Vietnam
The Last Battle

A VIDEO BY DAVID MUNRO

WRITTEN AND PRESENTED BY JOHN PILGER

DISTRIBUTED BY FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS

153 WAVERLY PLACE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014

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VHS Format. Color. Black and White

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 Đöl Môi or “Renovation” is a refusal to acknowledge the command Đöl Môi economy’s fundamental inability to provide a decent standard of living for the majority of Vietnamese without massive infusions of Soviet bloc aid.¹

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 Chuyén tiêt-tê (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.

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NOTE
1. Pilger incorrectly translates Đöl Môi as “Our Way.”

The Burmese Harp

DIRECTED BY KON ISHIKAWA

CONNOISEUR VIDEO COLLECTION, INGRAM FILM INTERNATIONAL

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

1956. 116 MINUTES BLACK AND WHITE

In 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.