense, including a biting segment deconstructing previous Pentagon film propaganda, among which *Why Viet-Nam* is listed as part of the films seen by "at least 52 million Americans" (00:21:09). While *The Selling of the Pentagon's* voice-over claims that "facts and information, not opinions and attitudes, are supposed to be the ingredients of Defense Department films" (00:21:29), the film proceeds to demonstrate that these films are everything but "facts and information." Davis's own film was then accused of distorting the truth, especially of manipulating the contents of interviews, for its own propagandist ends (Barnouw 282; McEnteer 15). When Davis started the production of *Hearts and Minds*, he thus already had a confrontational anti-establishment streak to his name.
- 10 Just like *Why Viet-Nam*, the very title of Davis's *Hearts and Minds* is culled from an expression used by President Johnson between 1964 and 1968. The most quoted version of the expression comes from remarks made at a dinner meeting of the Texas Electric Cooperatives on May 4, 1965, about two months after the first US ground troops began fighting in Vietnam. During the speech, Johnson said:

So we must be ready to fight in Viet-Nam, but the ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and the minds of the people who actually live out there. By helping to bring them hope and electricity you are also striking a very important blow for the cause of freedom throughout the world. (Johnson, 1965b)
- 11 Winning "the hearts and minds of the people" implied moving beyond simple military tactics and planning out a coherent political strategy aimed at the population of South Vietnam. This strategy included the distribution and production of films on Vietnamese large screens and on television (Cull 124, 271). Film was thus a means of public diplomacy. By pointing reflexively at the meaning implied by Johnson ("helping to bring them hope"), the title *Hearts and Minds* can be said to assert the aim of film propaganda, just as the title of *Why Viet-Nam* referred to the reason of film propaganda.

When Johnson wished to target the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese civilian population, Davis's film was aimed at "apathetic, uninformed Americans" (Grosser 270).

12 If, by 1974, public opinion had largely turned against the war, even questioning its very legitimacy, Davis's documentary still wished to offer an "experiential" rather than "explanatory" film in the hope to discuss the issues that had been left unaddressed in previous Vietnam documentaries (O'Grady). To do so, Davis relied on, and in a sense perfected, the documentary strategies set forth by Emile de Antonio in *In the Year of the Pig* (1968): the juxtaposition and confrontation of contradictory film sources, including material from US and enemy military sources, Hollywood war movies, TV news, press conferences, and retrospective interviews made specifically for the film. This "compilation" approach tends to give more leeway to the audience to determine the viewpoint implied by the film, without the benefit of an overbearing voice-over. It can be linked to Nichols's "participatory mode" (31, 179-194), in which the presence of an authorial voice is acknowledged by a documentary that does not claim to be neutral.

13 If *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), which came out when the political debate over the legality and legitimacy of the war was still raging, uses a Marxist framework to position the Vietnam War within the larger perspective of liberation wars, *Hearts and Minds* aims to question the cultural and psychological causes and consequences of the war, at a time when the aforementioned debate had been settled or, at least, appeased.⁵ In a way, BBS, the independent company that produced Davis's documentary, used its countercultural credibility to force mainstream Hollywood to deal with the war on its own terms.

14 Though well known (McEnteer 19), the following anecdote is worth discussing to better understand the impact of *Hearts and Minds* on the hearts and minds of Hollywood. When Bert Schneider, the film's producer, got on stage at the 47th Academy Awards Ceremony in 1975 to accept the Oscar for Best Documentary, he made the following statement, riffing on Davis's earlier comment ("It is ironic, of course, to get a prize for a war movie while the suffering in Vietnam continues"):

It is ironic that we are here at a time just before Vietnam is about to be liberated. I will now read a short wire that I've been asked to read by the Vietnamese people. It is sent by Ambassador Dinh Ba Thi, who is the chief of the Provisional Revolutionary Government's delegation to Paris, the Paris political talks. It says: "Please transmit to all our friends in America our recognition of all that they have done on behalf of peace and for the application of the Paris Accords in Vietnam. These actions serve the legitimate interest of the American people and the Vietnamese people. Greetings of friendship to all the American people." Thank you very much. ("Documentary Winners" 00:03:10-00:04:04)

Later on in the televised program, presenter Frank Sinatra said:

Ladies and gentlemen, to deviate for one second. I've been asked by the Academy to make the following statement [written by Bob Hope] regarding a statement that was made by a winner. The Academy is saying, quote, we are not responsible for any political references on this program and we are sorry that they had to take place this evening. ("Francis Ford Coppola" 00:00:07-00:00:27)

15 This kneejerk reaction to the perceived politicization of what was considered as the realm of pure entertainment goes against the idea that all cultural productions are political; it inadvertently recognizes, however, that moving images, whether those of a competing documentary or those of a live ceremony, can directly influence their respective audiences.

16 Both *Why Viet-Nam* and *Hearts and Minds* were heavily criticized for their lack of neutrality. The concern of reviewers was, indeed, linked to the intended educational

use of both documentaries. As mentioned above, *Why Viet-Nam* was loaned to schools and colleges, and *Hearts and Minds* was rented to schools for \$125 (Steirer 661). In his review of the film for *The History Teacher*, an academic journal devoted to the teaching of history, William F. Steirer Jr. denounced its "anti-historical impressionism" (661). He was worried by the lack of accuracy displayed by the film. Similarly, historian Henry Steele Commager, in a review of *Why Viet-Nam* in a 1967 issue of the *Saturday Review* devoted partly to education, wrote:

But *Why Vietnam* is well below the standards of objectivity, accuracy, and impartiality which we are accustomed to in newspapers and on television; needless to say, as scholarship it is absurd. In simple, uncritical, and one-dimensional terms it presents the official view of the war in Vietnam with never a suggestion that there is or could be any other view. When Communists sponsor such propaganda, we call it "brainwashing." (68)

- 17 Writing as a historian but also as a worried citizen, Commager does not object to all "government production[s]"; he only finds "objectionable" "an official argument" that "is not presented as an argument, but as history" (68). Obviously presenting an argument as a fact or a truth is what many political documentaries do. Later reviews of *Why Viet-Nam* tackled similar issues; from the "far fetched [*sic*]" (Combs and Combs 99) comparisons to its "misleading politics and false rationalizations for war" (McEnteer 10), the film becomes "a distorted, deceptive (one might even say desperate) attempt to justify the war's escalation" (Barsam 315). In his "critique" of the film (watched on a VHS tape bought on Amazon), John Kays also contrasts the scenes that "deceptively" present the perspective of the government with "the reality of what was happening in Vietnam" and "what the film does not tell you." The criticism that if similar aesthetic strategies were made by the opposite political side, then the film would be decried as propaganda, was also levelled against *Hearts and Minds*, even by critics somehow politically aligned to the anti-war position of the film. Writing in *Film Quarterly*, Bernard Weiner implies that, "in aiming for the emotions, the film is not averse to some simplistic agit-prop that would be hissed off the screen if something similar were included in a right-wing film" (63). It is indeed the simplifications of complex issues that have become the targets of criticisms in *Why Viet-Nam* and *Hearts and Minds*, and, perhaps, in all (political) documentaries.
- 18 The two documentaries were thus widely seen and extensively commented on by critics who sided for and against their politics and discursive strategies. Worlds apart on the political spectrum, both documentaries used ruins visually to justify their claims. The visual inclusions of war ruins in films at opposite ends of the public war debate have led to accusations of manipulations. This suggests that war ruins can serve seemingly contradicting ideological ends.

Narrating and Depicting the Ruins of Vietnam

- 19 *Why Viet-Nam* opens on a slightly low-angle medium close-up of President Johnson's left profile; surrounded by aides, the president tells of the letter from an unknown woman who does not understand the reasons for the war. This opening "conveniently locate[s] American doubt in those simple people out there—mothers in the Midwest" (Engelhardt 13), as if it wanted to include the film's addressee within the film itself. As the presidential voice repeats the question "Why Vietnam?", the camera zooms in and the frame freezes, accompanied by dramatic suspenseful music. As a distant echo, the

words of the president, now off-screen, are repeated three times over still photographs that become alive before freezing again: a high-angle medium shot of white US soldiers walking through the jungle, followed by a rightward pan ending on the close-up of the right profile of a GI; a close-up of a crying Vietnamese baby held by his smiling mother; a pan to left from a prison-like window to a medium long shot of burning war ruins seen through an open door, 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 and innocent civilians, with no explicit mention of the enemy). The human suffering and the bombed building following Johnson's question beg to be explained and justified: why should US soldiers go halfway across the globe to fight? Why should Vietnamese civilians endure destruction and distress? Why should American civilians see these visually harrowing images every night on television? Since the president raised these questions, he will have to provide answers.

- 20 The booming repetition of the film title by the president also endows the film with an aura of presidential authority. In this respect, the voice-over of an anonymous narrator, which effortlessly and almost imperceptibly replaces that of the president, never escapes the constraining framework of the official explanation given by the administration. *Why Viet-Nam* presents itself as the explicit perspective of the government. 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 paradoxical belief in the power of images in that they are deemed too powerful to be left uncommented. Images of war ruins have thus to be integrated within a larger narrative that explains their necessity to a questioning audience.
- 21 The narrative then takes us back to 1938 in Munich. Archive footage includes the arrival of "German Chancellor Adolf Hitler" and "British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain" for a meeting that "will long be remembered for it opens the door to the dreams of dictatorship" (00:01:27). Chamberlain then directly addresses the camera as he promises "the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with another again." While the crowd can be heard cheering in the background, Chamberlain looks up straight at the camera, as if to reassure the audience beyond the screen that he can be trusted, and the frame freezes on this instance of look to the camera. The diegetic sounds made by the crowd are replaced by the voice-over, deridingly quoting the infamous expression "Peace in our time," as well as by thundering music over long shots of war ruins: a whip pan to the left from the ground shows destroyed buildings and lone walls. After a cut, an aerial view shows the destruction from above. These unidentified ruins, which could be anywhere in Europe during World War II, are presented by the voice-over as "a shortcut to disaster" and as a "lesson" (00:01:52). The lesson of the past is simple: if we bow down to the pressure of dictators now, they will very soon destroy us. Here, the shots of the ruins serve as visual evidence of the terrible destruction. What used to be a vibrant city is now a landscape of destruction that displays the madness of our enemies. The implied comparisons (Ho Chi Minh and Hitler are virtually the same, the appeasers of the present are as naive and doe-eyed as

Chamberlain was) are based on "little analogy" (Commager 68), but they press on the right emotional buttons.

- 22 The Manichean logic of *Why We Fight* is indeed brought to an extreme in *Why Viet-Nam*: while North Vietnam is described as a violent aggressor bent on expanding Communism in the region with the military help of China, the US has struck the right balance between willingness to negotiate and determinacy of purpose. It simply wants South Vietnamese people to be free. Alas, the "American offers to move from the battlefield to the conference" are met by "high explosives aimed at American air bases and other troop installations in the South, including the barracks of American service men" (00:24:17-00:24:32). The camera tracks in through the ruins of the barracks, then cuts to a tilt down on rubble before cutting in to a framed photograph of a young white girl, apparently the daughter of a US GI. This final close-up is a good example of "some of the film's images [that] depend entirely on the narration for their intended significance" (Springer 157). As intimated by the voice-over, the cruelty of the enemy knows no bounds: he can strike at the heart of American children. These ruins caused by the evil North Vietnamese enemy are "part of a carefully planned and continuing campaign of terror" (00:24:45). If a crouching man is still alive in the first ruins depicted by the film, supposedly caused by the US, life and movement have deserted the ruins caused by North Vietnam. There is thus a narrative logic to the use of war ruins in the film: the circumscribed, temporary ruins of the beginning seem to be a necessary evil to avoid later destruction and larger ruins. However, the focus of the film on material ruins tends to erase the loss of human lives. The suffering caused by the war is depersonalized, dehumanized even. It is precisely because human suffering is not explicitly mentioned and simply hinted at metonymically that material war ruins acquire their political and symbolic meaning.
- 23 A similar explanation for the presence of war ruins is found in another government-sponsored documentary. *The Unique War* (Army Pictorial Center, 1966) is part of "the Big Picture" series,⁶ made for TV by the US Army. Narrated by "Commander Glenn Ford, USNR," as the title card indicates (00:02:18), the film aims to describe the specificity of the Vietnam War, as it was happening, in clear contrast to "any other war, at any time" (00:04:24). In order to do so, the Vietnam War is compared to the Korean War, which is described as a typical war ("as in all the wars before it" [00:06:37]) because it had a clear battle line. Ruins are described as a necessary evil of war, "a fact to be accepted" (00:07:02). As the film presents a military offensive, "this normal kind of a military situation" (00:06:52), Glenn Ford's voice-over describes the pan to the right on urban ruins as "the cost of victory's advance" (00:07:08). As in *Why Viet-Nam*, the ruins of the Korean War were necessary in the fight for victory. Small war ruins may be necessary to avoid later massive destruction, or so the film suggests.
- 24 However, *The Unique War* contradicts its avowed purpose when it shows Vietnam ruins that resemble the Korean ruins. The ruins left by "the calculated cruelty" (00:11:56) of the Vietcong are not that different from the ruins seen previously. Corrugated aluminum roofing and wood may have replaced brick and mortar, but the destruction of living spaces remains the same. The voice-over worries that the Vietnamese may not "be able to distinguish" (00:11:55) the difference between Communist destruction and US air strikes and, visually speaking at least, the difference is, indeed, non-existent. The ruins only make political sense because they are clearly inscribed within a coherent

narrative. It is precisely this absence of an overt narrative that *Hearts and Minds* will use to frame war ruins in a radically different manner.

- 25 If, to quote Richard Dyer MacCann, the author of the only comprehensive study of film production by the US government, "film in the service of national self-delusion" could be used as the "subtitle of a study of documentary in Vietnam" (222), *Hearts and Minds* precisely wished to correct the official view. The main filmic device that Davis used is montage, in the sense of the juxtaposition of shots or scenes that contradict each other. This editing may be "not so fair" (Combs and Combs 101) at best or "manipulative" (Barsam 316) at worst, but it is less directive than the delusional voice-over of government film propaganda. The absence of a voice-over does not mean that the documentary lacks a "voice," as Nichols understands it: "The voice of documentary is each film's specific way of expressing its way of seeing the world" (68). The documentary voice can employ all the available film techniques, including voice-over commentary, to express a distinct worldview. For example, the juxtaposition of two scenes toward the end of *Hearts and Minds* has led to extensive critical discussions. A long scene, adopting the observational mode of documentary filmmaking, shows the burial of a Vietnamese soldier. The camera lingers at length on the grieving wife and son, crawling into the still open grave and wailing loudly in front of a black and white picture of the deceased (01:41:03-01:43:23). The narration then cuts to a medium shot of General William Westmoreland, who was the commander of US forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, sitting in front of a peaceful lake and addressing the camera directly: "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 . . . The philosophy of the Orient expresses it . . . life is not important" (01:43:24-01:43:47).⁷ Quite obviously, the blatant discrepancy between the two scenes is shocking, the first scene completely contradicting Westmoreland's prejudices. The violent juxtaposition forcefully demonstrates, without resorting to a voice-over commentary, that Vietnamese people do, of course, put a high price on life and that Westmoreland is a racist and cruel military leader, who is fortunate enough to be unaffected by the physical consequences of his decisions.⁸ To quote Ginsberg's comments on film segments as ruins, "[t]he experience of the whole is generated by their antithetical proximity" (245). In this case, the voice of *Hearts and Minds*, as that of other political documentaries, uses the power of editing to express its perspective on the war.
- 26 Another key scene neatly illustrates the notion of a documentary voice as the narrating entity. This scene articulates the way an interviewee explicitly refuses to provide a narrating voice for the film and the creation of the film's own distinct documentary voice. After a scene in which Lieutenant Coker, a POW from 1966 to 1973, explains why he decided to enlist to a crowd in his hometown of Lindon, New Jersey, the film cuts to a close-up of Walt Rostow, presented as "Aide to Presidents Kennedy, Johnson" (00:07:59). Slightly off-center to the left, sitting in front of large windows that seem to reflect a vast city underneath, Rostow begins to explain that he knows of "no Communist analysis or non-Communist analysis" according to which the majority of "the people of that country" wanted to be Communist. An off-screen voice, which we later understand belongs to Davis—a rare instance of direct authorial intrusion in the film—interrupts Rostow and asks: "Why did they need us, then?" Rostow begins to reply by using the typical Cold War reason for the Vietnam War (Communist aggression) when he suddenly stops and clearly becomes very annoyed at the question, which he derides as "pedestrian" and "sophomoric." Reluctantly and

"condescendingly" (Grosser 273), Rostow answers the question by going back to the launch of Sputnik, but not before suggesting that Davis "can throw away that tape" (00:08:52). Obviously, Davis did not throw away the tape but he cuts the explanation short.⁹ Indeed, he abruptly cuts to an archive footage of Johnson describing the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Thus, the entire explanation of the reasons of the war, by one of its architects who refuses to admit any responsibility, is not shown.¹⁰ What the film lacks in subjective critical context, it gains in character description; as suggested by Grosser, "Davis does not give us Rostow's explanation, he shows us the contempt Rostow feels for others who question his competence" (273).

- 27 Granted, Rostow's refusal to narrate the war does not automatically imply that the ruins seen later are not inscribed within a war narrative. After all, the film itself relates the war, or its own interpretation of the war, but the film quite cleverly makes the spectator responsible for her or his interpretation of the political subtext. The meaning of the ruins does not belong to Rostow for whom, it is implied, the ruins have the same value they had in *Why Viet-Nam*, but it is left open, or so it seems. One of the aims of *Hearts and Minds* is, indeed, to show to its mostly American intended audience the consequences of the political and military decisions on soldiers and civilians on both sides of the war. It thus features bombing footage as well as the memories of such events shared by Vietnamese survivors.
- 28 After showing in full bright colors the American bombing of the Vietnam countryside, the film cuts to black and white footage (sometimes with dark red patches) of "North Vietnamese Anti-Aircraft" (01:39:02), leading to the fall of what is implied to be a US plane. Yet another cut introduces the still black-and-white footage of the destruction of Bach Mai Hospital, a major hospital in Saigon, which was destroyed in late 1972 by US bombs originally targeting a local airfield. The width of the still burning ruins is displayed by a smooth pan to the left, followed by a pan in the opposite direction from the face of crying women looking down at the corpses of two young boys. The relation between these three scenes (the US bombing, the North Vietnamese retaliation, and the final ruins) is implied by the voice of the documentary, once again strongly suggested by the film's "manipulative editing" (Barsam 316), even if the logic between the scenes is not always entirely clear. What is suggested, here, is that the two sides in the conflict are not fighting with the same weapons, as implied by the clear contrasts between the first two scenes (aerial views in color as opposed to black-and-white eye-level or low-angle shots), that both lead to destruction (the falling plane and the ruins of the hospital), that the destruction is real on both sides. The segment, however, mostly focuses on Vietnamese suffering. Although the source of the last scene in this segment is unclear, it strongly points at the human toll of the war. The point of ruins, at this stage, may well be to show the visible, physical, and emotional consequences of war even if they remain ruins of matter, hence downplaying the human dimension of war.

Bridging the Visual Gap

- 29 The scene that follows this segment explores the material and emotional impact of the war on the Vietnamese population. Standing in front of the rubble of his destroyed house and bystanders, Vu Duc Vinh, a bereaved North Vietnamese, explains that his eight-year-old daughter and his three-year-old son were killed; as the camera zooms in on his eyes, he accuses Nixon of being a murderer. In this participatory scene, it is quite

clear that the camera's presence is directly responsible for his public outcry. Addressing the offscreen film crew through a translator, he asks them to take his daughter's shirt and throw it in Nixon's face. If the two corpses in the previous shot could very well be Vu Duc Vinh's dead children, it is the presence of war ruins in the background that makes their death palpable. The ruins of his house stand for what cannot be represented—the eternal absence of his children. The ruins become the visible symbols of the inanity of war, of the incommensurate means used for political means, of the innocent civilians who stand in the crossfires of belligerents. As the father evokes what his daughter was doing when she was killed (she was feeding the pigs), he designates specific points in the ruins, hinting at what stood there before its destruction. The ruins also symbolize, here, the erasure of a family. If the camera becomes an intermediary through which the father shouts his anger and despair at Nixon and at the American audience, it is associated with destruction itself in another scene featuring ruins.

- 30 Indeed, earlier in the documentary (00:21:46-00:22:43), another scene uses the same strategy of representing ruins as symbols of what used to be and was destroyed for no comprehensible reason. Nguyen Van Tai from "Hung Dinh Village" shows the camera where the kitchen used to be and where pigs used to eat in the middle of the destruction caused by a bomb. Each time he mentions a specific location, the camera pans to what is now an empty void. As suggested by Robert Ginsberg, "[t]he ruin of an ordinary home strikes many chords in our sensibility, since we are familiar with the functions and furnishings" (370). The remembrance of what used to be is even more dreadful because it is associated with the intimacy of the home, compared to a nest by Vo Thi Tu, a woman from the same village (00:25:36). A little later (00:25:55-00:26:29), four shots return to the ruins of homes. The scene begins with a high-angle close-up of broken china scattered across the ground. A cut leads to a similarly framed shot of pink flip-flops in a puddle, as thunder roars offscreen. In the third shot, the camera tilts up from the carcass of a chicken amid broken bricks to the remains of a destroyed house of brick, wood, and hay, battered by the rain. Finally, two men inspect the ruins of a house. David Grosser contends that this segment is meant to evoke "what the Vietnamese really think, away from the intrusive pressures of the camera" (276). However, "the quality of eavesdropping on a private conversation" implied by the "medium distance" of the shot does not last long, as one of the men soon spots the camera, and the other says, in the translation provided by the voice-over: "Look, they're focusing on us now. First, they bomb as much as they please, then they film." The final look to the camera of a third man drives the point in: there is not much difference between the technology of bombs and that of the camera. The aestheticization of ruins may be less physically threatening than actual bombing, but the two strategies tend to relegate the other to the position of an object without a voice. This rare instance of the reflexive self-awareness of its own representational limits does not prevent the film from forcefully asserting that ruins should be filmed because they have to be seen; they have to be seen in the present because they had been made invisible.
- 31 Ruins indeed had to be seen in order to bridge the visual gap started by *Why Viet-Nam* and furthered by early TV coverage of the war. The Department of Defense's film "promises that all will end well if America learns from the past and takes a firm stand" (Rollins, 2003 96). Contained ruins made by well-behaved US soldiers may

unfortunately be necessary to prevent later and larger ruins by aggressive enemies. In *Why Viet-Nam*, the actual consequences of US policy on South-East Asian populations are glossed over (in the three shots following Johnson's speech at the beginning of the film) to concentrate on the US ideals of democracy, freedom, and self-government. Because the film relies primarily on its voice-over, its images are mere illustrations of its oral narrative. The documentary, quite understandably, does not include images that may contradict the official position of the Johnson administration. As such, it opens up a yet unrepresented offscreen space—that of the actual physical and, to a lesser extent, psychological consequences of the war. It is this gap between the ideals proclaimed on end by Johnson and his administration and the reality of the war that *Hearts and Minds* wishes to bridge, notably by showing ruins.

- 32 These ruins are also meant for the US soldiers who fought in Vietnam. In *Why Viet-Nam*, the advisers and soldiers are polite patriots who join the war effort because they are aware that "the future is in the balance" (00:28:12). One of the soldiers portrayed in *Why Viet-Nam* could very well be Lieutenant Coker, one of the key figures of *Hearts and Minds*. Celebrated earlier on for his homecoming, he is seen several times in the film (talking to mothers, to schoolchildren, or directly to the camera) always affirming that going to Vietnam was the right thing to do. His counterpart is Randy Floyd, a former captain from Norman, Oklahoma, who flew ninety-eight bombing missions. Physically, the two men could not be further apart: Coker has a crewcut and still sports his military uniform, while Floyd has grown his hair and beard and wears hippie clothes. A long segment of the film (00:18:36-00:21:45) focuses on the aviation history of the war by intercutting Coker's and Floyd's recollections with combat footage (planes taking off, bombs dropping out of planes and exploding). Several shots of a peaceful Vietnamese village where smiling children go to school and women pull water out of a well contrast with the militaristic nature of the combat footage. Both Coker and Floyd describe the "deeply satisfying" "thrill" and the "incredible" "sense of excitement" (00:21:00-00:21:40) they felt when flying a plane and dropping bombs. The two men also explain that they considered what they were doing in Vietnam as a job that required "technical expertise" (00:20:15) and conclude, fairly explicitly, that it was just a fun job in the end:¹¹ they even mention "the hallucination of technological combat-delirium, which blurred the distinction between the real and the imaginary" (Virilio 85). While Floyd compares flying to "a singer doing an aria" (00:19:01), Coker sees it as "doing something that mankind has only dreamed of" (00:20:27).
- 33 The excitement comes in part from what Paul Virilio, in his analysis of the interconnectedness of war and filmmaking, calls "the derealization effect of industrial warfare" (72). Of the two soldiers the parallel editing compares here, Floyd is the most articulate because of his capacity to tackle "the disintegration of [his] personality" (84); as a mere "technician" doing a "job," he "could never see the people"; he "never heard the explosion [and] never saw any blood or any screams" (00:24:50-00:25:05). Such a confusion of sensory perceptions in his retrospective testimony suggests that his personality may still be disintegrated. The key motif in both Virilio's analysis and Floyd's onscreen recollection is, of course, vision. Virilio explains that, in modern warfare, "[a]s sight lost its direct quality and reeled out of phase, the soldier had the feeling of being not so much destroyed as derealized or dematerialized, any sensory point of reference suddenly vanishing in a surfeit of optical targets" (15). The "optical targets" were no longer visible human beings or villages but a "steering symbol" (00:19:51). *Hearts and Minds* tries to transform the derealized symbol into a flesh-and-

blood human being. The function of war ruins, here, is thus to show what the actions of soldiers who do not see actually entails; it is to remind television audiences, who have been numbed by body counts, that there are tangible consequences to the war, also on the other side.

- 34 The war ruins in Davis's documentary reveal what Gloria Emerson, in a 1972 review, condemns as "killing at a distance":

Americans cannot perceive—even the most decent among us—the suffering caused by the United States air war in Indochina and how huge are the graveyards we have created there. To a reporter recently returned from Vietnam, it often seems that much of our fury and fear is reserved for busing, abortion, mugging, and liberation of some kind. Our deepest emotions are wired to baseball players. As Anthony Lewis once wrote, our military technology is so advanced that we kill at a distance and insulate our consciences by the remoteness of the killing. A very large part of the war's moral horror, he said, has been our ability to conceal its human significance from ourselves. (Emerson, 1972)¹²

The function of the war ruins of *Hearts and Minds* is, therefore, to resist the insulation of American consciences, to show what bombing actually entails, to display the human toll of a dehumanizing war. The visual gap between the technology meant to help the soldier and the target (Virilio's and Lewis's interpretations) or between the technology meant to help the American public understand the war and the actual suffering cause (Emerson's analysis) has to be bridged. It becomes a political necessity. *Hearts and Minds* may be "superficial" (Barsam 316), and may very well be based on a "purposeful distortion" (Steirer 664), but it forces its audience to come to terms with what *Why Viet-Nam* barely hints at, which is that wars cause ruins and that actual human beings suffer.

Conclusion

- 35 When it chose film as a valid way to explain to the American public the necessity to fight Communism in Vietnam, the Johnson administration relied on the time-honored strategies put in place during World War II. The only problem was that "the contradictions in the Vietnam War were so pervasive that even the military propaganda machine could not generate precise reasons for why we fought" (Springer 167). *Why Viet-Nam*, perhaps the most widely seen of the government's pro-war apologias, has a very clear message for its audience: the US military, supported by an enthusiastic population, has to retaliate against a Communist aggression in order for the people of Vietnam to claim their right to sovereignty and self-government. All "apparently supported by documentary evidence" (James 202), the claims of *Why Viet-Nam* imply that the country has to accept a temporary small ruin by the US government in order to avoid wider ruins by the enemy.
- 36 Among the anti-war documentaries, *Hearts and Minds* is at once the most celebrated and criticized example. The ruins it depicts can be construed as an attempt to show the impact of war on a population that was used to concealment. Without the benefit of a voice-over imposing meaning on its corresponding images, *Hearts and Minds* shows that "the innovation of eyeless vision" (Virilio 2), which leads to decisions being made by soldiers emotionally disconnected from their surroundings, actually entails physical consequences on a population denied its agency. *Hearts and Minds* may "privilege [...] affect over analysis" (Howell 352), but it nevertheless points to how war ruins can be used to benefit a political narrative. When they are inserted in a coherent but

misleading historical narrative (*Why Viet-Nam*), ruins justify the continuation of the war effort. When they seem to be logically disconnected from their decisional causes (*Hearts and Minds*), they point at the inanity of war. Ultimately, the ideologically justified war ruins of *Why Viet-Nam* and the emotional ruins of *Hearts and Minds*, precisely devoid of "an ideological framework" (Weiner 61), remain metonymies for death and larger destruction. In so far as they are shown at a safe distance through which to gauge the war, both the government-sponsored and the anti-war ruins fail at fully appreciating what the Vietnam War meant to its participants.

- 37 When the two films were released, they led to vastly polarized receptions, each reviewer emphasizing their own preferred film segment to praise or delegitimize the political perspective offered. If a film segment can be seen as a "cinematic ruin" (Ginsberg 237) in the sense that it no longer belongs to "the unity of the original," it may gain a demonstrative part in the "new unities" (Ginsberg 285) created by the film critic or scholar. When viewed decades later, when the passionate political discussions about the conduct of the war have been replaced by passionate political discussions about the memory of the war, the two documentaries can be seen as vivid ruins that refuse to be entirely destroyed or covered by the ruins of a later war. When John Kays "rediscovered" *Why Viet-Nam* in 2009, he saw it as a warning that "history repeats itself." When *Hearts and Minds* was rereleased in 2009 and on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary, some (O'Grady, Yabroff) wished to establish parallels with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Far from showing "the naiveté of the past" (Rabinowitz 133), when seen today, these two documentaries show that the ruins of Vietnam have not become ruins quite yet.

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NOTES

1. The film referenced here is probably *Objective, Burma!* (Raoul Walsh, Warner, 1945), which was heralded for its "startling degree of realism" and its "strong documentary quality" in the original *New York Times* review. This realism was immediately questioned, especially in Great Britain, as "most of the legwork" shown in the film was done by "Allied forces," "the majority of" which "were British, South African, Indian or Chinese." (Von Tunzelmann). The celebration of a film's realism can only rely on the cultural and political expectations of its time of reception, rather than of its time of production.
2. "[E]lles figurent implicitement l'effacement du point vers lequel convergeait la marche de l'histoire" (my translation).
3. For unclear reasons, film scholars and historians have used two spellings to discuss the film, *Why Vietnam?* (Barnouw 272; Combs and Combs 99; James 202; McEnteer 15; O'Connor and Rollins 27; Springer 152, among other references; even the transcribed "narration" of the film in *Film Comment* uses it) and *Why Vietnam* (Commager). For purposes of clarity and historical accuracy, I have decided to follow Tom Engelhardt's lead (12-14) and use the spelling present in one of the film's opening shots. The absence of quotation marks in the original title, notwithstanding the spelling chosen by some, will be explained later.
4. Engelhardt (13-14) refers to an article by James Thomson Jr., a State Department East Asian specialist in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, who claims that he fought to have the title followed by a question mark. However, in the original article, Thomson explains he was working on a "pamphlet" without specifying the (written or filmic) nature of that pamphlet. *Why Vietnam?*, a book published in 1966 by Frank N. Trager, is presented in the caption of a photograph illustrating Commager's article as having been "published with USIA subsidies" (69). I have not been able to trace a connection between Thomson's pamphlet and Trager's book. The latter is strongly in favor of the American military intervention in Vietnam.
5. The comparison between the two films is warranted by de Antonio's harsh words, accusing *Hearts and Minds* of "political emptiness," judging that the documentary "sneers with a japing, middle-class, liberal superiority when it should be doing something quite different" (359). McEnteer, who seems to be biased against the "rigidity" of "academic concepts" (155), tends to limit the scope of de Antonio's political position when he suspects him of simply being "annoyed by the much greater acclaim and final success of *Hearts and Minds* compared with his own earlier, pioneering effort" (19).
6. For more information, see this website devoted to the Army Pictorial Center: armypictorialcenter.com/the_big_picture.htm. Accessed September 7, 2020. The "Big Picture" is mentioned in *The Selling of the Pentagon* as an Army series that costs \$900,000 annually (00:20:57).
7. Peter Rollins explains that this cut is a good example of "editing legerdemain" because Davis "recontextualized" an interview in which Westmoreland's experience in Korea "taught him that Asian commanders do not place the same value on life" as "American commanders," in the sense that the former "anticipated high casualties during attacks" (385). Without access to the original

interview, there is no way the audience can perceive the manipulation. Whether a documentary filmmaker can manipulate reality for the benefit of her or his argument is the topic of an ongoing ethical debate in documentary studies. So far, the debate has suggested a case-by-case approach is preferable to overarching positions.

8. Quite strangely, some critics (Landau; Steirer 664; McEnteer 18; Rollins, 2008 385) tend to invert the two scenes and place Westmorland's remarks *before* the burial of the Vietnamese soldier. Even Peter Davis, in a 2009 interview when *Hearts and Minds* was rereleased, describes "the most explosive cut in the film" (Yabroff). If such mistakes can be understandable in reviews contemporaneous to the release of the film when a lot of film criticism was based on the memory of the film, they are less so when the film is easily accessible. Furthermore, the order of the scenes certainly has an impact on our perception of the film's voice.

9. Rostow was so incensed at the way he was treated that he sued to prevent the release of the film (Combs and Combs 100) or to prevent Davis from using his interview footage (Grosser 272). Landau suggests that Rostow may have seen the possibility of an interview with Davis as one step on his "path of self justification [sic] and righteousness," which can explain why he agreed to it in the first place. A similar need to justify one's past actions in the war is felt in Errol Morris's *The Fog of War* (2003), which interviews Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968, at length.

10. In a later scene, Rostow explains that he has "never had any reason to change [his] judgment" and that it was "the vital interest of the United States" to fight in Vietnam, although he would have liked "a more decisive military strategy" (01:32:24-01:33:12).

11. Both arguments—the pleasures of war and the claim that it is just a profession—are repeated extensively in other documentaries that offer more screen time to the testimony of veterans, for example in *Interview With My Lai Veterans* (Joseph Strick, 1971) and *Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm Collective, 1972).

12. For the original quote by Anthony Lewis, unreferenced in Emerson's article, see: Lewis.

ABSTRACTS

In 1965, the Department of Defense released *Why Viet-Nam*, a propaganda documentary aimed at justifying the involvement of US troops in Vietnam. The film opens on images of (unidentified) destruction and ruins as the voice of President Johnson begins to answer the question raised by its title. A little less than a decade later, Peter Davis also included ruins in *Hearts and Minds*, a scathing indictment of the Vietnam War, which was drawing to a close. This time, the ruins were clearly the result of the US war effort, if not its overt aggression, and they even questioned the very possibility of adequately representing the destruction caused by war. The purpose of this article will be to address the political and aesthetic implications of war ruins in Vietnam documentaries. When they are inserted in a coherent but misleading historical narrative, ruins justify the continuation of the war effort; when they seem to be logically disconnected from their decisional causes, they point at the inanity of war.

Why Viet-Nam, un documentaire de propagande produit et distribué par le ministère de la Défense des États-Unis en 1965, cherche à justifier la guerre contre le Nord-Vietnam. Le film s'ouvre sur des images de destruction et de ruines alors que la voix du Président, Lyndon Johnson, commence à répondre à la question du titre. Un peu moins d'une décennie plus tard, Peter Davis

inclut lui-aussi des ruines dans *Hearts and Minds*, son réquisitoire contre la Guerre du Vietnam, alors que cette dernière se termine. Les ruines y sont clairement le résultat concret de l'effort de guerre américain, si ce n'est de son agression. Elles questionnent même la possibilité de représenter correctement les destructions causées par la guerre. Cet article cherche à analyser la valeur politique et esthétique des ruines dans des documentaires sur la Guerre du Vietnam. Quand elles sont insérées dans un récit historique cohérent mais fallacieux, les ruines justifient la continuation de l'effort de guerre ; quand elles semblent être déconnectées de leurs causes, elles indiquent l'inanité de la guerre.

INDEX

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