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FAR FROM VIETNAM

FAR FROM VIETNAM

A film by Jean-Luc Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch,
Chris Marker and Alain Resnais
An Icarus Films Release

Official Selection, Cannes Film Festival 1967
Official Selection, New York Film Festival 1967

Exclusive Theatrical Engagement of New Restoration
At The Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York

“Long-lost, long-sought, long-rankling activist agitprop assemblage”
—Michael Atkinson, *The New York Times*

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SYNOPSIS

Initiated and edited by Chris Marker, *Far from Vietnam* is an epic 1967 collaboration between cinema greats Jean-Luc Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda in protest of American military involvement in Vietnam--made, per Marker's narration, "to affirm, by the exercise of their craft, their solidarity with the Vietnamese people in struggle against aggression."

A truly collaborative effort, the film brings together an array of stylistically disparate contributions, none individually credited, under a unified editorial vision. The elements span documentary footage shot in North and South Vietnam and at anti-war demonstrations in the United States; a fictional vignette and a monologue that dramatize the self-interrogation of European intellectuals; interviews with Fidel Castro and Anne Morrison, widow of Norman Morrison, the Quaker pacifist who burned himself alive on the steps of the White House in 1965; an historical overview of the conflict; reflections from French journalist Michèle Ray; and a range of repurposed media material.

Passionately critical and self-critical, and as bold in form as it is in rhetoric, *Far from Vietnam* is a milestone in political documentary and in the French cinema.

ABOUT THE FILM

Program Note from the Tate Modern Exhibition "William Klein: Films, 1958-99":

"On the corner of 42nd Street and 8th Avenue in New York, a guy is reciting a poem consisting of the syllables napalm. And no one knows what napalm is. It showed me how blind people become to something they hear referred to all day long. So, we decided to do something a little like Picasso confronted by the bombing of Guernica."
—William Klein

Far from Vietnam

This legendary agitprop feature was initiated and edited by Chris Marker at the height of the Vietnam War under the aegis of the French activist group SLON (Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles). Highly influential on subsequent political documentaries, it is constructed in eleven chapters (plus an introduction and epilogue), and rallies both fact and fiction to counter coverage of the Vietnam War by the mainstream media as well as propaganda by the U.S. government. [Klein's contribution is] a moving meditation on the self-immolation of American Quaker Norman Morrison in protest against the war. This searing cine-manifesto is a passionate and concerted protest against the U.S. war in Vietnam. Marking a crucial moment for political cinema and collective filmmaking, *Far from Vietnam* is also a multifaceted exploration of the global impact of war, cultural indifference and selective memory.

IN THE PRESS

"An important film, a beautiful film, a moving film.
The cinema at last has its 'Guernica.'" —Richard Roud, *The Guardian* (UK)

"A landmark in the European cinema."
—Michael Kustow, *The Times of London* (UK)

"Rich with humanity and indignation...This is a film nobody should miss.
Mirrors both the horror and the hope of our times." —*Sanity* (UK)

"This brilliant and moving picture should be compulsory Christmas viewing."
—*The Observer* (UK, 12/24/67)

"It is impossible to withhold admiration that the thing was has been done at all, that it so often affords such clear perceptions of connections not always apparent."
—*The Financial Times* (UK)

"Watch this, you become newly and horrifyingly aware of what it means to live in a country where war has, perforce, become a way of life...Chris Marker, who edited the film, has done wonders in fusing such contradictory material into a tangible whole."
—*Morning Star* (UK)

"The brilliantly instinctive editing of Chris Marker gives it the unity normally missing in this [compilation film] genre." —*What's On in London* (UK)

"A film about the war in Vietnam, but it is also about the conditions of political and nonfiction filmmaking more generally."
—Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film

"The displacement of the war into its repercussions throughout the world is reciprocated in the displacement of the illusionist documentary mode into varying degrees of abstraction, discursivity, and reflexiveness."
—David E. James, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*

"The film represents a true collective endeavor, presented as a whole without singling out individual contributions...manifests the will to produce a film that cuts through the sensationalized media reports on Vietnam—the misinformation—while simultaneously joining the growing protest against the war."
—Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker*

"Long-lost, long-sought, long-rankling activist agitprop assemblage"
—Michael Atkinson, *The New York Times*

"How Far From Vietnam?"

The Guardian

By Richard Roud

December 28, 1967

Highly Recommended

Some people—perhaps those with guilty consciences?—have tried to dismiss *Far from Vietnam* (at the Paris Pullman cinema, London, from today) out of hand. Their line has been that propaganda films preach only to the converted; only to those who are already opposed to the American presence in Vietnam will go to see the film, and they—so the argument goes—don't need further convincing.

This is not quite true. There are many people who are vaguely against the war, who think vaguely that something ought to be done, who are sort of unhappy about the whole situation. It is to them that the film is really addressed, as an attempt to help them crystallize their attitudes, to make up their minds once and for all. I know, because I am one of them.

Far from Vietnam is a propaganda film; it is not, by and large, objective. Its six nominal directors (Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, William Klein, Joris Ivens, Agnes Varda, and Claude Lelouch), to whom one must add the conceptual organizer of the film Chris Marker, all feel very strongly about the war in Vietnam, and think that they, as artists, should have the right to express their feeling. Each in his own way, of course, and if only to compare Godard's way with, say, that of Resnais, the film is well worth seeing.

Resnais's is the only fictional episode—acted, dramatized, directed. Also, and typically, it is the most generous: his hero is very much like Resnais, a man with great feeling for Americans, gratitude to the liberators of 1944, an admiration for, and fascination in, American pop culture. His attitude is the one which will probably be shared by most British viewers, as will his pain at the role the Americans are playing today.

Godard's episode is the simplest, the most direct: Godard himself, half hidden behind a big camera expressing directly to the *real* camera his feeling about the war in a sequence that is as moving as Resnais's by its very simplicity and directness.

When the film was shown at the New York film festival, it was violently acclaimed by the audience and bitterly attacked by the press. What right, said the critics, did the French, of all people, to criticize us? And they all declared that although they were against the war, they still thought the film was Maoist, Communist (cries of "Moscow gold" were even heard). In any case, and above all, it was anti-American. But this is to criminally oversimplify for moments like the interview with Mrs. Norman Morrison (the widow of the man who burnt himself in front of the Pentagon) made one actually proud to be American.

Far from Vietnam is an important film, a beautiful film, a moving film. Rare, indeed, have been the occasions when contemporary art has successfully involved itself with politics. In this film, the cinema at last has its "Guernica."

"An Antiwar Flame That Flickered Glows Brightly Again"

The New York Times

By Michael Atkinson

August 27, 2013

It could be both the most eloquent and rankling protest film ever made, but it has gone unseen for so long that only cinéastes and New Wave aficionados remembered to hope for its reappearance.

Never released on home video in North America, the 1967 anthology movie "Far From Vietnam" was in its day intended as a cinematic intervention, a cataract of antiwar activism delivered by a dream team of New Wavers: Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Claude Lelouch, Agnès Varda, the fashion photographer-turned-filmmaker William Klein and the old-guard Dutch documentarian Joris Ivens. Along with a virtual army of sympathetic technicians, actors and producers, the directors staged the cinematic equivalent of an angry peace march: if not the first documentary about Vietnam, then the first to be made in direct resistance to the American invasion there.

When "Far From Vietnam" was originally shown in the United States, in the political 1967 edition of the New York Film Festival, the reaction was tumultuous: applause clashed with explosive boos, and, *The Guardian* reported, anti-Communist catcalls of "Moscow gold!" could be heard in the audience, suggesting the Soviet Union had financed the film. The critic Jonathan Rosenbaum was in attendance and said via e-mail that he remembered many patrons dismissing the film as " 'simply' Commie propaganda." In Paris the right-wing extremist group Occident reacted to the film by vandalizing theaters and slashing seats. In *The New York Times* Bosley Crowther grouched that the movie was "frantic and formless," condemning it for "scurrilous" agitprop techniques.

Now "Far From Vietnam" is re-emerging, restored, free of tangled rights issues, and running for a week starting Wednesday as part of the Film Society of Lincoln Center's "Cinema of Resistance" series on radical features. The screenings offer an overdue chance to consider the film's controversial heat in retrospect, long after its fires raged.

"For us, 'Far From Vietnam' stood as a rare and exemplary model of an omnibus film whose sum was greater than any one of its parts," said the activist-filmmaker John Gianvito, who led the team that made "Far From Afghanistan" (2012), a 21st-century mirror film also in the Lincoln Center series. Mr. Gianvito said that the earlier film, which inspired his, had lost little relevance. "It was both an ethic and a strategy from which we could draw sustenance."

In the fall of 1967 "radical" was still far from the American mainstream. In the United States the shock of the Tet Offensive lay several months in the future, the news of the My Lai massacre wouldn't break for a year and a half and Woodstock was still almost two years away. Released by New Yorker Films in 1968 for only a single week, and shorn of 30 minutes, "Far From Vietnam" found no American friends — Andrew Sarris, writing in *The Village Voice*, proclaimed the film "zero as art" and slammed it for fuzzy thinking (supposedly romanticizing the peasants) and unintended ironies (American street

protesters, for both Mr. Sarris and Mr. Crowther, coming off just as grotesque as their counterparts).

Fiercely expressing international, but particularly French, opprobrium toward American policy and actions, the movie was a few years ahead of its time. It took until the war was almost over, with Peter Davis's Oscar-winning "Hearts and Minds" (1975), for America to embrace an antiwar act of cinema.

Seen today, "Far From Vietnam" comes across as a mournful, enraged chant. Mr. Marker, the French New Wave's most mysterious artist, was the project's primary architect, and its editor. The segments, which are not attributed to individual directors, are conscientiously eclectic in strategy and form, mixing stock footage, firsthand documentary scenes, pop-media imagery and, in the case of Mr. Resnais's portion, actors and scripts. (The actor Bernard Fresson plays a spineless French intellectual articulating excuses for his class's political apathy.)

The mix includes self-condemning speeches from Hubert H. Humphrey and Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the folk satirist Tom Paxton singing "Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation," a detailed stock-footage history of postcolonial Vietnam, footage of a "traditional" North Vietnamese clown play about President Johnson weeping over his Air Force's failure, on-the-street explorations of protests on the home front, interviews with Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro, portraits of Hanoi inhabitants and their one-man concrete bomb shelters, and so on.

Typically, Mr. Godard's segment inches beyond the others philosophically, as he muses on camera about his conflicted relationship with injustice. "The best I can do," he says ruefully, unable to go to Hanoi, "is make cinema," though he's doubtful of its utility. His hesitant solution, for us all, is to "instead, let them invade us" — that is, figuratively, to resist imperialism wherever we are, "Africa or Chicago or Rhodioceta," the last a company in France where workers staged a huge strike in 1967 that became the subject of a 1968 film directed by Chris Marker.

The hammer blow of "Far From Vietnam," however, comes with Mr. Klein's segment about the legacy and family of Norman Morrison, a 31-year-old Baltimore Quaker who in 1965 doused himself with kerosene outside the Pentagon office of Robert McNamara, then secretary of defense, and set himself ablaze. Grief doesn't prevent Mr. Morrison's serene pacifist widow from endorsing her his martyrdom, and Mr. Klein makes clear that Mr. Morrison immediately became a folk hero in Vietnam.

"Far From Vietnam" failed to intervene as the filmmakers had hoped. In a voice-over, Mr. Marker defined his mission as fostering solidarity, but the real enemy was complacency. "We are far from Vietnam," he ruefully concludes.

CREDITS

Title: *Far From Vietnam*
Copyright: 1967
Release: 2013
Running time: 115 minutes
Image: Color

Directors: Jean-Luc Godard
Joris Ivens
William Klein
Claude Lelouch,
Chris Marker
Alain Resnais

Music: Michel Fano
Philippe Capdenat
Georges Aperghis
Jacqueline Meppiel
Jean Ravel

Sound: Anthoine Bonfanti
Harald Maury

North American distributor: Icarus Films

YouTube Trailer: <http://bit.ly/1c7CYPj>

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