Loin du Vietnam (1967), Joris Ivens and Left Bank documentary

by Thomas Waugh

Far from Vietnam: a “Left Bank” Collective film

Historians of the cinema of the French New Wave of the 1960s have traditionally divided the phenomenon loosely into the Right Bank current—incorporating filmmakers aspiring to break into the star-studded auteur or commercial cinema, such as François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Claude Lelouch—and the Left Bank current, whose members blended their cinephilia with leftwing political commitment—such as Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais. If the contribution of two panels on the Left Bank current at the 2010 “Visible Evidence” is indeed visible evidence, the Left Bank is attracting considerable historical and critical attention. The feature documentary film Loin du Vietnam (henceforth Far from Vietnam) provides a useful introit into this sometimes revisionist focus on the Left Bank, for it was a key document in trajectory of the Left Bank cinema and political culture, synthesizing the transformations of the hinge year in which it was produced, 1967. As a cinematic conversation among Left Bank committed artists whose political and artistic consensus was being challenged by this historical conjuncture, this rich film symbolically inaugurated the convergence of left cinema and political upheaval known as May 1968.

1967 was marked on the international scale by the escalation of the military conflict in Vietnam, which had involved WWII-scale bombardment of Hanoi since February 1965—and of course the martyrdom of Che Guevara—and in France momentous industrial strikes at Rhodiaceta (Besançon) and St-Nazaire echoed by growing student unrest. All these developments hailed Left Bank filmmakers, and set the context in which a coalitional cinematic response became possible—and necessary. The project was instigated by Marker, veteran documentarist and frequent collaborator of other filmmakers on the scene from Ivens to Resnais, the eventual maître d’oeuvre and editor of the work, together with Varda and a host of sympathizers within the film milieuFIV was the first major production—and test case—of the Société pour le lancement des œuvres nouvelles (S.L.O.N. or Society for Launching New Works), the French collective production and distribution organization which Marker and others formed that year to promote political filmmaking in France and which would mark the subsequent decade of French committed cinema. Also on board with the Vietnam project were Varda’s husband, Jacques Demy, the Brazilian expatriate Ruy Guerra, the New Wave pillars Resnais and Godard, the newly commercial New Wave hanger-on Lelouch, fresh from his Oscar-winning blockbuster Un homme et une femme, plus the U.S. expatriate William Klein, a fashion photographer known for acerbic satire of his homeland. Ivens had produced in Hanoi a short poster film on the North Vietnamese resistance to U.S. aggression, Le Ciel la terre (The Threatening Sky) that had created a strong impression in Paris in March 1966. So Ivens’s presence in the group seemed indispensable, despite the political difference between the 69-year-old communist and the thirty-something unaffiliated-left filmmakers at the peak of their power. Michèle Ray, French journalist, also came on board with her footage of South Vietnam from both sides of the National Liberation Front membrane, complementing Ivens’s Hanoi testimony. The lineup reflected the spectrum of Left Bank allegiances but also constituted a major coalitional achievement for the skilled diplomat Marker, joining together artists with a strong track record of working with communists and the left like Varda and Resnais with hyper-individualist avant-gardists like Godard and Klein. The precariousness of this coalition would become evident as the planned contributions by Demy and Guerra were soon dropped (the collective didn’t like Demy’s proposed narrative about a Puerto Rican male G.I. and a female Vietnamese prostitute [Varda 1994, 92]), but problems came to the surface even more dramatically upon the release of the film.

The final two-hour film included eleven fairly distinct parts:

- long episodes on the theme of the anguish and impotent self-interrogation of intellectuals, courtesy Resnais, Godard, and Ray;
- actuality footage from North and South, some of it even then already familiar to Western audiences;
- impressionistic footage of U.S. operations in the South and pro and anti-war demonstrations in New York, shot by LeLouch and Klein respectively;
- an interview with Fidel Castro;
- a compilation historical backdrop to the Vietnam conflict narrated by Varda;
- an interview with Anne Morrison, widow of Norman Morrison, the Quaker who burned himself in front of the Pentagon in 1965, intercut with a testimony by Ann Uyen, a Vietnamese woman living in exile with a similar young family;
- and a collage refrain of miscellaneous media artifacts of the war and U.S. civilization in general (newsreel footage, video material, a televised speech by General Westmoreland alongside testimony by black power advocates, analyzed and distorted, stills, comic strips, radio voices, popular music, etc.).

All was assembled with hyperbolic flair and dialectical rigor by Marker, who also provided an eloquent voice-over intro and conclusion, respectively situating the conflict as a war of the rich against the poor, and urging spectators to face the challenge of the war far from Vietnam.[1]
Far from Vietnam as an Ivens film

I came to this topic of course from the vantage point of my comprehensive monograph-forever-in-progress on the work of Joris Ivens, who at that time had been based on the Left Bank for scarcely a decade but who had interacted with that milieu as well as with the Parti communiste français and its international patron Moscow since the late 1920s. In the interwar years Ivens was a regular of the Paris left avant-garde, commuting regularly from Amsterdam and elsewhere. He collaborated with artists ranging from Éli Lotar, Luis Buñuel and Jean Renoir to his sometimes wife, the constructivist photographer Germaine Krull, and he contributed to the debates in left periodicals around the nature of art and politics. For example in 1931 the Revue des vivants ran his “Reflections on avant-garde documentaries:"

“I call ‘avant-garde cinema’ the cinema that takes the initiative of progress and keeps it, flag-bearer of cinematic sincerity... Documentary film is the positive means left to the avant-garde filmmaker for working and for putting the most of him/herself, as representative of the expression of the masses, of popular expression in his/her work.... It is impossible for the director of a documentary to lie, to not be in what is true. The raw material will not allow treason: ...only the personality of the artist distinguishes him from ordinary newsreel work, from simple cinematography.”

That this text echoed in important ways the manifesto from the previous year by Jean Vigo (Vigo 1930), another stalwart of the same milieu, no doubt indicates that such views represented a consensus among committed filmmakers of the Left Bank milieu. Ivens’ solidarity work around the Spanish Civil War, 1936-38, was a key later moment in the interwar’s chapter in this history; and references to this conflict and/or Ivens' intervention in it are a refrain in the discourse within and around the Indochina films two decades later.

In the postwar era, Ivens remained a fixture of the Paris communist milieu, moving there in 1957 at the time of his prizewinning collaboration with communist film historian and critic Georges Sadoul on the poetic documentary La Seine a rencontré Paris (Paris Meets the Seine). Thereafter he shared the milieu’s solidarity with the emerging third world, spearheading its enchantment with Cuba, and making like Varda and Marker documentaries on Fidel’s revolution. Early 1967 found Ivens back in Hanoi, now with his soon to be inseparable partner Marceline Loridan, about to embark on his most important Indochina work, the feature documentary Le 17me Parallèle (The 17th Parallel). Ivens had met with Marker and Resnais before leaving Paris to discuss the “theme and direction” of the planned film (Ivens and Destanque 1982, 290). A follow-up list drawn up by Varda on behalf of the collective for the couple to take to Hanoi made a number of requests for specific shots for the film, e.g.:

“men and women lying and hidden in a rice-field (or corn or some kind of bushes)—when they get up they are covered with leaves.”

Varda had clearly been impressed with an allusion to Macbeth and Birnam Wood in Le Ciel, and given color stock for the purpose, Ivens was happy to oblige. Or rather, taken ill in Hanoi, Ivens happily delegated the half-dozen sets of shots to Loridan who commendably absorbed her partner’s style for the purpose.[3] This shot, prominent in the prologue, shows a brilliantly yellow expanse of waving grain, first coming to life with the choreographed advance of a troop of camouflaged militia and then returning to its former serenity. Similar requests included

“a shot of soldiers matching three or four abreast, leaves in helmet, and the same thing rear view, and a single man. Also camouflaged with leaves, not marching, standing immobile in extreme close-up, and then the same man lying nude on the road or running through a village.”

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your point of view), Ivens drew the line at the last detail of the request, apparently in deference to his hosts’ sense of decorum, but the other material was all sent back to Paris. The former shot appears as the penultimate movement of the film, while Marker inserted the close-ups of the soldier, with its heroic poster-like stylization, in the midst of Godard's monologue halfway through the film. Varda also asked for some atrocity footage, “flaming ruins,” etc. which Ivens apparently did not provide; the producers had no shortage of this material in any case, either from North or South.

Ivens’ and Loridan’s finest contribution to the film, however, was conceived in his own style. No conceptions of Parisian intellectuals were necessary to stimulate four or five concise sequences of matchless precision and calm attention to detail which stand distinctly apart from the other currents in the film. The Ivens sequences are all silent and all in color with one exception. This is the first brief scene, in black and white, which shows peasants defusing and collecting small fragmentation bombs filled with tiny ball bearings aimed at chest level, the target of which “is human flesh.” The camera follows the defusing process in close-up, scans the stockpiles that the workers have accumulated, and records their absorbed expressions and purposeful gestures. The same watchful attitude informs the color sequences, which record brigades preparing individual concrete air-raid shelters for the streets of Hanoi. The first of these, an attentive record of women filling wooden moulds with concrete, is followed by an actual alert with passersby running to the shelters we have just witnessed being built as the camera tracks up and down the street from a car, recording rows of faces settling in to or emerging from their individual shelters beneath the street. Detailed subjective information on the future of the war is offered in the Ivens/Loridan footage. Their tightly coordinated close attention and panning close-ups of moving workers’ faces and hands and the product of their labor seem to encapsulate materialist cinema.

A further sequence records a troupe of agitprop players performing in a village, the camera shifting back and forth between the relaxed and cheerful spectators and the ingenious show, which presents an unrecognizably painted President Johnson lamenting his woebegone U.S. Air Force. The commentary repeats Ivens’ impression of the great calm pervading the atmosphere in Hanoi. However, it is not only Hanoi but Ivens’ footage itself which seems an island of calm in this otherwise chaotic film, relying mostly for its impact on sensory and affective discourse, rather than factual exposition. Ivens’ footage of concrete activities on the part of both Hanoi civilians and rural peasants offers clear evidentiary support for the range of perspectives and emotions expressed elsewhere in the film by the
Ivars' unquestioning faith in the evidence of cluster bombs being defused or bomb shelters being moulded by women's hands, and in the unassailable political relevance of this evidence for Western society, might situate him in apparent sharp contrast to Godard's minimalist self-interrogation that takes place within the same film. Godard's segment searches for the lessons of imperialist war and their application at home, expresses a personal agony at the dilemmas of industrial strikes in his own back yard, and regrets an elitist cinema that cannot speak to the proletariat. Both moments, however divergent they may be, emerge from the film seen now, as it loses the immediacy of its agitational role almost a half-century later. They have an impact as compellingly parallel testimonies and perceptions with a relevance extending far beyond the issues of 1967. The two presences, Ivens and Godard, superficially separated by a seemingly insurmountable gulf—stylistic, conceptual, cultural and generational—ironically appear in retrospect to have the most affinity of any two contributors to the film. Both present workers and their means of production: respectively peasants and their tools, and an intellectual/artist and his camera. Both meditate on this evidence as the final authority for and subject of political analysis and revolutionary art.

Far from Vietnam as intervention in critical subculture

In the 1990s Ivens rightwing Dutch biographer Hans Schoots called Far from Vietnam a “fretful,” “egocentric,” and “far-from-flattering” “bizarre mix” ([1995] 2000), and at the time of its release in late 1967 the film sparked strong responses from both French and U.S. critics as well. Such responses are a good indicator of the film's success in intervening in the two milieux—in stirring up infrastructural subcultures of critics and audiences, but in different ways.

The U.S. critical response by and large showed total disarray, at best a primitive stage of political critical culture in that country in 1967, the postwar red scare having completely erased the legacy of political film culture of the Popular Front era. U.S. critics seemed to lack language and criteria for dealing with political cinema of any type, not to mention the resurfacingsolidarity work of the 1960s. Moreover Far from Vietnam's revelation of apparent anti-Americanism among native son Klein and the idolized leaders of the Nouvelle vague was apparently hard to swallow. Andrew Sarris's dismissal of the film as a “patchwork quilt” unlike anything he had seen since Mondo Cane (1962) is arguably apt[4], as is his critique of Ivens' indulgent romanticization of the peasant similar to that in Spanish Earth. However, his rating of the entire film as “zero as art” says more about the confusion of U.S. liberals in 1967 than the worth and interest of the film. His Village Voice piece after the New York Film Festival showed Far from Vietnam is a masterpiece of evasion. He includes a sermon on the inherent conservatism of all peasants and a veiled attack on French intellectuals for their failure to stop their own Vietnam, Algeria (echoing a similar comment within Far from Vietnam by Resnais, who along with Marker, Godard and Loridan had been far from silent on French colonialism in North Africa, as Sarris knew full well but seemed conveniently to forget). While politely applauding Ivens, Godard, and Resnais for at least trying to make a personal statement, Sarris scolds them for yielding their right to edit their own footage, such is his blinkered auteurism's blocking of the concept of collaboration. Sarris's perception of the film as “lies from Hanoi and Paris” seems embarrassingly defensive in retrospect, but even he is outdone by the incoherent hysteria of the New York Times's Renata Adler upon theatrical release of the film the following June (I'll come back to Adler), which effectively seems to have killed the film's career—at least in the United States.[5] Meanwhile U.S. left film criticism had not found its voice, and Cineaste, then in its inaugural year at the outset of a decade of national leadership in New Left film criticism, somehow avoided reviewing the film. Only American Richard Roud, the New Wave devotee and presumably the programmer of the film in the New York festival, came to its defense. Writing as an expatriate for London's Guardian, Roud critiques the U.S. schizoid bad conscience around what is undeniably a “propaganda film,” praising it as “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’.”

The much greater richness and resilience of the French critical discourse around the film can be encapsulated briefly here simply by a repertory of the terminology deployed to describe the film. In contrast to the Americans' dismissive and inaccurate invective, the Paris responses, unanimously positive across the ideological spectrum, included the following terms, culled from the ten reviews cited in my list of sources, as the basis of their criticism:

1. Meditation; reflection—beyond testimony and fiction
2. [Filmed political] essay
3. Dossier (file)
4. Film engagé (committed film)
5. Film utile (useful film)
6. Collective testimony
7. Demonstration; a manifesto (the French manifestation has the ring of both English concepts, though normally means the former)
8. Didactic

To this list, the filmmakers themselves in their interviews and public discussions of the film, external or internal, added the simple terms: “a banner,” “un cri” (a cry or a shout) and the useful “cinematic roundtable/meeting.”

Having the conceptual equipment to define and describe a film, its form and its objectives, is arguably the most basic tool of film criticism: the French had it, the Americans were still working on theirs.[6]
Though the word “solidarity” is less prominent as a defining genre in the critical reception to *Far from Vietnam*, in the discourse around the production of this film and within the narration of the film itself, it designates both the film’s objectives and self-conception as part of a documentary genre. “Solidarity” is therefore a useful term for summing up the film’s significance historically. The Left Bank collective’s letter to the North Vietnamese leadership, carried by Ivens and Loridan to seek permission to film from the Hanoi authorities, was explicit in this respect:

> “Words of friendship and solidarity, however sincere they may be, are only words… Silence in the face of the war in Vietnam is impossible. But saying ‘solidarity’ from afar and without risk, may also be a convenient way of easing one’s conscience. Our solidarity occurs in towns that no one bombs, in lives that no one menaces. What does this mean? We know that this war is your war, that the peace, when it becomes possible, will be your peace, and that no one has the right, even with the best of intentions, to put themselves in your place, to speak on your behalf. Where is our place? To answer these questions, we have undertaken to make a film. It is a response that is neither praiseworthy nor heroic, but which has the sole motive of being tangible, within our means and within our limitations. It is with our work, it is within the context of our profession, that we want to bring a little life to this word ‘solidarity.’” (cited and trans. Mundell 2003, 26).

Marker’s narration takes up this theme in both his introduction and conclusion to *Far from Vietnam*, explicitly in the former:

> “[58 names] and many other technicians, assistants and friends have made this film during the year 1967 to affirm, by the exercise of their craft, their solidarity with the Vietnamese people in struggle against aggression.”

Could anyone argue that this film failed in Marker’s objective to “bring a little life into this word solidarity”; that he and his colleagues made the political relationship between the Left Bank and Vietnam “tangible”; that they revived through craft the solidarity genre that had been invented in no small part thanks to Ivens three decades earlier? (Waugh 2009) And that the genre would now launch a whole new reinvigorated chapter in its history as fellow traveler of the New Left, still vigorously kicking fifty-three years later?

It is therefore fitting in conclusion to probe this “tangibility” of this film in the context of this genre a bit further, to cast FfV in terms of the perennial generic dynamics of the solidarity film. I have identified these dynamics within Ivens’s founding contributions to the genre from the 1930s, in terms of three factors (2009):

1. engagement with cultural difference, even conflict:

*Far from Vietnam* offers a vivid depiction of the dialectics of rich vs. poor, calm vs. frenzy, Vietnam vs. France/U.S.A….. with an emphatic dialectical rhythm throughout. It offers also a vivid depiction of cultural specificity in, for example, everything from low-tech shelter construction to agitprop theatrical performance techniques—but always as in the process of dynamic updating, never as static “otherness.”

2. engagement with constituency:

*Far from Vietnam* is not only addressed to the Left Bank in particular and the West in general—not the Vietnamese—but is also about this constituency, not about Vietnam. Marker makes this especially clear in the concluding narration:

> “…This war is not a historical accident, nor the delayed resolution of a colonial problem: it is there, around us, within us. It begins when we begin ourselves to understand that the Vietnamese are fighting for us, and to measure our debt towards them … And the first honest movement that we can make towards them, is to try to look at their challenge head-on.”

This framework, together with the self-questioning of the Godard, Resnais and Ray episodes, suggests that the film could be valuably situated not only as an important moment in the rediscovery of the solidarity cinema by the New Left, but also as one of the founding texts of what we might call meta-solidarity, which both try to look head-on at a distant struggle and, as Godard puts it, endeavor to question our stakes in bringing it home.

3. engagement with documentary form, craft, language (however conservative formally solidarity documentary has tended to be):

*Far from Vietnam* inevitably grapples with the issue of forms, whether emerging or conventional, and their success in achieving an efficacy of communication and ethics of solidarity. There is no space here to go into the impassioned critical debates over Marker’s indulgent inclusion of clashing styles of material, all either loved or hated by critics, from vérité reportage of U.S. street politics to the first person interventions of the Left Bank auteurs, to Marker’s essayistic collage, praised as productive or decried as incoherent, depending on taste and ideological positioning. It is sufficient to acknowledge here their vigor and pertinence—and their prophetic laying out of the debates about form and technology that would dominate the aftermath of May 68, both in France and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The coalitional spirit of *Far from Vietnam* did not last long after its release, but lessons were learned. Launched at festivals in Montreal and New York in the summer and fall of 1967, Ivens and Lelouch publicly locked horns at the Paris official opening of the film in December (two months after screening it for the striking workers at Besançon). Ivens, just back from harrowing months literally underground filming *17th Parallel*, castigated Lelouch’s attitude of pity towards the Vietnamese—what the Resnais episode in the film calls “victimes à la mode” and what we might now call a “victim aesthetics”—insisting rather on the necessity of unconditional victory for the besieged people.[7] The Lelouch eruption may have harmed the film’s lackluster exhibition career, since the distribution of the film had been entrusted to the director’s distribution firm. Schoots describes a lackluster exhibition for the film in “many provincial towns” and
Even more serious for exhibition abroad was the hostile reception greeting the film’s U.S. opening at the New Yorker Theatre in Manhattan in the spring of 1968, with the New York Times critic dismissing it with the pretext that this banal and ugly “rambling partisan newreel collage,” “facile and slipshod and stereotyped,” had been overtaken by “events” anyway (meaning the Tet offensive of January 1968 and the subsequent withdrawal of Johnson from the Presidential race that spring). But critic Renata Adler unknowingly touched on the essence—both the virtues and the liabilities—of solidarity itself, its relation to “events.” No doubt related to this initial failure and this presumption about actuality, Far from Vietnam remains out of circulation in its English version to this day, a lamentable absence from the documentary, solidarity and essay filmic sub-canons, to which it clearly belongs. It is absent even from today’s ardent Marker canonicity on the English-language graduate dissertation market. Still, this exemplary solidarity film remains resonant for all the ephemeralism of its hook to “events,” an exemplary study in artistic commitment at a pivotal moment in the trajectory of left politics and neo-imperialism. This film and the community from which it emerged have a transhistorical and transcultural relevance that could not be more acute to the renewal of both engaged documentary and neo-imperial conflict in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Notes
1. Varda returned from her famous 1967 sojourn in California to discover that Marker had deleted all but a few shots of her fictional episode of “a woman who lives in Paris and experiences delirium, confusing the demolition of the old neighborhoods in the 20th Arrondissement with the U.S. bombing of Hanoi, and the manhole covers with the “man holes” where the Vietnamese were hiding. In a mental panic, she becomes aware that this distant war contrasts tragically with her modest and well ordered milieu.” Some of Varda’s material was however retained by Marker, namely shots of Vietnamese repairing dikes she had set up and filmed in a vacant field near Paris’s Porte Dorée; it would serve as a transition from the compilation history of the conflict narrated by Varda, and Godard’s monologue “Camera Eye.” On her return to Paris Varda was not even able to view her episode that had already been fully edited before her departure, but she apparently did not unduly resent the decision of her collaborator who had after all been assigned the final cut. Rather she “would take a leaf out of his book” and declared the final result a respectful rendition of the group’s thinking, but “without warmth”: “Strong and intelligent personalities gathered together in a group are not necessarily the most likely to transmit a feeling, nor the most efficient for indicating the urgency of taking a stand.” Varda returned to Los Angeles and participated in anti-war demonstrations there. (Varda 1994, 92-3).

2. Auschwitz survivor Loridan was three decades Ivens’ junior and had been one of the main performers in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s Chronique d’un été (Chronicle of a Summer, 1960). More recently she had been involved in solidarity documentary work around the Algerian war of independence with Jean-Pierre Sergent (Algérie année zéro, 1962).

3. Schoots’ account has Loridan handling the Far from Vietnam shots because Ivens was teaching at the film school in Hanoi (292).

4. Was Sarris making an erroneous unconscious connection between Far from Vietnam contributor William Klein and the Paris painter/performance artist Yves Klein whose famous blue nude body paintings were depicted sensationally in Mondo Cane?

5. The English version of Far from Vietnam seems to have been cut for its U.S. release by twenty-five minutes, down from its original 115 minutes, but further details are not available at this time.

6. Although the Times’ Adler at least had the critical equipment to describe (accurately) Far from Vietnam as a “collage.”

7. Lelouch was not the only nouvelle vagueiste who found himself offside. Right Banker François Truffaut was an interesting case study, immersed in the late sixties in various apolitical cinephile activities, but who would join other New Wave filmmakers including Lelouch at the superstructural barricades the following year when film institutions came under attack from the Gaullist government. Nevertheless, the previous year, with his Hitchcock riffs The Bride Wore Black and Mississippi Mermaid both in the pipeline, Truffaut’s response to Loin du Vietnam in Cahiers du cinéma (1967) was an ad hominem attack on Ivens who seemed to represent for him the vile combination of cinéma du papa and the Parti communiste, an attack which also baited Marker in the process:

“the pseudo-poetic career of Joris Ivens, sponger off of festivals, who ambles around from progressive palace to progressive palace, filming water puddles with municipal funds and much aestheticism. Next, upon these decorative images—thus rightwing images—his pal also devoted to the genre, Chris Marker, will try to veneer on it a leftwing commentary.”

Sources
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