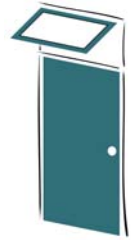


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Errol Morris's Topic



About Errol Morris

Since the premiere of his groundbreaking 1978 film, "Gates of Heaven," Errol Morris has indelibly altered our perception of the non-fiction film, presenting to audiences the mundane, bizarre and history making with his own distinctive elan.

Roger Ebert has said, "After twenty years of reviewing films, I haven't found another filmmaker who intrigues me more... Errol Morris is like a magician, and as great a filmmaker as Hitchcock or Fellini."

Recently, Morris was highly praised for his short film that ran at the front of this year's Academy Awards, where he asked an admixture of anonymous and well-known people outside the movie business to talk about what they love about movies. He is also currently at work on an as yet untitled feature film on the life of former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

In 2000 and 2001, Morris aired two seasons of a television series, "First Person." The series uses his unique interviewing machine, the Interrotron. A modified teleprompter, the

Interrotron allows Morris to project his image on a monitor placed directly over the camera's lens. Interviewees address Morris's image on the monitor while looking directly at the camera, which lets Morris and the audience achieve eye contact with his subjects.

The effect is to focus the subject's attention and gaze more directly into the camera than was possible in the past. "It's the difference between faux first person and the true first person," says Morris. "There's an added intensity. The Interrotron inaugurates the birth of true first-person cinema."

The first season had eleven episodes and premiered in March 2000 with Errol's short film, "Stairway to Heaven," about Temple Grandin, an autistic woman who designs humane animal slaughterhouses. The second season of "First Person" began in August 2001 and featured an interview with Rick Rosner: philosopher, game-show contestant, cosmologist and high-school recidivist.

Errol Morris' last feature film, "Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.," (2000) focuses on Fred A. Leuchter, Jr., an engineer from Malden, Massachusetts who decided to become the "Florence Nightingale of Death Row"- a humanist whose mission was to design and repair gas chambers, electric chairs, lethal injection systems and gallows. His career and life are ruined after becoming involved in the world of holocaust denial. "Mr. Death" appeared of the year's "Top Ten" lists of many major publications, including "USA Today," "Entertainment Weekly," and "The Boston Globe."

Morris began his first non-fiction feature in 1978 after reading a headline in the San Francisco Chronicle: "450 Dead Pets To Go To Napa." "Gates of Heaven" follows the stories behind two pet cemeteries: one that fails set up by the idealistic Floyd McClure at the intersection of two superhighways; and one that thrives set up by the Harbert family, who apply the latest marketing concepts to the pet cemetery profession. "Gates of Heaven," was described by Roger Ebert as "one of the ten best films of all time."

Morris's second effort, about the inhabitants of a Florida small town who lop off their limbs for insurance money ("They literally became a fraction of themselves to become whole financially," Morris commented.), had to be retooled when his subjects threatened to murder him. Forced to come up with a new concept, Morris created "Vernon, Florida" (1981), about the eccentric residents of a southern swamp town. David Ansen in Newsweek called it "the work of a true original."

Morris completed his most controversial film, "The Thin Blue Line" in 1988. Billed as "the first movie mystery to actually solve a murder," the film is credited with overturning the conviction of Randall Dale Adams for the murder of Dallas police officer Robert Wood, a crime for which Adams was to be executed. "The Thin Blue Line" was voted the best film of 1988 in a Washington Post survey of over one hundred film critics. "Premiere

magazine”, in a survey of films of the 1980s, described it as one of the most important and influential movies of the decade.

In 1992, Errol finished a film about the life and work of Stephen Hawking, the physicist who is often compared to Einstein despite having spent most of his life confined to a wheelchair, a computer his only means of communication. "A Brief History of Time" won the Filmmaker's Award and the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Morris' interviews for the film have been incorporated into a book, *A Reader's Companion*, published by Bantam Books. The film appeared on many "top ten" lists for 1992, including *Time*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*.

Errol Morris created one of the most highly regarded films of 1997, the critically acclaimed "Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control." Linking the fascinating, yet seemingly unrelated stories of: a lion tamer; an expert on the African mole-rat; a topiary gardener who carves giant animals out of hedges; and an MIT scientist who designs robots. The film won the Best Documentary Film Award from the National Board of Review, National Society of Film Critics and Independent Spirit Award. It was also selected as part of the 2000 Biennial at the Whitney Museum.

Morris has also made numerous commercials, including a heralded post September 11th campaign for United Airlines, Apple Computer, and Southern Comfort. He also won an Emmy in 2001 for directing the commercial "Photobooth" for PBS.

Morris has received three fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was a graduate student at Princeton University and the University of California-Berkeley. Morris' work received a full retrospective in November 1999 at the Museum of Modern Art in 1999 and he was given a special tribute at the Sundance Film Festival in 2001.

Morris lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his wife, Julia Sheehan, an art historian; their son, Hamilton; and their bulldog, Jackpot.

Intro by Jay Allison

When you watch an Errol Morris documentary, the stunning visuals seduce you. Then you realize you can close your eyes if you want, because the heart of the film is in the voices. Years ago, in fact, I got a call from Nonesuch Records asking about getting the CD soundtrack of "The Thin Blue Line" broadcast on public radio, just as is. For whatever reasons it never happened, but trust me it would have worked pretty well.

At Transom we're interested in the relationship between story and image, because as radio producers we're responsible for the images in the listener's mind. That's why we like to hear from television journalists and photographers and filmmakers, who know things about imagery that we don't. Plus, as the Internet brings all non-fiction workers into contact, it makes sense to talk, right?

In this case, we asked our friend Nubar Alexanian, documentary photographer and former Transom Special Guest, to talk to his friend Errol Morris about image and spoken word for our audience of storytellers. An edited version of their conversation follows, accompanied by audio clips and pictures by Nubar. We may sprinkle in some of the outtakes over the coming month. Errol cautioned that he's busy finishing his new film (McNamara) and traveling about the world, so his participation may be irregular. That's okay. We can still ask questions. Some may be answered, and some may remain mysteries.

Errol Morris

Interviewed by Nubar Alexanian (October, 2002)

Edited by Sydney Lewis

The Bedrock of Language

Nubar:

Do you orchestrate for the ear independent of the eye?

Errol:

This is a difficult question. When you're putting a film together you're so much aware of both it's hard to extract them independently.

Nubar:

But you're a classical pianist, a cellist. Your knowledge of music is very deep and it plays a really big part in your films. It's important in all movies, but with yours it's particularly important.

Errol:

I don't know if it's more important in my movies than it is in anyone else's. I do think that language is the bedrock of everything I do. And this kind of strange language, language that comes out of people talking. It's spoken language, as opposed to written language, and heavily edited spoken language. But the music, obviously, has to work, or maybe it's not so obvious, but the music has to work with the spoken language. It can't be independent of it. I mean, it's been the cause of I don't know how much trouble in just getting music to work with my films. Often, when you have a sequence that's purely visual, without dialogue, music can drive the sequence and music can take on almost a dominant role. It can't in my movies. I first started using music in my movies with *The Thin Blue Line* with Philip Glass. And we had terrible difficulties finding music that would work with what people were saying -- with the spoken word -- that wouldn't undermine what they were saying, wouldn't interfere with what they were saying, that would enhance what they were saying, but would not overwhelm it, would not efface it. That's very, very difficult. So I would say that the music in my films has always taken a back seat to the spoken word.

A Person, a Tape Recorder, and Time

Nubar:

I want to talk about interviewing. You often conduct long, long interviews. I know, for example, like when I shoot a portrait, of someone, I have a three-role minimum because I

don't feel like people can sustain their own view of how they're supposed to look for a camera for three rolls of film.

Errol:

Three role maximum or minimum?

Nubar:

Minimum, three roll minimum.

Errol:

Oh, you mean they lose control.

Nubar:

Right. Is that what the twelve-hour interview is about?



Errol:

Yeah. Loss of control. That's when things start to happen. The marathon interviewing style started years and years ago when I was interviewing people with just audiotape. I did this before I became a filmmaker. I would do these lengthy interviews. I started with a tape recorder - no camera - and I was interviewing murderers and their families in California and in Wisconsin.

Nubar:

When are we talking?

Errol:

I started interviewing people in 1973. Criminals and their families... I started with killers and graduated to serial killers and mass murderers.

Nubar:

Toward what end?

Errol:

I was interested in writing books based around this material. And I had all kinds of ideas about how the material was to be organized and how the interviews were to be conducted. I developed a style of interviewing where I tried not to say anything in the interview. I tried to say very, very few things... If possible, nothing. And I was very proud of the interviews that I had done where you can barely hear my voice on the tape. The interviews would go on for hours and hours and hours and hours and it would be people talking. It was part of the idea behind *Gates of Heaven*. *Gates of Heaven* came out of audio interviews extended to film. But the origin of it is a person sitting in front of a tape recorder.

"Everywhere I Go There's Murders... "

Nubar:

So how did you make the leap into film from that?

Errol:

I don't know, my fascination with movies. The idea that I could create something even more complex with pictures. But since then, all of my work, regardless of what I've done, has been driven by audio; it's been driven by interviews. The interviews are the script, the interviews precede everything, or they have preceded everything. I'm planning to do a number of features with actors, but I'm basing these ideas for drama on interviews, oddly enough.



Nubar:

So they're driven by audio then?

Errol:

They are driven by the spoken word.

Nubar:

This interests me. Years ago, you were interviewing people with a tape recorder. But you ended up in film not radio.

Errol:

I could have very easily ended up in radio if I had thought that was an option. I never looked at them as radio ever. I looked at them as books and then as movies. I never thought of Studs Terkel as a model... I had my own idea of what these books would look like. And then of course, it became something very different, it became interviews into film. I still have all of these tapes, and it might be very interesting to do something with them as just audio tapes. You know, I've never even thought of it until, until you mentioned it right now.

Everything that I've done has its origin in the spoken word. My favorite examples... ? From *The Thin Blue Line*. Emily Miller talking about her love of old detective movies -- Boston Blackie. She actually says, "Everywhere I go there's murders. Even around my house." Lines like that. "Everywhere I go there's murders. Even around my house." These interview fragments give you a perspective on how she sees the world and what she's

thinking. A friend of mine says you can never trust people who don't talk a lot because how else would you know what they're thinking. My art is based on that principle. It's based on people's willingness to talk a lot.

The Weird Laboratory

Language is unendingly interesting. My belief is that we invented language so that we could lie more effectively. That language is a vehicle of self-deception and evasion. I used to transcribe all of my audiotapes myself. And there were these exciting moments where you would become aware of patterns of speech, the way people talk, the way they use language, the way they express themselves, the way they don't express themselves. When you sit and transcribe interviews you become aware of things that you would never notice ordinarily. Because you're going through it, you're listening to it in a completely different way as you actually put these words down on the page and then look at them as words on a page. How much you can actually learn about a person just from their patterns of speech about how they communicate? And it goes well beyond the surface content of what they're saying.

I've always been amazed by this fact, that you sit and transcribe and transcribe and transcribe, and then you get this huge pile of material. You transcribe an interview that goes on for eight, nine, ten hours -- you have a small book. And you look at all of this stuff. How different it is reading it from actually looking at the film material. How the content of it changes once again when you see it associated with picture. It's always remarkable. It's like being in this weird laboratory of language, doing this kind of work, because you get to isolate various aspects of communication. It seems like an odd thing to say, but it's absolutely true. You get to hear the audio, you get to transform the audio into the written word, you get to see it once again as film.

Nubar:

You're saying by looking at the text?

Errol:

No, no, no, not just the text. It's the whole deal. You get all of these levels. You get to hear the interview for the first time around when you're actually conducting it. And you get to hear the audio and to transform the audio into written material. And then you get to edit the film. And the difference between each of these different elements is endlessly fascinating. When you read something you can always imagine a voice. You could imagine the words as being spoken by some ideal speaker that you have in your head, or as being spoken by yourself, or meaning certain things depending on how they're delivered. And it's always interesting to set that reading experience up against looking at the person, once again, saying the stuff on film.

Lost On The Page

Nubar:

You do these interviews and the tapes are transcribed, the film is transcribed to audio. You edit from there, no?

Errol:

No, I don't edit from the transcripts, ever. I edit from the film. We transcribe the material, we write in time code, and it's a way of creating an index for the material. While you're editing you can quickly find pieces of material from the transcript and in the transcript.

Nubar:

But the form doesn't come from the transcript then? In other words, you don't edit down...



Errol:

Paper cuts? No, never, never. Paper cuts give you a very false idea. That's what's so interesting about this. In my first two films I was very much involved in creating the transcripts of the material. I no longer actually do them myself. Someone else does them for me. But you see these various representations of the material: there's the interview initially; there's the audio, just audio divorced from the image; there's the transcription of the spoken word on the page; and then there's the film. The track plus picture.

I've been aware since the very first film that I made that there's an enormous difference between the paper cut ---- essentially you have the transcript in front of you and you cut and paste together the sections that you like. And it never works in film. It really doesn't. Somehow you need to hear the person talking, you need to actually see the piece of film and cut it against another piece of film. That something complex happens that is lost on the page. And that all of the editing, all the editing that's done away from film is a waste of time. Literally a waste of time. It's going to have to just simply be redone. It's a different, different ballgame. And I think there are many, many, many reasons for that. But I also think that when I edit voice in my films, that there's a kind of talk that emerges that is really different from Brand X. I was told by somebody, and it was something that I took as an enormous compliment, that people sound different in my films, there's a different kind of discourse. And I think it is connected with music, it's connected with editing the spoken word in a very different kind of way.

A Linguistic Thing

Nubar:

I'm so taken by the visual elements in your films, but now that I hear you say that they're about language, it makes perfect sense to me.

Errol:

You're sold a bill of goods about what art is supposed to look like, or what art is supposed to be about, or how it is supposed to be made. And I've always been attracted to images. Images interest me. Don't get me wrong. You often hear about scripts that, you know, scripts shouldn't have voice-over, voice-over is kind of a failure, it's a mistake. Well, I started to think, this is maybe within the last year or so, what if I just do these interviews, use them as voice-over and construct a completely fictional movie with actors based on it? I can preserve what really interests me about this linguistic element as being the foundation for it, and I can move my film-making in a completely different direction. It's odd, because for many reasons I look at this distinction between fiction and nonfiction as being nonsense.

Nubar:

How do you mean?

Errol:

We talk about feature film-making and documentary film-making as if there's this rigid line of demarcation between the two, that we can say, OK, this fits into category one and this fits into category two, and it's clear to me what the difference is. The differences are very, very important, but they are different than what people imagine them to be. People love to talk about truth. Truth-telling. Truth in advertising. Try that oxymoron on for size. Most of the time I have no idea what people are talking about when they start talking about truth. They somehow imagine that it truth-telling is connected with style or presentation. If it's cinema verite or it appears in The New York Times, it must be true... And then the nonsense over the Rodney King videotape where people can agree that it was a videotape of a real event but they can't agree what that real event was...

Truth is not guaranteed by style or presentation. It's not handed over on a tray like a Happy Meal. It's a quest. It often is as interesting to chronicle people's persistent avoidance of the truth as their pursuit of it. But in any event, whatever truth is, it is a linguistic thing. It's not a visual thing. To talk about a photograph being true or false is utterly meaningless. Words give you a picture of the world and visuals take you into the mystery of what is out there and whether language has captured it or not. When the characters in *The Thin Blue Line* are talking about the events on that roadway in Dallas [where the police officer was shot and killed], and then you see images of that roadway,

you start to think about the mystery of what happened, the mystery of our attempt to really grab a hold of the world with words and images.

Believing Is Seeing

You know, the truth is subjective, the truth is contextual, the truth is up for grabs. To me, the real story behind *The Thin Blue Line*, and I think this is an important story to be told in general about the world, is not that truth is unknowable, but that often people are uninterested in the truth. They don't seek the truth, but they seek some series of answers that make them feel comfortable or answer to certain needs that they might have.

When people talk about photographs being true or false, I have really no idea what they're talking about. But if people ask me, "Is it true that David Harris was the driver of the blue Comet, and was stopped by police officer Robert Wood, and pulled a gun from underneath the seat and shot and killed him, true or false?" To me, you know, those statements have truth value. And I believe that... *The Thin Blue Line* is involved in two separate enterprises. One is to show you what the underlying truth most likely was. And to show you how people came up with conclusions that were at such variance with the truth.

Nubar:

And then you do those recreations on the road.

Errol:

I did it in a whole number of ways. I did it with the reenactments and I also did it with just the stories, the individual stories of the people who were supposed to be witnesses to the event, the people who testified at the trial. It becomes clear as the movie unfolds that the stories that these witnesses were telling are not so much stories about what they saw, but about what they wished to see. My belief that believing is seeing and not the other way around. And that's one of the very strong themes for me in *The Thin Blue Line*.

Nubar:

That believing is seeing.

Errol:

That believing is seeing. If there's enough



pressure, if there's enough reason to believe something, then people will believe it, no matter what the underlying truth might be, no matter what the evidence against their believing it might be. If there's enough pressure of one kind or another. Take *The Thin Blue Line*. This is a crime that went unsolved for a month. They didn't even have any suspects. Dallas officer is shot in cold blood. Someone has to pay the price. And so, when David Harris pointed the finger at Randall Adams, here is something that the police can jump on, you know? We have the perfect witness to the crime because he claims he's seated next to the perpetrator. We have a case which we can build around his claims. Now you would think, well, a moment of reflection tells us that this guy's testimony is unreliable because he might be the killer!

Stories About Belief

At the center of *The Thin Blue Line*, there's this question. How did it happen? How did it happen that the guy who committed all of these crimes walked away scot-free so that he could commit other murders and other crimes, and the guy who hadn't done anything wrong ended up sentenced to death? Now we would call this a perverse outcome. You know? The innocent party gets the hot seat and the guilty party walks away. Isn't our system of law, of justice designed to prevent outcomes like this? To me the real question was -- did the Dallas police knowingly frame this guy? Did they convince themselves that he was guilty and then manufacture evidence to support that conclusion? Once I had convinced myself that in fact Randall Adams was innocent and that David Harris was guilty, then the real issue was -- how did they get there? How did they arrive at this point? What was going on in people's heads, what were they thinking? What lead them to this perverse, bizarre conclusion? Was it a conspiracy... ? Or the blundering of dunces who were under pressure to believe something that they had no trouble believing. The only drawback -- it just happened to be wrong.

A lot of what I do as a filmmaker is this concern about conspiracy versus human incompetence, confusion and infallibility. And *The Thin Blue Line* is very much a story not of conspiracy, but a story of just how incompetent and how easily seduced we are into believing anything. That is at the heart of the movie, and some of my other movies as well. I like to think of these movies as stories about belief, about what people believe, how they see the world, set against what the world might be. And *The Thin Blue Line* is very much a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too movie. It wants to tell two stories. It wants to tell an investigative story, just in plain language, a story about what really happens. But it also wants to tell a story about the massive confusion and error that produced this incredible miscarriage of justice. And I am very proud of the movie because I think that it does work on both levels.

Born To Babble

Nubar:

When you go into an interview... do you do tons of research?... do you prepare heavily?

Errol:

Yes.

Nubar:

You do?

Errol:

I never talk to the people in advance. But I prepare heavily.

Nubar:

Well, I want to ask-- really? You never talk to them?

Errol:

Try not to.

Nubar:

Because?

Errol:

Because I think that there is a real need that people have to talk. I used to think that if I ever had a tattoo, my tattoo would say Born to Babble. People have a need to talk. And if they've already told you a story, they have dissipated that need.

Nubar:

You want it all to happen on camera.

Errol:

I want it to happen on camera. And over the years I've found from painful experience that talking to somebody about what you're going to talk about with them is counter productive.

Nubar:

Do you want them to get to know you before they talk to you? Is that important?

Errol:

Um, no.



Nubar:

It's not?

Errol:

It's not important. They'll get to know me soon enough, in the process of actually doing the interview. It's not about them knowing me, it's about their need to tell me something. And my interest in hearing it. I have not had very good success-- I mean, maybe it's become a kind of superstition on my part. You know, I just won't allow myself to go there. I just won't allow myself to talk to people in advance of actually interviewing them. There's also a tendency, it's a natural human tendency, you hear something good, and then you want someone to repeat it. "Oh! That thing you said was really good. Could you please repeat it for me." Well, that's not how it works, it does not work that way. We're all familiar with the phenomena where you try to do something again and it's never as good as when it just happened the first time, when it happened spontaneously.

No Other Voice

Nubar:

I've been in lots of interview situations with you where you will go over and over the same material in hopes that what... ? That something will open somewhere? That you will learn something new?

Errol:

I don't know. Often it's just the hope that I will understand something. You know, the traditional idea of how documentaries are to be put together is that you talk to some twenty people and you inter-cut the interviews. "A" says such-and-such, and then "B" says, that's wrong... And "C" says something else altogether. And supposedly you gain perspective on an issue by listening to this interplay of characters, in effect, arguing with each other. Well, what if you tried something completely different. What if you created a movie about one character's perception of history? About one character's attempt to understand himself through history? I have been playing with the idea for several years now -- creating things around one interview, one person being interviewed, no other people. I tried that with Fred Leuchter in *Mr. Death*, but failed for a whole number of reasons.

Nubar:

You feel like that film failed?

Errol:

I don't feel the film failed, but the film was to be based on Fred Leuchter's interview alone and it did not turn out to work with Fred Leuchter alone. So I had to supplement the Leuchter interview with -- I don't know how many additional interviews there are in there --

but there are six, seven, eight interviews. So in the end it was not this one voice, first-person story that I had envisioned when I set out to make it. It had evolved into something quite different. And what was so appealing about the McNamara project was this opportunity to try that same thing again with one person, no other interviews, just one person being interviewed: Robert S. McNamara, and Robert S. McNamara alone. No other interviews. No other voice.

The Mess Of Reality

I like to think of myself as an investigator. I was an investigator at one time, a professional investigator if you like. And I think that there has been a very strong investigative element in all of my movies. There certainly is in this newest movie. The McNamara movie is investigative.

Nubar:

But you're a storyteller, and yet you use investigation as the way to tell a story?

Errol:

Yes and no. I think investigation and story telling work in opposite directions from each other. Stories, by their very nature, have to be tremendously simplified versions of reality. Reality is too complex; it's too chaotic. We tell ourselves stories, so we don't have to deal with reality. We create stories out of the mess of reality by eliminating material, by reinterpreting material, by rearranging material. But the investigative element is what connects the stories to the world. It's what makes stories interesting to me.



The only way that people can make sense of experience, of the world, of history, whatever, is by picking and choosing from a myriad of details and facts. And when you make a movie, I mean, that after all is the enterprise that I'm involved with, you have to carry the audience by something. You are telling a story as a means of taking people through a series of events. *The Thin Blue Line* is very much a story, but it's a story also dotted with these absurd, picky little details that fascinate me and which inform the story. But if you looked at the work that I had done in Texas, I spent two plus years investigating this crime, and I have volumes. And one of the saddest things for me is that ninety-nine per cent of my investigative work in Texas in connection with this case is invisible. It's not in the movie. I mean, you see the tip of the iceberg, you see the results of all of this effort that I put in over the years. But it's not really in the movie. And the reasons are pretty

straightforward. Because if you put them all in the movie, the movie would be confusing and no one would watch it.

Errol Morris, P. I.

Nubar:

When you were a private investigator-- That's how you made your living, right?

Errol:

Yeah, 'cause I couldn't make my living otherwise.

Nubar:

Yeah, but so, like, who were your clients?

Errol:

Well, I worked for one of the best private investigators in America. So I was working on huge corporate cases. This was not matrimonial investigations. This was Wall Street investigations. And I'm still-- I know this sounds really cheesy, but I'm still not at liberty to talk about the work. [pause] But it was great. It was absolutely terrific.



Nubar:

So you were a private eye.

Errol:

Yes.

Nubar:

I think that is so cool.

Errol:

And what do you do as a private detective? There's all of this mystery connected to detective work, or this image of what I must have been: Errol Morris, comma, P. I., the guy who's sitting in a car late at night looking at the entrance or exit to some building. Or a person watching someone, tracking them, following them. In fact, almost everything that I did as a detective is stuff that I do as a filmmaker. There was, if you were to do the Zen diagram of the overlap between the two, there was enormous overlap. And what is the essence of private detective work? It's talking to people and learning something about them from it. That's it. Period.

An Odd Place Of The Unexpected

Nubar:

When you're shooting in the field it's a very organic process. You know something of what you're doing, but you're looking for things to happen.

Errol:

People discount the out of control element in art as if somehow -- You see it in the auteur theory, you see it in the sort of idea that great art is completely under control. Someone has this exact picture of what they're going to do and they realize it faithfully. It's sort of like the Howard Roark idea in *The Fountainhead*. And my experience is that art is a very different kind of affair. And maybe this just points out certain infirmities that I have as a filmmaker, but I think one of the most exciting things about making a movie is not knowing what's going on, of actually being in an odd place where unexpected things are happening. Where you're learning things that you could not have imagined you were going to learn in advance.

I think the worst thing that you can do as a filmmaker is just go through a recitation of received material, and illustrate it as if somehow your job is to provide the illustrated news. My tendency as a filmmaker is to keep going, to keep gnawing at some bone until I finally come to a conclusion that satisfies me.



Hunger Artist

Nubar:

The courage that you have which I haven't seen in other filmmakers that I've watched is that you're willing to leave it open and learn even while your labor costs are twenty thousand dollars an hour when you're in the field.

Errol:

That's just cause I'm insane, self-destructive...



Nubar:

... But honestly, there's an element of courage there.

Errol:

Well, I always liked the idea of courage that is embodied in Kafka's "Hunger Artist." Kafka wrote this story about a professional faster who in the end fasts himself to death. He starts off fasting for great audiences who just love watching him fast and revel in the idea of his ability to discipline himself, quote unquote ---- to do without food for weeks at a time. But he comes really into his own when people stop watching him. And he fasts himself to death. And he makes it quite clear at the end, maybe this is what I take away from the story, that-- Um, he does it, not out of some great discipline, but out of some weird persnicketyness and obsessiveness. That, as he puts it, he fasts because he could never find any food that really satisfied him.

Willing To Listen

Nubar:

You don't give yourself enough credit. But if what you say is true, and I think it is, that the worst thing that a filmmaker can do is simply illustrate, what's the best thing a filmmaker can do?

Errol:

I don't know, create something that is really unusual, that's unique, that has emotional power, that says something. Says something unexpected. I remember going into this McNamara movie knowing full well that there are millions of people in this instance who have very strong views about who McNamara is and what his role was in the U. S. government in the 1960s. And my goal notwithstanding was to try to find out something about him, to learn something about him. To be interested in him, in the sense that this is a person who has something very important to tell, and that I should be willing to listen.

The Shadow

Nubar:

You have a way of telling stories that is uniquely yours. You work in a narrative medium, which is linear. Think of it like a tape: you start at the beginning and you go to the end. But the way that your mind works is much more...

Errol:

Confused?



Nubar:

Not confused but, you know, all the information is accessible at any given point. I've watched you take that non-linear way of thinking, and try and adapt it in a medium that has a beginning, a middle, and end. How do you do that?

Errol:

It's always difficult. It has been difficult in every single movie that I've made. But there's been two movies in particular which do not have, in any sense of the word, traditional stories. And that's *Vernon, Florida*, and *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*. I hate to use the term non-linear because I'm not really sure what it means. To me there are stories in there, linear stories, however you want to describe them. And the real task was how to take something that really resists in every way imaginable, being put in some traditional form, figuring out how to tease out a story line, a narrative structure from this mass of material. I think that there very much is a storyline in *Fast, Cheap*, but uncovering what that was and making it work was no easy matter.



Nubar:

So this comes after, the structure?

Errol:

While I was making the movie there was an idea of what the structure in the movie would be and what the story would be. But actually putting that into practice, making it work... Thinking it is one thing and actually making it work and editing is something else altogether. Between the intention and the act falls the shadow.

A Kind Of Experiment

Nubar:

What about influences in your work? Or even just your approach to storytelling.



Errol:

Documentary filmmakers. Wiseman. The surrealists. Vigo, Vertov, Franju. I've been influenced by all kinds of directors. Sirk, Lang, Bresson... I imagine film as a kind of experiment. I hate the idea of film as just boilerplate, and often it seems that film today has become boilerplate -- people making the same movie. Movies sometimes seem horribly unambitious to me. My brief experience with Hollywood was disastrous. I guess it's not so surprising. I guess what's surprising to me is that I could have thought it would be otherwise. But I'm lucky. I'm a very, very lucky guy. I get to do my own kinds of films in my own way. I have my own kind of laboratory of filmmaking, and I love it.

A Different Kind of Animal

Nubar:

What are the kinds of things you would be able to do with an unlimited budget on the movies that you make?

Errol:

Well, creating visuals. It's part of the problem of being in this no-man's land, or gray zone of filmmaking. Yes, I make documentaries, but no I don't make documentaries like other people. I'm not a documentary filmmaker that just runs around shooting with handheld camera and available light. I do that on occasion as part of what I do, but that's not the deal.

I like to point to the end of *Fast, Cheap*, which is a scene shot in a topiary garden at night where we had to bring in massive amounts of lighting. We were shooting at a hundred and twenty frames a second. We're shooting five times the speed of sound, so we need five times as much as light. We're lighting at night. We have rain machines. You know, we're talking about something that is a really substantial deal with a crew of forty people.



And it's stuff that just can't be accommodated on a documentary budget. And even though I have been very fortunate, I get not insubstantial budgets, the budgets are never enough to cover the cost of the film. Part of the reason why I would like to abandon documentary, or at least what I've been doing, is because it's not clear to me that the budgets will accommodate what I want to do. The idea of endlessly going into debt to make my movies is not an appealing one. I'll do it if I have to, but I just would prefer not to. [long pause]

For example, salaries of actors and so on and so forth. I mean, that's what's interesting about documentary. If you look at the budget, the money that people are actually being paid, that they take away from it, is a virtually insignificant amount of the budget versus the amount of money that just goes into the physical production of the elements of film. Which are expensive. And commercials are even further in the other direction than feature film, because the amount that's spent to actually produce a commercial is such a small percentage of what the client will eventually spend on buying media. Perhaps the client will spend two, three, four million dollars on a set of ads, thirty-second spots. But they could just as easily turn around and spend some thirty, forty, fifty, sixty millions dollars putting those spots on cable and network television. That's where the real money is spent. So it's just all driven by certain production models. You know, all this may sound very boring but it does inform on some simple level your work as a filmmaker. And I'm not a guy who is a sixteen millimeter handheld guy, I'm some different kind of animal. And a more expensive, needy kind of animal.

Fast, Cheap, And Out Of Control

I'm creating movie-like themes in all of my work. I mean, on some level you have to find a story that people can understand as a story. And then play with that idea. And I often chastise myself for not going far enough in playing with how a story is told. There's this worry in filmmaking. Who's going to watch them?

I would like my movies to be seen by more than half a dozen people. I've never been able to attract as large an audience as I might like, which is depressing. There could be lots of reasons for that. I tell myself that my movies haven't been marketed well, but it could be just simply the way that I put them together or the nature of the films themselves that restricts their audience. Or maybe I'm not that good. That could be another possibility. But the goal is to reach a larger number of people. That's what's so fascinating about film: the idea of making films for half a dozen people is not an appealing notion. And regardless, even if it was, it's not a viable financial model because no one would ever give you the money, the wherewithal, to make them. That's what's so weird about filmmaking... How expensive it is, how complicated it is, how involved it is. You can't do it without at least having some idea of an audience in mind. Unless you're independently wealthy and can just pay for these things on your own accord, you have to have some kind of audience. That's true of all art. You can't make it without some real or imagined audience.

I remember someone asking me if *Fast, Cheap* was a cold calculation on my part to make something that was commercial. And I thought: are you insane? What? Oh, right, yeah, that commercial model -- mole rats, topiary animals, lion taming, and the robotic scientist. Yeah.

Nubar:

That's funny.

Errol:

Proving once again that people can say anything.

A Conversation w/ Errol Morris

A Larger Story

Barrett Golding - *October 30, 2002* - #21

i've wondered since seeing (several times) the amazing *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, at what point in filmmaking did you realize the stories of a lion tamer, mole-rat expert, topiary gardener and robot designer could become, in a sense, different versions of the same story? ...it was a haunting moment of revelation when i began to understand you were not only painting a fascinating portrait of four individuals but also telling a single larger story about pursuit, passion, eccentricity and expertise.



Vulnerable Absurdity

Lisa Peakes - *October 30, 2002* - #22

I was struck by the vulnerability of your subjects in "Vernon, Fla." and "Mr. Death" and by their seemingly absolute belief in the immutability of their worlds...I also have the feeling that many audience members who see your films are laughing at the absurdity of the subjects' beliefs.

You mentioned that people reveal themselves out of an innate need to "babble" - but I wonder whether these people know they will be fodder for laughter. It seems that, in order to retain the "purity" of their story, they MUST NOT know. How do you: approach them about being filmed, prevent them from censoring themselves, and protect them from hurt feelings? Is protecting them from hurt feelings even something that comes up, and, if it is, is it something you feel obligated to do?

Extension Errol

Chris Lydon - *October 31, 2002 - #23*

So much of what Errol says here casts him as a sort of extension of the meticulous and thoughtful Tony Schwartz, the famous sound maven and advertising man, except that Tony focused on the audio track and Errol seems to give the same care to both aural and visual effects and their combination.

Tony did the best-known-TV-commercial-that-ran-only-once, the "Girl with a Daisy" spot for Lyndon Johnson in 1964, in which the image of a child and a flower morphed into a mushroom cloud, warning people not to vote for Barry Goldwater. But in fact Tony has an explicit theory of political and other advertising:...The idea was to neutralize the eye and fly the message in under the radar to the ear...

Question: On the matter of Errol's dark and plausible observation that language is fundamentally about lying... how in the world does a man with this consciousness, to wit: Errol, use it in the advertising biz. What's the truth in or about advertising, Errol?

Fetishizing

Errol Morris - *November 6, 2002 - #26*

Maybe it's just my nasty contrarian streak... But I see little difference between advertising and anything else. It is an effort to "sell" someone on an idea... on a conception of reality... And the people who do well at it - could I be one of them...? - usually have to put themselves in the state of mind of true believers... Yes, the "new blue crystals" have made all the difference...

But come to think of it - what higher-calling is there than fetishizing inanimate reality...? Anybody can make a person interesting, but what about adult diapers...?

Girl With Daisy Joins Cast

Errol Morris - *November 16, 2002 - #38*

Many thanks for reminding me of the LBJ spot from the '64 campaign. Yes, it's really great, and it captures - more than anything else I have seen - the true "spirit" of the times.

(I know it's fashionable to talk about the use of sound and image in media, but what is so striking about this commercial is the baldness of its message: vote for me or die. That's what candidates want to say, but the message is usually hidden under a hundred thousand layers of prevarication.)

I have dutifully incorporated the spot into my McNamara movie...

Seeing The Good Light

Dave Isay - *November 6, 2002 - #24*

Thin Blue Line is, in my book, far-and-away best documentary ever made. When I first saw it in '88 ... I understood for the first time what a documentary could be- how you could break rules, push to the limits and make something totally outrageous and artistic and wonderful from real life... And, on top of that, actually do GOOD... Still what I aspire to every time I go out to do a piece...

Producing Uneasiness

Error Morris - *November 6, 2002 - #28*

Yes, I got Randall Adams out of jail, etc. And, indeed, I am delighted to have actually changed something in the real world... But what is really, really nice to hear is that you liked the movie as a movie...

There is a kind of irony for me here...

I used to rail against what I called The-Mother-Theresa Principle. That any movie about Mother Theresa has to be a good movie (Christopher Hitchens notwithstanding) because Mother Theresa is such a good person... It's the flip side of the same reasoning that tells us that Triumph of the Will is a bad movie because it was made in service of the Third Reich...

Are documentaries to be evaluated on the basis of their social content...? Is there such a thing as a bad movie about a good person...? And are there good movies about bad people...? Do good things happen to bad movies...?

Take movies that appear to be about good things but aren't really... One of my favorite examples of this sort of thing is Scared Straight. It won an Academy Award for best documentary. It was about sending youthful offenders to a maximum security prison for a day... They spent a day with serial killers, pedophiles and God knows what else...

And what happens...? They got "scared straight..."

I despised this movie... OK. I more than despised it... I loathed it. Really, really loathed it. The movie claims to be presenting this social benefit. But it is deeply corrupt at its heart. It pontificates. We turned these youthful offenders into law abiding citizens... Look at us. We did good.

It turns out that (a) the kids in the movie came from an upper middle class neighborhood where the recidivism rate was nil, so the argument in the film that they were turned away from crime was vacuous, if not specious... (b) the level of craft in the movie was beyond

execrable... and (c) even if there had been a real social benefit - although there was none - is that the way we want to run our society, namely, by scaring people into submission...? Why not go and live in North Korea...?

"Do-good-art" often gives me the willies.

Another abomination is "Night and Fog," but perhaps it's best not to go on about it here...

Yet, there is great art that tries to capture something real about the world, something that we might not be aware of, even something that we do not want to be aware of, something disturbing, alarming... Something that does not play into what we want to hear, but something that we might like to avoid hearing...

Something that produces uneasiness.

A Concentration of Surrealism

Julia Barton - *November 12, 2002* - #31

Language = Lie (well, a lot of the time)

That is the "truth" that I get from Errol Morris's movies, though I didn't realize it until he said so here.

I'm working with radio journalists now in Vladivostok, in the Far East of Russia, and I know when I mention that insight to them tomorrow, they will laugh...I think about surrealism a lot in Russia, especially given recent awful events in Moscow. And I wonder, is there ever a point when a concentration of surrealism just turns into tragedy? Or is the surrealistic art a response to tragedy, a way to absorb it?

I'm wondering if Errol Morris has ever hit that point in his investigative or film work when the weirdness became no longer fascinating, just awful. And then what do you do?

Books Bad Copy

Errol Morris - *November 12, 2002* - #32

Do things ever get too weird...? Well, yes.

My glib answer has been: The only thing that makes the world tolerable is that it is unutterably insane...

And to be sure, there is something immensely satisfying about finding out that things are just as bad - or even worse - than one might have thought and that people are not merely weird but they are maliciously insane.

I asked Fred Leuchter - after I had more or less finished my movie with him - to watch it and tell me whether it had changed any of his views about the Holocaust... I also paid him the kindness of telling him in detail why I thought he was hopelessly wrong about everything. (I thought he should hear it from me before the movie came out.)

You know, the whole deal. I told him: your tests have no scientific validity... There is compelling documentation in the Auschwitz archives... Etc., etc., etc.

He responded to all this by reiterating his belief - no poison gas at Auschwitz - and by suggesting an alternative possibility - a thousand electric chairs under Berlin...

So, let me give you a less glib answer...

I think that most of literature is like bad ad copy for mankind. We have this sanitized picture of what we would like to be like... But the reality of who we are is Goddamn depressing...

Cushioning

Lisa Peakes - *November 13, 2002 - #33*

...I'm gathering that you must feel some obligation to "soften the blow" for subjects. Perhaps, in addition to the preparatory kindness in your response to Fred, you also feel a need to change peoples' views where the simple facts of the film fail to do that?

Confessing

Errol Morris - *November 13, 2002 - #34*

You seem to imply that documentary filmmakers should be social workers... That I should be protecting my subjects from themselves, from me, from real or imagined audiences who might look at them critically at some unspecified time in the future.

Well, I have a confession to make: I'm not a social worker nor do I ever want to become one.

When I was speaking about "The Thin Blue Line," shortly after its release, a Dallas journalist asked me if I had "Mirandized" my interview subjects. Yeah. I told them that they had a right to remain silent; they had a right to have an attorney present; and they should know that anything they said could and would be used against them in a court of law... Or public opinion...

OK. No, I didn't.

However, I did point out to this journalist that I was a filmmaker and not a cop, not an agent of the State. And hence, was not required to issue Miranda warnings. When you talk to a journalist (or to another person for that matter) you are taking a risk.

Perhaps before every conversation a warning should be issued. And I don't mean just in journalism. I mean EVERY conversation.

WARNING: I might think ill of you. You might reveal yourself to be a complete idiot. Be on your toes. That's right. Watch out, buster.

Respecting

Anaheed Alani - *November 18, 2002 - #47*

... isn't there some notion of basic respect for people that we can agree is, like, "good"?...I mean giving people the simple dignity of being themselves. No matter how good or bad or stupid or silly or jerkoffy or wonderful they may be.

... doesn't it make stuff better and more interesting when people approach their subjects with some degree of respect? And: I know I'm naive, but leaving out all the highfalutin ideas about responsibility, etc., isn't it just mean to sucker-punch someone just to make your film/piece/whatever better?

Doubting

Errol Morris - *November 18, 2002 - #49*

You asked, "Isn't there some notion of basic respect for people that we can agree is, like, "good"?"

It would be nice to think so, but I doubt it.

I have a great deal of trouble interviewing anyone I don't like. I won't say I have to like them in order to interview them, but it certainly helps...

And - something I get from my mother - I like to think I'm interested in people.

You also wrote, "doesn't it make stuff better and more interesting when people approach their subjects with some degree of respect?"

I think it does, yes.

For me, that means wanting to find out something about people. Wanting to learn about them. But in practice, who knows what really is going on...?

Discreting

Jay Allison - *November 14, 2002* - #35

We had a session at last week's **Third Coast Festival** on "Trespassing" -- documentarians as trespassers...

At the end of the session Lawrence Weschler made the point that our responsibility is DISCRETION, the etymology of which he reduced to "knowing shit from food." This implied that when we're gathering interviews or images or sound that we'll be scooping it all up, shit and food, and that our most potent opportunity for trespassing comes, of course, not when we're on the scene, but later when we're making choices, exercising discretion.

Many of the people in your films are so consumed with their own worlds that I wonder if the trespass/discretion thing or the notion that they are "taking a risk" occurs to them. Do you think it does?

...And Did You Know? Old Film Stock Makes Fabulous Room Dividers

Errol Morris - *November 16, 2002* - #39

You wrote, "At the end of the session Lawrence Weschler made the point that our responsibility is DISCRETION..."

What in God's name was Ren (or you) talking about...?

Don't you know that Shakespeare has been misquoted...?

The correct quotation is: Discretion is the better part of valor.

And, while we're at it, what's so great about discretion? Jay's comment - or whatever it is - seems to suggest that an interviewer is taken into a confidence by the interviewee, a confidence that he is duty bound to keep...?

What...?

Is this so-called discretion supposed to be synonymous with "good taste"? And what might that be...?

In "The Journalist and the Murderer," Janet Malcolm correctly pointed out that there is a power imbalance between a journalist and a subject. But she incorrectly seemed to imagine that that this was particularly true of journalists and their subjects.

Well, I've got a secret. It's true of all relationships.

Sometimes a journalist is more powerful than the subject, sometimes vice versa. It's the same in "real" life. Sometimes "A" is more powerful than "B," and vice versa. Journalistic relationships exhibit certain familiar features - abusiveness, betrayal, smarminess, protectiveness, kindness and so on...

Is this so surprising...?

But I have to vociferously object to the idea that there are limits to what you can show or express. Who decides...?

Martha Stewart...?

What Is Told

Jay Allison - *November 17, 2002 - #41*

I wasn't talking about the "good taste" sort of discretion...

sure, the journalist/subject relationship can have the attributes of any relationship, but ultimate power resides with the journalist. He takes home the tapes. He decides what is told, or not.

In those choices there is responsibility, discretion...Maybe one qualifier here is the kind of work...the straight interview vs. the producer entering the daily lives of the subjects, permitted to trespass over time and in unpredictable ways.

I'm trying to think of a documentary, of Errol's or otherwise, where the interviewee held the power. He has the power -- always counterable by the journalist -- to lie, to charm, to be silent. What other power does he have? Certainly not the power of the last word.

The Complexity of Discretion

Errol Morris - *November 17, 2002 - #42*

Sometimes it is may-the-best-man win.

When Claude Lanzman was interviewing Nazis he surreptitiously recorded them, and then put the material in the film.

Of course, this became controversial. Should he do such a thing...? Is such a thing ethical...?

...After two years of investigating I finally put David Harris on film. (David Harris is the "kid" who I believed was the killer of Dallas Police Officer Robert Wood.)

During the interview, he confessed to the murder. (By the way, parts of the confession did not have an audio counterpart. For example, I asked him the question, "Where you alone in the car when you were stopped by the Dallas police officer...? He smiled and nodded his head.)

Should I use his confession...? Maybe I should be "protecting" him. Is that the nature of our relationship...? He incriminates himself, and I protect him, by keeping it to myself...?

I mention all of this because - and I may be misinterpreting you here - it seems as though you have a guilty conscience about interviewing or reporting. And so, in order to go on with it all, you imagine the following, "Well, I'm a good guy... And I have standards... I know where to draw-the-line... Whatever that line might be... I'm a responsible journalist..."

I also would respectfully submit the following view.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A STRAIGHT INTERVIEW. (Although I would admit there are good and bad interviews.)

Interviews are human relationships in a "laboratory" setting. They allow us to scrutinize the nature of how one person relates to another and vice versa... As such, all the things that are common features of the "ordinary" relationships appear in the interviews - deceit, coyness, misdirection, sincerity, honesty, dishonesty, confusion, etc.

In some instances - I dare say - there is the powerful impulse to protect a subject from himself or to show him in the best possible light. I have a lot of these kinds of impulses. I actually like people to look good, and I attempt - even if I don't succeed - to capture their complexity in the interview and in the film I eventually produce.

But let me provide a couple of definitions of a good interview.

A GOOD INTERVIEW CAPTURES THE COMPLEXITY OF THE SUBJECT.

and

A GOOD INTERVIEW CAPTURES THE COMPLEXITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INTERVIEWER AND THE SUBJECT.

Sometimes it is a matter of "discretion," sometimes it is "let the best man win..." But, it's usually a lot more complex than that.

Responsibility Gets Dizzy

Errol Morris - *November 17, 2002 - #44*

[Jay] wrote, "...sure, the journalist/subject relationship can have the attributes of any relationship, but ultimate power resides with the journalist. He takes home the tapes. He decides what is told, or not..."

It has become fashionable since Janet Malcom wrote "The Journalist and the Murderer" to imagine that the ultimate power in "the journalist/subject relationship" resides with the journalist. But there are many counterexamples.

One, for example -- political reporting that depends on access. The reporter knows that he needs (for his employment, self-esteem, whatever) to have access to certain political figures. He needs to be coy. He needs to be careful. He needs to express the point of view of the people he is covering in ways that will not alienate or antagonize them...

And then there are journalists who are knowingly told lies by their subjects -- that's right, they are manipulated by their subjects -- and then uncritically report these lies as the truth...?

You go on to write, "In those choices there is responsibility, discretion..." Responsibility to whom...? To the public...? To the subject...? To oneself...?

Discretion...?

I would suggest there is a responsibility to the truth...

Perception, Detection, And A Whole Lot Of Eyes

Jay Allison - *November 18, 2002 - #45*

In a may-the-best-man-win dynamic, direct contact makes things clear. If punches are thrown, they're out in the open. We see the contest.

In your interviews and in your Interrotron work, sometimes your voice jumps out from behind the camera -- calling a question, expressing surprise. In those moments we get a clear sense of the interview dynamic... as you said, "the complexity of the relationship." The eye-to-eye contact does that too. And the hot seat is obviously hot. Rules of engagement are clear. The technique addresses these questions of discretion in an open, formal, visually arresting way.

This is different from entering someone's life, over time, tagging along invisibly with a microphone or camera. I think I've seen most of your work, and I can't recall you using this approach...

There may be times a sucker punch is necessary -- when the stakes are high or when the power dynamic is way off: government corruption, hidden criminal behavior, flat out lying -- but it's tricky to control and can undermine the audience's acceptance of the result. Our production tools and the right of final cut are incredibly powerful. If we're any good we can manipulate perception without detection, and we can hide. If we sucker punch, the audience doesn't get a sense of the dynamic in the way they do with the Interrotron, for instance, of who really is the "best man." It's like the part in the film Decasia where the boxer fights with the dissolving film emulsion. Who's in that blur, what punches did he throw, did he fight fair?

Fairness. To correct your impression, I never feel guilty about my own work as a journalist/producer/interviewer; on the contrary I'm proud and happy about it. I am always concerned, however, about being fair. Most of my work is not with the powerful, but with the relatively powerless. You're right that trying to be a "good guy" can obscure goals, and truth. One measure of truth and responsibility and fairness is to imagine playing the finished piece looking into the eyes of the interviewees, but that's not enough. You have to look the audience in the eyes too. If something is true, and it's important, you tell it. That's all.

The Balancing Act

Errol Morris - *November 18, 2002 - #48*

You wrote... "I never feel guilty about my own work as a journalist/producer/ interviewer; on the contrary I'm proud and happy about it..."

Oh, really.

I have a slightly different belief.

It is as follows:

Anybody who says that they have never felt guilty about their own work is either...

- (a) incapable of guilt
- (b) self-deceived

or

- (c) lying.

You also wrote, "There may be times a sucker punch is necessary... but it's tricky to control and can undermine the audience's acceptance of the result."

You are correct in your assessment that often there is a balancing act.

I often ask myself:

Am I manipulating my subject...?

Do I look like I'm manipulating my subject...?

Will I get caught...?

Have I overstated my case in such a way that I, myself, will end up looking bad...?

In fact, this entire email may be an example of just that sort of thing.

But isn't your answer about manipulation. That is, how you can better manipulate your audience and get away with it...?

Slipping Past

bw - *November 19, 2002 - #53*

...in the end...a good interview is one where you don't get 'caught' and its one thing to slip something past the audience - but what about the subject?

I am curious about what happens (and what you do) when a subject becomes aware that he or she is being manipulated or set up -

Slipping Up

Errol Morris - *November 19, 2002 - #54*

What about slipping something past oneself...?

Gitta Sereny wrote an entire book about trying to convince her subject -- Albert Speer -- that he knew about the Holocaust. By the end, she clearly believes that Speer has admitted (to her) that he knew about the Holocaust. But I don't think Speer ever admits anything of the sort -- to Sereny or anyone else, including himself... After all, Speer's "defense" is to admit responsibility for things he claims to know nothing about. It's an idea he developed at Nuremberg and never had occasion to modify.

So, whose self-deception are we talking about here...? Sereny's...? Speer's...? Mine...?

There is the wonderful assumption that we are in control of our relationships with other people - in interview situations or otherwise, that we know what we're doing much of the time and have a clear idea of our motivations and purpose.

It's a wonderful assumption.

It suffers, however, from one minor infirmity.

It's false.

Part, Not Goal

Errol Morris - *November 19, 2002 - #55*

I am disturbed about being misrepresented and misquoted.

A good interview is not about "not getting caught" or "slipping something by past the audience." It is about trying to discover something about another person.

As for manipulation. To say that "manipulation" is part of every relationship is not to say that "manipulation" is the goal of every relationship.

Muscles, Dance Shoes, And The Flow Of Words

Chris Lydon - *November 21, 2002 - #58*

First...Most interviews are power struggles, and many are righteously stacked and blatantly unfair...

Errol makes the key point that a great interview is not one in which the investigator ferrets out the truth. No, the great interview is a dance in which both partners lead and follow; both educate each other; both are revealed, both are changed...

Second, I just rejoice in Errol's saga of transcribing interviews--not looking for the bite, really, but listening for subtleties in vocal sound, puzzling about what's really going on, tuning in on patterns and subtexts, noticing evasions and euphemisms, waiting for the defenses to go down, or for the skeleton to pop out of hiding...It becomes a treasure hunt, in which all the little evidences of accent and pitch and tempo and feeling tell you something! ...

Third...I want to hear more about Robert McNamara. But my question is not about why Errol is doing McNamara. My question is: what is McNamara doing with brother Morris...

Endless Investigation Fascinates

Errol Morris - *November 24, 2002* - #63

You wrote, "Errol makes the key point that a great interview is not one in which the investigator ferrets out the truth..."

I'm not sure I said any of these things. But I do like the part about leading and following...

I have to thank you again for your kindness to me on these pages. In particular, pointing out my obsession with spoken language. Listening, reading, transcribing an interview is properly considered, an investigation. And like most investigations doesn't really have an end.

There is something endlessly fascinating about how people use language... What it reveals... What it hides...

There have been several questions about my McNamara movie. I'm sorry, but I would prefer to wait until the movie is finished to talk about it and/or McNamara.

The Proper Relation of Poop

Lawrence (Ren) Weschler - *November 21, 2002* - #59

... Donald Nicholl, a marvelous English historian...offered the following gloss, that the word "discretio" derives from the Latin, to wit, "dis-excretio," which is to say, "to be able to discern the difference between food and shit," to know, precisely, that shit is something you ought not eat--or serve--and yet to know as well that shit has its uses, worthy uses at that, as in manure, for example. It is all a question of proper relation.

... These issues of course also came up on the occasion of the release of Janet Malcolm's "The Journalist and the Murderer." At the time, the Columbia Journalism Review convened a vast print-conclave on the scandal (see their issue of August 1989), and some of what I wrote then might also be pertinent to this discussion....

Elaborate Theories Spellbind

Lawrence (Ren) Weschler - *November 21, 2002* - #60

CJR Piece, Aug. 1989

... the piece being called "The Journalist and the Murderer"? Well, I was telling someone you could have called the piece *Les Jouissances Meurtrieres—Deadly Pleasures or Murderous Orgasms—*because the rhetorical tone of the piece is straight out of *Les Liaisons Dangereuse* ...

The marquise in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* has all these elaborate theories about the complicated power relationships in love, and she looks down on the ordinary people who think of love as something really quite simple...

The marquise's analysis is spellbinding. But in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* it falls apart the minute real love enters the scene. Janet's thesis is spellbinding, too, and I want to emphasize that I think it's a remarkable piece of writing but it falls apart in the same way. While the dynamic she describes is potential everywhere in journalism, it doesn't inevitably have to materialize. There are journalistic equivalents of love—compassion, engagement, conscience.

...My ideal for a profile is that I want it to be as if you were meeting this person. The highest thing that I aspire to is fairness and transparency. Even when I do a profile of someone I am critical of I aspire to do it so fairly that he or she will say, "Yes, that's me."...

Let's say, for example, that I am describing someone who, as I get to know him, I realize is an alcoholic. I don't think I need to say the guy is an alcoholic. I can portray him in bars, talking about being thirsty, or do other things that will provide a kind of feeling about that but not a label. Later on, if someone says, "God, you know, he's an alcoholic. You didn't say that." I can say, "Well, go back and read the piece, it's in there."

To label is in some cases to betray. Whereas if you show things I think you are being fair.

Crude Device Deceives

Errol Morris - November 24, 2002 - #64

I don't want to get into the business of attacking or defending Janet Malcolm. [Although I must confess I am an admirer. Even a fan. She is the only true Chekovian journalist.]

But I do believe that she has been endlessly criticized because it is assumed she was talking about conscious mendacity, conscious journalistic ill-will.

In such a view, the journalist imagines himself (or we imagine the journalist) to be in control of an interview and can manipulate it to his own advantage.

The point I wish to make. Is that we often have the idea that we are in control of what we're doing when we are not...

Call it self-deception.

Perhaps consciousness, itself, is nothing more than a crude device that allows us to deceive ourselves about our own motivations...

Perhaps that's the only purpose of consciousness.

Ren (as usual) makes the unassailable point that the Marquise does not take love into account...

I would recast this in a different form.

The Marquise fails to realize that despite his own tortured, convoluted explanations ú none of them may be correct.

Ultimately, it may be that our conscious explanations do not take into account the hidden layers of motivation, intention and belief that determine what we do.

We observe at best one percent of ourselves. Maybe zero percent.

I have always wanted to recast the Cartesian cogito... How about, "I think therefore I think I am..."

Allow me to fall back on one of my favorite quotations. It is from the last living member of Zoar, a failed utopian community in Ohio. In her nineties and on her death-bed, she said,

"THINK OF IT... ALL THOSE RELIGIONS... THEY CAN'T ALL BE RIGHT...

(This is where I imagine a death-rattle. She summons up all her strength for one last line...)

...BUT THEY CAN ALL BE WRONG."]

Why do I like this quotation...? Because I believe that we should always entertain the possibility that everything we think is wrong.

Yours analysis presumes that we are completely aware of what is going on... Conscious of what is going on. And can plan accordingly. And you believe that by faithfully recording the nature of the transaction that you avoid falling into a trap. But the best traps are those that we are not even aware of...

Just A Jealous Guy

Robert Krulwich - *November 23, 2002* - #62

Funny, when I watch an Errol Morris movie, I don't brood about who's manipulating whom or how'd Errol get the guy to say that, or is it true or what is truth or any of those things. I just sit there being jealous.

I get this sense (I may be imagining this; I don't know the man, just his work) that Morris loves, really loves, what he's doing. Ferreting into people's heads suits him. And when he gets deep, deep inside and his person begins to undress, I imagine Morris getting happier and happier unbuttoning each button, not just for the 'kill' as so many of these postings suggest, but for the chance to know more, to get, as the poet Paul Celan has written, "all the way to each other." Is Errol a manipulator? Sure.

But is there an excitement, a joy, an athlete's pride being the fox chasing down the hare? There's gotta be, and in Errol's films, the joy trickles out...I can sense it. especially when the hare is a weird tangle of strangeness like Dr. Death or Robert McNamara. With hares like them, who wouldn't want to be the fox? I would.

I don't have the moves, or the patience, or that odd-ball camera thingy that Errol has, but I can sit there and be jealous that he's having such a good time.

Question, Application, Answer

william warner - *November 25, 2002* - #65

I was thinking about the Morris films I've seen, and I started to see them in a bit of a progression, kind of the way Chuck Close uses an image over and over as a way of developing an idea that has nothing to do with the image. Mr. Morris has a way of making a movie and especially a way of interviewing people, and applies it in a rather detached scientific way to different subjects. It's as if Mr. Morris poses a question and applies his technique to produce an answer. "A story of small significance to most of its characters?" - Heaven's Gate. "A story of great significance to its characters?" -- Thin Blue Line. "A story of great significance?" -- Mr. Death...

The Consumer Looks Hunted...

chelsea merz - *December 2, 2002* - #72

How does your perception of the viewer shift when you make films from when you make commercials? Or does it? Does the filmgoer differ from the potential consumer? And if so, how? And if not, why?

A Crazy Kind Of Dialogue

Errol Morris - *December 4, 2002* - #75

I like the question. And I'm not sure this is a simple answer... Although there might be.

How about this...?

Do I look at the viewers of my commercials in some different way than the viewers of my films...?

I'm still thinking about it.

But I don't think I do. I think a viewer is a viewer is a viewer. I think the goal is to create something interesting in the time available -- even if it's only 30 seconds.

I sometimes think of commercials as "American haiku"... Expressing ideas in a very short span of time.

For example, I directed a series of commercials for United Airlines. This was shortly after 9.11... It seemed that task was not about advertising a product but expressing something real about that historical moment...

I could argue that there is no clear line between advertising and anything else, but this is not the point I want to make here.

Simply, I try to do good work. Interesting work. No matter whether it's advertising or anything else. And part of that is not pandering to a client or an audience. But trying to create interesting things... No matter what.

And, yes, I imagine that I am in a crazy kind of dialogue with my viewers.

You Look At You Look...

gasolina - *December 5, 2002* - #77

has the director in you ever interviewed the subject matter in you? in other words, have you ever turned the camera on yourself and done a personal exploration on some theme in your life for a documentary? even as an exercise? ...

Subjected

Jay Allison - *December 5, 2002* - #78

Yes, I turn the mic around sometimes. Not too often, but enough to remind myself what it feels like to be out there. Of course, I'm only subjecting myself to my own authorship, which is quite different from being in someone else's hands...

For instance, last month I did a piece about my marital separation and new house and relationship to my kids (it's the last piece in This American Life show, "Classifieds"). It's personal, my kids' voices are in it. Sure, I have control over what I included, so there's some safety in that, but there is still risk. I tried to be "honest" in what I said, but obviously didn't say everything...

Much of my work demands that others reveal themselves, either to the tape recorders I loan them or when they let me into their lives. Then I put them on stage. Doing it to myself occasionally seems important, like a self-portrait--marking a given time, going on record. I even like doing it. And hate it. And fear it.

Stripping An Oxymoron

Errol Morris - *December 6, 2002 - #82*

I have been interviewed for a number of programs... And, yes, I have tried several times to "interview" myself.

For example, I tried to interview myself for "The Thin Blue Line". I was having trouble editing the movie, and I thought if I introduce myself as one of the characters (after all, I was involved in the investigation), then maybe it could help make sense of the narrative.

It really didn't work. And I ended up stripping it out of the movie...

I tried to pretend as though I was talking to another person... That it wasn't me talking to myself... But it didn't work. Try as hard as I might I was always aware that it was "I" interviewing me...

But, I'm not sure this is what you mean by "interviewing" myself...

OK. There are these various parts of my personality involved in some crazy internal dialogue... But I'm not sure they're interviewing each other. (Is this the difference between a true psychosis and a mere neurosis...? That is, if I really had multiple personality disorder, my personalities would be truly interviewing each other; whereas if I was just neurotic they would be involved in an internal dialogue...?)

But isn't that different from an "interview," as well...?

Isn't "interviewing myself" an oxymoron...?

Doesn't the idea of an interview contain the idea of one person talking to another person...? I think it does.

But there is something else in your remarks that I find really interesting. This idea that people are being put on the spot, that they are taking a risk... I suppose in some sense, yes, every time you talk to another person you are taking a risk. You may be misinterpreted. Your words may be taken out of context... But it is a risk that we all repeatedly take -- as social animals...

An Honest Viewing

gasolina - *December 6, 2002* - #84

...it's my perception that every story you receive from a subject must be a gift... they've opened up to you, and allowed you to "view" the parts of them that are damaged, deranged or wonderful. that's kind of an honor, right?

it is my understanding (because i just googled it) "interview" is derived from the french word, "entrevous." meaning to enter and view. that can be a powerful moment when two strangers come together and an honest viewing takes place.

i sometimes wonder if the character's story is just a reflection of the author's story (in some hidden recess). a shared story. but, of course, the author has the opportunity to reshape her/his contribution in the safe confines of the edit room. reissue it -- and then the story becomes the author's gift, albeit a safer one, to offer others.

in that sense, does the final storytelling reveal more about the author's psych and pathos than the subjects? ...

A Scintilla Of Spontaneity

Viki Merrick - *December 6, 2002* - #85

I'm thinking interviewing oneself is probably bullshit. Because you ALREADY KNOW. ...what you're scared to say, want to say, don't want to say, would or wouldn't say. The view is FROM the INSIDE. That's just a sort of exposing oneself, allowing revealment on one's own pre-determined terms. Altogether different view from the OUTSIDE viewing IN. You can see things a "subject" hasn't thought about in years...

Good interviews, when they're working, contain a scintilla of spontaneity which I don't believe we have..."interviewing ourselves".

Awakening Connectedness

gasolina - *December 7, 2002* - #86

if good interviews contain spontaneity then i'm left wondering why most journalists strip themselves out of that dynamic? why do they choose to write narrative V/O for themselves while leaving their subject in the raw light? ...

...aren't they (journalists) just processing what they view in me (subject) through their own perspective of the world? and aren't i still in control as to what i reveal to them? ...

being latina i have a difficult time buying that "another" can tell my story or my communities because they have "perspective" or "distance."... no one can tell my story no matter how insightful his/her interview questions are. they can only tell their story about me...

...maybe i should say instead, at times take stock of yourself in the form of questions and tell your own story? let your own voice loose once in awhile. embrace its spontaneity and humanness outside of your constructed V/O's. it might be a great awakening in regards to all of our connectedness.

Morris In The Mirror

Errol Morris - *December 8, 2002 - #87*

You asked: Does the final storytelling reveal more about the author's psychology and pathos than the subject's? An important question.

Are interviews just projection and transference...? Do we really see the world, or are we just holding up a mirror to ourselves...?

And if there's something more, where does all that projection and transference end and reality begin. Or if you prefer, where does the "self" end and the "other" begin...?

I'm not sure.

Errol Morris Photo Gallery



Errol outside Crema 1, Auschwitz

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Filming in the Topiary Gardens

Photo: Nubar Alexanian (Taken with BW Infrared Film)



Filming at Birkenau Death Camp, Poland 1998

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Viewing playback of an interview during a break in filming

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Film still from "The Story of Willie Edwards," a TV movie that never aired

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Directing the story of Saul Kent, who froze his mother's head in liquid nitrogen

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Errol being filmed on video monitors for a TV series that never aired

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Directing an actor for "The Story of Willie Edwards," a TV movie that never aired

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Directing a scene for "The Story of Willie Edwards," a TV movie that never aired

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



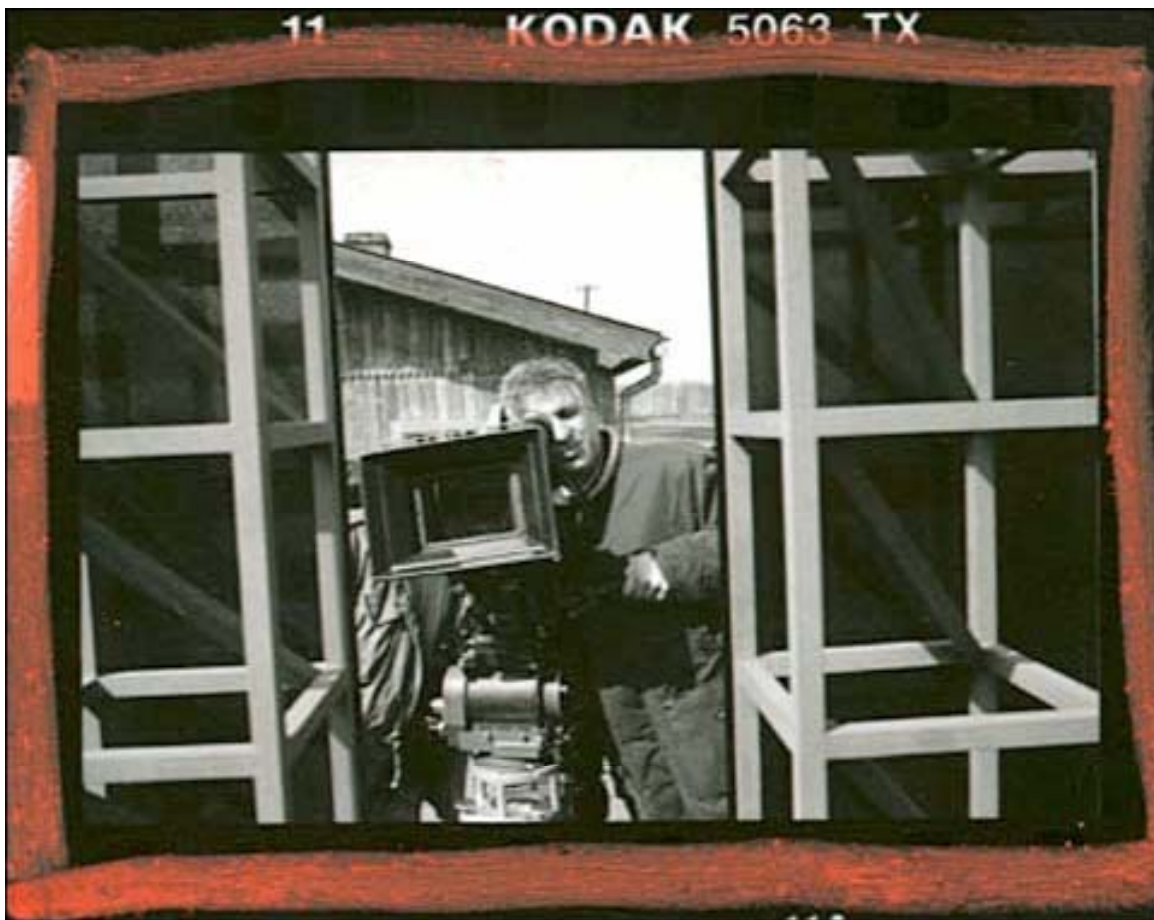
Directing a scene in one of the gas chambers at Birkenau Death Camp, 1998

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Alone in Crematorium 1, Auschwitz, 1998

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Checking a camera position, Birkenau Death Camp, 1998

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Checking a camera position, Birkenau Death Camp, 1998

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



On location at Crematorium 5, Birkenau Death Camp, Poland 1998

Photo: Nubar Alexanian



Film still of the Topiary Gardens at night

Photo: Nubar Alexanian

About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.



Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere - by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

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ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH*-Boston.

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