

## Vietnam *The Last Battle*

A VIDEO BY DAVID MUNRO

WRITTEN AND PRESENTED  
BY JOHN PILGER

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**V***ietnam: The Last Battle* is journalist John Pilger's coming-to-terms essay on the meaning of the Vietnam conflict. Pilger takes a perspective that is rare in Western-language films on Vietnam: he places the Vietnamese people in the center of the discussion, and emphasizes that the great tragedy of the war was not the anguish of American veterans but rather the devastation of the Vietnamese land and people. He makes this point early and forcefully by interviewing Mỹ-Lai survivors at the site of the massacre; showing archival footage of bomb damage to hospitals and churches in the North; and visiting doctors who treat deformed babies in the South.

He proceeds to raise troubling questions about the way that the war was covered by Western journalists at the time, most of whom, he notes, remained in the southern cities rather than venturing out into the countryside; and few of whom ever traveled to the D.R.V. to view the impact of the bombing for themselves. Nor, in his view, have the mass media done better for the post-war period: Western films have generally seen Vietnam and the Vietnamese as props in the midst of which the crucial issues were played out by Westerners, and mainly Americans at that.

Pilger, for his part, is little interested in helping Americans come to terms with the implications of their defeat in Vietnam; he rather seeks to assess the meaning of the Vietnamese victory for the Vietnamese. Indeed, the latter half of the film is devoted to demonstrating that Vietnam's present modernizing reforms are creating a profound gulf between newly rich and newly poor Vietnamese, and are bringing international capitalism and its abuses back with a vengeance.

These themes are explored in interviews with Western "capitalists," who, failing to detect the irony in Pilger's questions, proudly expound on the "exclusive" nature of the country clubs and luxury residences they are constructing—in which few Vietnamese could ever afford to live. Pilger gently reminds them; with rare footage from inside Sài-gòn's new "sweatshops," textile mills owned by foreigners in which young Vietnamese women work twelve hours a day for about a dollar a day. Does not this stranglehold of Western and Asian capital, Pilger asks, allow its representatives to dictate policy to the Vietnamese state? What are the implications of these economic and social developments for the political independence that the Vietnamese fought so heroically at such cost to win?

While the questions Pilger poses are important, the answers he suggests are not without problems of their own. In particular, his cursory—even simplistic—treatment of the nature of Vietnam's economy under the Neo-Stalinist model (i.e., before c. 1987) is seriously flawed. Few scholars would now be willing to blame the American-led embargo for all of Vietnam's economic problems, as Pilger seems to do here, or to give such glowing praise to the former health care system. An assertion that the embargo, multinational corpora-

tions, and the World Bank are responsible for the Communist Party's shift to *Đổi Mới* or "Renovation" is a refusal to acknowledge the command *Đổi Mới* economy's fundamental inability to provide a decent standard of living for the majority of Vietnamese without massive infusions of Soviet bloc aid.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its shortcomings, *Vietnam: The Last Battle* remains a fascinating and challenging vision of Vietnam's modern history and current transformations. As such, it takes its place among the very few films in any language that have attempted to deal seriously with the issues that Pilger raises: e.g., Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds*, 1975, for the American war; and Tran Van Thuy's *Chuyện tử-tế* (A Story about Kindness), 1987, for the post war era.

*Vietnam: The Last Battle* can be a valuable asset to professors and high school teachers dealing with modern Vietnamese history in a wide range of contexts: Vietnamese history courses per se, the Asian survey, the "Vietnam War" course, and American history. Properly introduced and moderated, it can focus students' attention on the Vietnamese people and the place of the conflict with America in their national history, and lead students to challenge the hegemonic "Hollywood" versions of the war while raising questions about the nature of history and memory.

Mark McLeod

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#### NOTE

1. Pilger incorrectly translates *Đổi Mới* as "Our Way."

## The Burmese Harp

DIRECTED BY KON ISHIKAWA

CONNOISSEUR VIDEO  
COLLECTION,  
INGRAM FILM INTERNATIONAL

APPLAUSE PRODUCTIONS  
1575 WESTWOOD BLVD., SUITE  
305, LOS ANGELES, CA 90024

1956. 116 MINUTES

BLACK AND WHITE

**I**n many classes, at various levels, it is necessary to deal with the role of Japan during World War II. America's enemies in that war, Germany, Japan and Italy, are often portrayed in crucially different ways. In Europe, the Nazis misled the German people into a series of misadventures and cruelties. The war in the Pacific was a racial war; the United States fought against the Japanese people.

In part, this difference in attitude grows out of pervasive American racism. In part, it stems from the attack on Pearl Harbor which crystallized "the war" for Americans. Though Great Britain and the United States officially agreed on a "Europe first" policy, the Pacific war was "our" war. In Europe, we demanded unconditional surrender. In Asia, our goal was extermination.

This attitude toward Japan has become an American myth; and it is part of our psyche. An older generation created this myth and still accepts it; a younger generation generally accepts it as a fact. Because of this, *The Burmese Harp* is useful in presenting a different and more sympathetic view of the Japanese fighting man.

## FILM REVIEWS

Simply put, *The Burmese Harp* is a beautifully made film. In its photography, it shows what a master can do with black and white photography; one hopes that Ted Turner never comes out with a colorized version. Though some audiences may feel that the story drags in a couple of places, Ishikawa took the time to develop his characters and to give something of the essence of Buddhism.

The plot is this. A small Japanese contingent is trying to get from Burma to Thailand as the Pacific war was coming to a close. Out of touch with any higher authority, the unit struggles against the British and the jungle environment as it presses onward. The Japanese captain was a music teacher before the war; he has spent much effort in teaching his men to sing in harmony. Singing, he feels, keeps up the morale of the troops. One of his non-coms, though musically untrained, has learned to play a Burmese harp as accompaniment to the singing.

In a small village, the Burmese host a dinner for the Japanese

troops in the hope of slowing them down while British and Indian pursuers surround them. The Japanese discover their predicament and, preparing for a final charge, sing to cover their preparations. Their final song is the Japanese version of "Home, Sweet Home." When the British advance out of the jungle singing the same song, the nature of the war suddenly and dramatically changes.

The British are no longer seen as an enemy, and the Japanese surrender to discover that the war officially ended three days earlier. To Americans who believe that the Japanese consistently fought to the end, and then committed *hara kiri*, this more human view of a commander whose goal is repatriation and the reconstruction of Japan will come as a surprise.

As the unit is marched off to a prisoner of war camp, the harpist is sent off on a mission to convince another group of Japanese to surrender. Failing, he is the lone survivor of the British attack. Nursed back to health by Burmese, the harpist begins to

make his way to rejoin his comrades.

Crossing a desolate hillside, he discovers vultures feeding on a group of unburied Japanese dead. This scene will indelibly impress itself on the viewer. Rather than rejoin his unit, the harpist finds a compelling mission, and becomes a Buddhist monk. He must stay behind until he has buried all of the Japanese dead in Burma and said the proper prayers so that the souls can find peace.

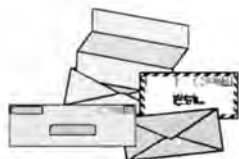
*The Burmese Harp* can easily be used from middle school through college to dispel some of the stereotypes and show another, more human, side of the war. The subtitles are clear and easy to read without distracting from the visual images. The photography is outstanding. It is easy to use the film to lead into a discussion of the war, propaganda, stereotypes, and on the nature of Buddhism. It may be more effective to wait a day or two after viewing the film before starting a discussion which will flow more easily and meaningfully after the impact has sunk in.

Interestingly, the Charles E. Tuttle Co. has reprinted the Takeyama Michio novel on which the film is based, under the title *The Harp of Burma* (1995; translated by Howard Hibbett). Intended for a young audience when originally published in 1946, the novel became even more popular with adults.

Though the film is true to the novel, the latter is better for teaching in some ways. Without the cinematic need for compression, the novel is superior in developing the essence of Buddhism and in making more detailed comparisons between Japanese and Burmese cultures. The Hibbett translation should not pose reading problems for middle school students, yet is still compelling for those in college.

Arthur Barbeau

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