

Vietnam North: Peoples' War

An evaluation of the Newsreel propaganda film

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At the outset, I would like to try to allay anyone's concern about bias in a member of the Newsreel reviewing a Newsreel film. Clearly, I am not objective. I am partisan. So I would like to make clear the nature of that partisanship.

I once said in a rather superficial discussion within the Detroit Newsreel collective that my personal commitment was to the project of a people's revolution in the United States, as part of the world revolution against imperialism and monopoly capitalism.

Second, I said that my commitment was to the movement, as the broad and various expression and agency of the people's desire for liberation.

Third, and deriving from the other two, I said that my commitment was specifically to revolutionary propaganda work in the Newsreel in Detroit.

Newsreel is a national organization of revolutionary filmmakers. In the two years since we began this work, we have produced more than 40 films, including several features. We have also imported and distributed in the U.S. more than 20 films produced by brother organizations in the Third World and Europe, especially Cuban, Vietnamese and French films.

A basic premise of our work is that there is no such thing as objectivity, simply conceived. Every bit of human perception, knowledge and communication is specifically and infinitely conditioned by the historical situation, conscious and unrecognized, of the people or groups involved.

It is one of the most repeated assertions in the raps we do with our films that the "objectivity" of the power-structure media is either a lie and/or an illusion. The power-structure media is a partisan of monopoly capitalism and imperialism. It is one of the enemies of the peoples of the world. The formulation of this thought that I use is this: the power-structure media operates primarily to make a profit, but always to coopt, distort and suppress any initiative or movement of the people, and to defend, preserve and apologize for monopoly capitalism and imperialism.

Newsreel attempts to work as part of the alternative countermedia, as part of the worldwide liberation movement. Which is the reason we came to make "Vietnam North: People's War."

Newsreel was invited by the government of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam to come and take a statement by Ho Chi Minh to the American people, which it was hoped might be presented on national television. We got together several thousand dollars and a pile of equipment, and sent a crew of three over with the delegation of the U.S. peace movement that was going to receive the release of some captured U.S. fliers.

When the crew arrived, Ho Chi Minh was too ill to make the statement. The crew had an interview with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, among many officials of the government, the Party and the Army. But Pham was unwilling to have his interview filmed. Nixon had visited Saigon the week before, and Pham said that in view of that hostile gesture of support for the puppet government in the South, there was nothing he would have to say that would be of any value to the U.S. peace movement.

Instead, the crew used the opportunity to produce a half-hour film on life in North Vietnam since the defeat of the U.S. air war, the enormously heavy and systematic bombings that were started in 1965 and suspended last year.

Two members of the crew had been to North Vietnam before, and what had most impressed them during their earlier visit was the direct reality of the way the people, the Army, the Party and the government of North Vietnam were quite literally “united in struggle” for the liberation of their country from the U.S. imperialists, and for its peaceful, democratic reunification.

They were determined to produce a film that would reflect that reality in ways that could be understood by the American people, to, in the words of one, “carry out propaganda that would be both more political and more concrete than most of what has been coming down against the war.”

“Vietnam North: People’s War” is the result of that determination. The crew traveled around North Vietnam for three weeks filming, from the capital, Hanoi, all the way down to the 17th Parallel and the “DMZ” that has separated the Northern and Southern halves of Vietnam since the Geneva Accords of 1954, the end of the Vietnamese war of national liberation from the French Empire.

Back in Hanoi, the crew had presentations made to them by the U.S. State Department that it would be alright for them to bring their footage, and some stock footage previously shot by Vietnamese crews during the bombings, back into the United States. Naively accepting these guarantees at face value, the crew tried to bring the film into the U.S. through JFK International Airport in New York. It was immediately confiscated by the State Department and transported to the Army Pictorial Center in Long Island City, where it was developed and prints were run off for the Defense Department and the intelligence agencies.

It took a six-week court fight to get the film back, but it was gotten back, and edited within a month into the film which we got in Detroit two weeks ago.

On the basis of our work with it so far, “Vietnam North” seems to accomplish its purpose in relation to two kinds of audiences—the movement itself, and a fairly wide spectrum of liberal and moral anti-war sentiment. The film confirms and informs the increasing anti-imperialist tendencies of the movement by implicitly and strongly arguing for revolutionary solidarity with the people of Vietnam and the new Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in the South. And it confronts liberal sentiment with the image of a strong, proud people united in struggle against U.S. imperialism.

Liberals tend to view the war in one of two ways. Either it is a situation in which poor underdeveloped colored people are being savagely beaten by a bully U.S. government. Or it is a situation in which “our boys,” presumably mostly white and middle class, are risking life and limb in a “senseless” conflict over a small underdeveloped country that just “isn’t worth it.”

Two incidents in the first Moratorium tend to confirm this estimate. One of the speakers asserted that “all of Vietnam isn’t worth the life of one American boy.” At another point, a black man who was arguing that black soldiers should be brought home because there was a war for them to fight here was completely drowned out by a combined flower-power, lib and pacifist chorus of “PEACE! PEACE! PEACE!”

It seems salutary for such people to be confronted with the reality of the Vietnamese struggle for national liberation, and the real force behind Ho’s statement of his “ultimate desire” in his will to the Vietnamese people—“for a peaceful, independent, unified and prosperous Vietnam, and to make a worthy contribution- to the world revolution.”

It seems good for these people’s not even very subtle racism to be confronted with the image of little yellow people who don’t even speak English, who have been able to fight U.S. imperialism and its “boys” to a standstill.

And indeed, a lot of libs do turn onto the film. Many of course are merely charmed and impressed in a silly, superficial way. But many also begin to see the material reality of the concept of “world revolution” and, perhaps, they begin to feel some relevance in that concept for their lives.

There are several audiences who do not like the film however. There is the pseudo-patriotic Right, whose particular kind of love of country leads them to identify it with racism, imperialist brutality, and an intimate identification

They call the film “bad propaganda” meaning something quite pejorative by the word propaganda. And there is some evidence internal to the film to support the thesis. Some of the excellently rhythmical sequences of people working almost verge on the old Stalinist work esthetic.

Too much of the real personalism of the film is on the sound track, in involving personal accounts of life and struggle during the wars against the Japanese, the French, and the Americans, and lacking in the picture. In particular, the structurally pivotal sequence on the national conference in Hanoi announcing the formation of the PRG is verbally abstract and visually flat, precisely because of the “illustrative” cutaways.

But it seems to me that the “bad propaganda” thesis fails to encounter what is clearly the basic thrust of the film. The Old Left concept of “propaganda” was and is instrumental. In its most debased form, the logic of this kind of propaganda can run to the idea that “it doesn’t matter so much what you tell people, as what effect it has on them, what it makes them do.”

This logic is, of course, not the exclusive property of the Old Left. They share it with the power structure media.

But “Vietnam North” is clearly a film which has undertaken the risk of not speaking linearly to people. It has not reduced its anti-imperialism and support for the Vietnamese people to an easily palatable set of broad slogans.

It has undertaken the risk of setting forth what its makers saw as the reality of the situation, in its own terms, and the risk of trusting people to be straight enough with themselves and the film to think about it critically and draw their own conclusions. The makers have not compromised their own sense of truth in order to manipulate their audience.

So charges that the film is “one-sided” are true, but miss the point. The film is one-sided because the people who made it were trying to force people to confront that side in their own terms, and deal with it.

There are only two ways of being more than one-sided. One is to be so completely indifferent to the material you are working with that you have to be more than one-sided. The other is if you are conning other people, and maybe yourself; trying to force them to accept what is necessarily a weighted argument; or maybe just resisting coming to terms with the most vicious dictators around the world.

There is the institutional, academic and corporate “liberal,” whose humanitarian impulses always proceed from the premise of maintaining a warmth berth in the power-structure. But these people are no problem. The film was not intended to speak to them in inclusive terms, nor could any film that dealt with the reality of the Vietnam war from the point of view of the people.

But there is another audience that doesn’t dig the film. Many of them say they like it, “personally.” But the film makes them uncomfortable. They feel it “goes too far” for general, non-movement audiences, and that it will offend the uncommitted. Frequently, these are people who say they support the PRG and say they are personally committed to a struggle against monopoly capitalism and imperialism. But they are seldom people who have any very vivid understanding of their own oppression within this system.

Any vital art, or any other form of communication, depends for its vitality on the personal and even passionate participation of its practitioner. There is no two sides to that.

So, quickly in summation of “Vietnam North” if you are interested in seeing a film about life in North Vietnam made by a group of young, white American revolutionaries who support Vietnam in its just struggle against U.S. imperialism, you might dig it. It is a finished work, employing sophisticated filmmaking techniques well, and it is strong and involving.

If you do not share the filmmakers’ point of view on the war, and furthermore have some problems about people freely expressing their point of view, you might have some trouble with it.

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

—George dePue/Newsreel

Showings of “Vietnam North” may be arranged through Detroit Newsreel: 833-7885.

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