

Using *The Quiet American* in the Classroom

By Robert L. Moore

A relatively painless way to encourage students to embrace a new and unfamiliar viewpoint is via film and fiction. In Asian-related courses this task is made easy by the ready availability of high quality engaging fiction, autobiography, and film offering sympathetic portrayals of Asian characters. Many of us have encouraged our students to make important leaps to new and unfamiliar points of view by using materials on China like Ha Jin's *Waiting*, Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, and Zhang Yimou's *To Live*. A variation on this technique is to present two stories that contradict each other as a way to encourage student discussion, analysis, and further investigation. A set I've used in the past for this purpose includes the heroic World War II film from the Philippine theatre *Back to Bataan* followed by Ichikawa Kon's heartrending depiction of the same theatre in *Fires on the Plain*. These two views portray essentially the same battle, but through drastically different evaluative lenses, and the effect, particularly on those inclined to fall for John Wayne heroics in the American film, can be dramatic.

The American war with Vietnam was a fulcrum for cultural change in the 1960s and 70s, a time when America was challenging and reinventing its understanding of itself. Debates about this war continue to this day and no consensus on its significance has been reached. To some, the noble American effort to fight Communist aggression was undermined by a vacillating or disloyal press corps. To others it was an arrogant attempt to reshape Vietnam according to American interests, thinly veiled by talk of democracy and nation building. This level of controversy offers fertile ground for discussion.

The release of Phillip Noyce's 2002 film *The Quiet American* on DVD presents us with an opportunity to compare portrayals of America's involvement in Vietnam from three different viewpoints spanning five decades: Graham Greene's 1955 novel, *The Quiet American*, and the two movies based on it: Joseph Mankeiwicz's in 1958, starring Audie Murphy and Michael Redgrave, and Phillip Noyce's recent one, starring Michael Caine and Brendan Frazier. Noyce's film has received a great deal of critical acclaim including an Academy Award nomination for Caine's performance.

The different political slants of these three fictional accounts of the CIA's activities in Vietnam in the 1950s illustrate different

takes on the American experience and can serve as an engaging starting point for classroom discussion. I recommend assigning the original novel and then showing just one film and a few key scenes from the other. For example, students can easily see the contrasting interpretations in the two films when they view the Noyce version in its entirety, then a few contrasting scenes from the Mankiewicz production. Of course, reversing the roles of these two films would also work. It is well to keep in mind that the Noyce version, unlike the Mankiewicz one, is true to the message of the original novel. The following brief descriptions should help to bring out differences in the novel and its two cinematic interpretations.

Greene's novel was actually more philosophical than political, nonetheless entailing a strong and pointedly anti-American political message. It focuses on the moral dilemma of Thomas Fowler, the British reporter from whose point of view the story is told. This

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dilemma traps him into making a life or death choice: Should he cooperate with the Vietnamese Communists who want to assassinate the American CIA agent Alden Pyle, or should he refuse to do so, and thereby remain neutral and disengaged?

Fowler's predicament is complicated by his feelings toward Pyle, the idealistic Harvard graduate, whom he personally likes. Pyle hopes to transform Vietnam in accordance with the political theories of his intellectual hero "York Harding," a fictional though plausible American diplomatic correspondent who, Fowler contemptuously notes, had once spent a week in Vietnam. Pyle enthusiastically buys into York Harding's proposal that the US govern-

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Michael Redgrave (Thomas Fowler) and Audie Murphy (Alden Pyle).
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ment back a “Third Force,” neither Communist nor French colonialist, and use this Third Force to establish a “national democracy” in Vietnam. Complicating things is the romantic interest Pyle has in Phuong, Fowler’s beautiful young Vietnamese girlfriend.

The background to this dilemma is the political situation in Vietnam in the early 1950s, a time when the French are in decline and the American presence is growing. Greene wrote *The Quiet American* just as the US started promoting South Vietnam’s Ngo Dinh Diem as a kind of “Third Force” noncommunist leader with anti-French credentials. His novel, by pinpointing some of the fatal weaknesses in American policy, showed remarkable prescience; its insightful description of these weak points has contributed significantly to its enduring popularity.

According to Greene (as recounted through Fowler’s words), the American policy was deeply flawed because it wasn’t based on a thorough understanding of the lives of ordinary Vietnamese, it unrealistically depended on the Vietnamese peasants’ embracing of Western-style democracy, and it was pursued through reliance on morally reprehensible local leaders. It was, in other words, a combination of ridiculously naïve and brutally cynical impulses. The quiet American, Alden Pyle, personified these qualities.

When Pyle is killed by Communist agents, Fowler, in an outburst to an American official, says:

They killed him because he was too innocent to live. He was young and ignorant and silly and he got involved. He had no more of a notion than any of you what the whole affair’s about and you gave him money and York Harding’s books on the East and said, ‘Go ahead. Win the East for Democracy.’ (31–2; notes refer to Penguin’s Viking Critical Library edition).

This portrayal of Pyle reflects Fowler’s (and, to a degree, Greene’s) idea of America. In fact, *The Quiet American* is downright prickly with critical barbs against not only American foreign policy, but against American culture in general. Because of these somewhat snide comments, the book has, from its first appearance, drawn a great deal of negative attention in the US.

In one internal tirade, Fowler expresses this view of the Americans in Saigon:

I was tired of the whole pack of them with their private stores of Coca-Cola and their portable hospitals and their too wide cars and their not quite latest guns (p. 31).

And again, in reference to a reporter from Pittsburgh, “He was like an emblematic statue of all I thought I hated in America—as ill-designed as the Statue of Liberty and as meaningless” (p. 184).

The use of the phrase “all I thought I hated” as well as Fowler’s admission a few lines later that he had been too hasty in his judgment of the American reporter suggest that Greene didn’t take all of these sentiments to heart, though it’s clear from the work

as a whole that he was deeply suspicious of American policy in Vietnam and had misgivings about American culture in general.

Joseph Mankiewicz’s 1958 screenplay for *The Quiet American* completely neutralizes the anti-American sentiments in Greene’s novel. In Mankiewicz’s film, Alden Pyle is played by Audie Murphy, an authentic American hero from World War II who had grown up in poverty in south Texas. To adjust for Murphy’s dialect and mannerisms, Mankiewicz rewrote his part as a Texan who had studied at Princeton, not the Bostonian Harvard graduate who inhabited Greene’s novel.

Mankiewicz did more than write virtually all anti-American comments out of his script. He drastically reshaped the plot and aligned it with Audie Murphy’s persona as an American war hero. As a result, Greene’s book, sharply critical of American policy symbolized by a CIA agent with innocent blood on his hands, was transmogrified by Mankiewicz into a portrayal of Pyle as a perceptive and entirely innocent “quiet American” who sees through the local Communists’ schemes and sincerely strives to improve the Vietnamese economic situation. The British protagonist Fowler, conversely, becomes a cynical but thoroughly misguided journalist who, in arranging the murder of Pyle, makes himself a dupe of the Communists. Mankiewicz’s rewriting of the essential political story is as dramatic as would be a rewriting of Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* that cast Scrooge as a decent and kind-hearted advocate of tough love and Bob Cratchit and his brood as a pack of whining layabouts.

The story of the pivotal terrorist bombing that Mankiewicz’s film tells is dramatically different from that of the novel. In Greene’s story (and Noyce’s film) one of the most central symbols in the plot is the blood spattered on Pyle’s shoe (or pants in the film) in the bombing incident. In Mankiewicz’s film Pyle has no blood on his shoes, his pants or his hands, and in fact arrives at the scene of the bombing just in time to berate Fowler for not making himself useful by helping the injured. In Mankiewicz’s hands, the bombing becomes not part of Pyle’s undercover activities, but the work of Communists. Where Greene portrays Pyle as a CIA agent with an innocent cover story and a guilty secret concerning plastic explosives, Mankiewicz makes him a genuinely innocent representative of an aid program helping to bring plastic toys to the children of Vietnam.

Mankiewicz, having made Fowler a fool and a scoundrel, then went on to turn him into a pathetic loser in love. At the end of Greene’s novel Fowler has taken his girlfriend Phuong back from the now deceased Pyle and appears ready to marry her and spend

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Brendan Frazer (Alden Pyle) and Michael Caine (Thomas Fowler).
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the rest of his years with her. In Mankiewicz's version Fowler, having arranged for the murder of Pyle, goes to a dance hall to find Phuong, but discovers that she has grown to despise him when she contemptuously and publicly rejects him.

Though Mankiewicz was a political liberal, his rewriting of *The Quiet American* reflects a very conservative American perspective, one influenced by Hollywood's traumatic experiences in the early 1950s. Mankiewicz had fought vigorously against HUAC blacklisting, and this experience, which included a fierce showdown with the right wing Cecil B. DeMille over control of the Screen Directors' Guild, may have encouraged him to stake out his patriotic credentials in *The Quiet American*. In light of this, his pro-interventionist perspective on Vietnam represents an interesting parallel to President Lyndon Johnson's. Johnson is known to have decided to intervene militarily in Vietnam partly in order to protect himself from the conservative criticism that he would face were he to "lose Vietnam." In any case, the Mankiewicz film embodies a perspective on American policy that many on the right continue to adhere to, and therefore its conservative message can serve as a point of contrast with the Greene novel and the recent Noyce film.

Some key scenes in the Mankiewicz film where his conservative take is most evident are as follows: the one that takes place in the watchtower on the road to Saigon (50 minutes into the film), the one in which Pyle confronts Fowler over his lying to Phuong (one hour, 12 minutes), the scene immediately following the terrorist bombing (one hour, 20 minutes), and the interrogation of Fowler by the French inspector Vigot (one hour, 50 minutes). In each scene the various characters offer their views and self-justifications in a way that reveals Mankiewicz's own perspective.

Noyce's film version of *The Quiet American* is basically true to Greene's original story, but differs in minor ways. For one thing, Noyce is more harshly critical of Alden Pyle as a person. Greene had written him as a chirpy young college graduate who spoke easily of "the Third Force" and "national democracy," and stood as a representative of the kind of innocence that kills. This is the same innocence or naiveté that Greene sees as so typically American and about which Fowler speaks disparagingly, saying of Pyle at one point:

That was my first instinct—to protect him. It never occurred to me that there was greater need to protect myself. Innocence always calls mutely for protection when we would be so much wiser to guard ourselves against it: innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm (p. 37).

Alden Pyle's depiction in Noyce's film (played by Brendan Frazier) resembles the original Greene version early on, but Pyle becomes rather suddenly transformed after the bombing incident into a more obviously aggressive and not particularly naïve undercover agent. Where the novel suggests that it's Pyle's very innocence that kills, the Noyce film says that Pyle's seeming innocence

was a mere cover for a determined agent who knew exactly what he was doing. Beyond this, the Noyce film becomes more politically focused by not playing up the moral quandary of Fowler, a quandary that rests at the heart of the original novel. Finally, Noyce does away with the anti-American insults that pepper Greene's original. Given these qualities, the Noyce story can serve as a viable portrayal of a liberal-internationalist perspective on American policy in Vietnam and can be instructively contrasted with the Mankiewicz version.

Noyce's film, like Mankiewicz's, did not escape the political currents of its day. Only after vigorous lobbying from both Noyce and Michael Caine did Miramax agree to release the film in December 2002, in time for Academy Award consideration. The studio had been hesitant about distributing a film critical of American foreign policy in the wake of the 9-11 disaster.

William Russo has written an account of the making of the Mankiewicz film called *A Thinker's Damn: Audie Murphy, Vietnam and the Making of The Quiet American*. This book describes the behind-the-scenes activities of the film crew on location in Vietnam and some of the difficulties Mankiewicz had in getting the movie off the ground. It is not particularly well written, and I wouldn't recommend it for student reading, but as a source of information on the background of the 1955 film it is quite useful.

The edition of *The Quiet American* I prefer is the Viking Critical Library one that includes a great deal of biographical information on Greene and numerous other sources pertinent to the novel and the situation in Vietnam in the 1950s.

The DVD of the Phillip Noyce film was released in July 2003 by Miramax Home Entertainment and is readily available in any bookstore. The Mankiewicz film is available on VHS in an MGM/UA release. Though it is somewhat more difficult to obtain than the Noyce version, copies are generally available through such Web sources as eBay. ■

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