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# 24 Lies Per Second: an Auteurist Analysis of the Documentary Films of Errol Morris

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## Theoretical Framework

My aim in these pages is to examine the work of Errol Morris, a film, television, and commercial director best known for his feature-length documentaries. For this analysis, I will use the framework of auteur theory, which premises that a director has a personal, creative vision evident across his or her body of work. Though auteur theory often pervades popular film criticism, it has never been a unified doctrine, as it lacks a single progenitor or foundational text.<sup>1</sup> Critics have interpreted (and misinterpreted) the theory in many distinct ways, and it has been irregularly, often only implicitly, extended to the producers and directors of documentary films. Thus, I will begin by laying out my specific approach to the auteur theory, my assumptions in applying this theory to documentary film, and the ways in which I hope this analysis can illuminate Morris's work.

In a 1954 article in the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, François Truffaut coined the phrase "*Politique des Auteurs*". He delineated directors who are auteurs (the French word for author), artists who understand the medium and often write their own scripts, from the lesser *metteurs en scène* who believe their job is only to "add the pictures."<sup>2</sup> Almost all the *Cahiers* critics adopted Truffaut's director-centric perspective to some extent, particularly in their writing

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<sup>1</sup> Wollen, Peter. "The *auteur* theory' (extract)". In *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*. Edited by John Caughie. (New York: Routledge, 1981), 575.

<sup>2</sup> Truffaut, François. "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema." *Cahiers du Cinéma* in English (1954). [http://soma.sbccc.edu/users/DaVega/FILMST\\_113/Filmst113\\_ExFilm\\_Movements/FrenchNewWave/A\\_certain\\_tendency\\_tr%23540A3.pdf](http://soma.sbccc.edu/users/DaVega/FILMST_113/Filmst113_ExFilm_Movements/FrenchNewWave/A_certain_tendency_tr%23540A3.pdf)

about the 1940's Hollywood films that enchanted post-war France. According to *Cahiers* co-founder André Bazin, the general purpose of this auteur approach was to uncover the great artists of the cinema, whose work consistently reflected the "image of their creator."<sup>3</sup>

The auteur concept crossed the Atlantic in less than a decade. In a 1962 article, American critic Andrew Sarris coined the term auteur theory and composed a list of filmmakers he considered auteurs. He included one director known primarily for documentaries: Robert Flaherty.<sup>4</sup> However, Sarris's understanding of the theory lacks a clear explanation of what unifies an auteur's body of work. He ignores the problem of considering a single artist the author of a film (when many others have a hand in shaping it), and he presumes that a critic can decide who is and who is not an auteur with "objective validity."<sup>5</sup> Given the constant critical debates that surround great works of cinema and the unpredictability of what artists will produce, this latter notion seems absurd.

French poststructuralist Michel Foucault, a seminal theorist on the construction of our contemporary notions of authorship, warns that the "aspects of an individual which we designate making him an author are only a projection [...] of the operations we force texts to undergo, the connections we make, the traits we establish as pertinent, the continuities we recognize or the exclusions we

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<sup>3</sup> Bazin, André. "On the *politique de auteurs*." In *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Edited by Jim Hiller. (New York: British Film Institute, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Sarris, Andrew. "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." *Film Culture* 27 (Winter 1962/63), 563.

<sup>5</sup> Same.

practice.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, when we refer to an author, we are actually referring to the characteristics by which we define him as an author. These characteristics are based on a subjective view of texts that bear his name. Thus, it is possible that two people could have a very different understanding about what constitutes an author. Contrary to Sarris’s perspective, conclusions drawn about the body of an auteur’s work belong to the critic; they are not definitive statements about the artist. The ‘Errol Morris’ whose work I analyze is a persona of my own construction based on an interpretation of his work. Therefore, if we recognize the critic is not conducting an objective analysis of the artist, but a subjective analysis of the elements connecting a diverse body of films, it is acceptable in most cases to treat a film as a single, unified text without the impossible task of teasing out the auteur’s exact role in shaping the film. Questions of authorship that are impossible to answer in Sarris’s framework are no longer significant obstructions to analysis in the poststructuralist view that meaning arises at the level of interpretation.

Therefore, I will approach auteur theory from the framework established by theorist Peter Wollen, who incorporates the poststructuralist perspective. Wollen defines the auteurist approach as the attempt to grasp the core motifs in an auteur’s work and to then understand the structure formed by these motifs that both defines the work internally and differentiates it from other works by the

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, Michel. “What is an Author?” In *The Essential Foucault*. Edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose. (New York: The New Press, 2003), 384.

auteur.<sup>7</sup> In this framework, any filmmaker whose work has this semantic dimension of unity may be considered an auteur, and an auteur may (or may not) simultaneously be a *metteur en scène*, whose work has stylistic unity. Two films by the same auteur may appear radically different from one another, but finding thematic unifications allows us to see the similarities and antinomies that define the selected body of work; likewise, two films that appear stylistically similar may have radically different underlying structures.

I make several assumptions about the nature of documentaries in applying the *auteur* label to Errol Morris. First, a documentary is a constructed representation of the historical world. Documentary theorist Bill Nichols argues that a camera is “an anthropomorphic extension of the human sensorium [that] reveals not only the world but its operator’s preoccupations, subjectivity, and values.”<sup>8</sup> The film may be a document, but the choices the artist makes always reveal his or her perspective. I would argue the same applies in editing, recording and mixing sound, lighting, color correcting, and so forth. The use of found or stock footage is a form of intertextuality, and while the footage conveys a particular perspective and signification for which the auteur is not responsible (such as time through older film stocks – though of course, this may be deceptive), the auteur is ultimately responsible for its inclusion. Therefore, the

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<sup>7</sup> Wollen, Peter. “‘The *auteur* theory’ (extract)”. In *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*. Edited by John Caughie. (New York: Routledge, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 79.

representation of reality in a documentary always reveals the perspective of the filmmaker.

Second, some suggest that because of the collaborative nature of documentary production, the main camera operator, sound recordist, and editor have such significant input that the concept of the auteur is irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> For three reasons, this cannot be universally true: first, Morris exerts significant creative control over all elements of his films, from the cinematography, to the editing, to the music, and there are many thematic similarities across his body of work. Secondly, it is important not to confuse a *metteur en scène* with an auteur, so while the stylization in two films by the same auteur may be radically different, they may have underlying structural unity. This is certainly true with Morris; each film has the unique, stylistic imprint of his crew, but his works follow the same essential structural principles. Lastly, in a typical auteurist analysis of narrative films, the critic may label certain films as “indecipherable” because of excess “noise” from others involved with the film’s production.<sup>10</sup> “Noise” refers to significant input from the cameraman, producer, or even the actors that renders the film text in some way unrepresentative of the auteur’s work to the extent that, in the critic’s mind, it is irrelevant to the analysis. Therefore, if the critic deems that including a particular documentary in an auteur’s body of work would

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<sup>9</sup> Glassman, Marc. “Author? Auteur?” *International Documentary Association*.  
<http://www.documentary.org/content/author-auteur>

<sup>10</sup> Wollen, Peter. “The *auteur* theory’ (extract)”. In *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*. Edited by John Caughie. (New York: Routledge, 1981), 575.

mislead the analysis, he or she can similarly dismiss the film from critical evaluation on an individual basis.

My third assumption is that the aesthetics of the documentary allow for the representation of individual subjectivities of the people in the film, which privileges the film to explore areas normally thought to be outside the realm of objective (in the sense of being distanced or detached from an individual's perspective), non-fiction cinema. According to documentary theorist Michael Renov, "Every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier (via choices of language, lens, proximity, and sound environment). The itinerary of a truth's passage is, thus, qualitatively akin to that of fiction."<sup>11</sup> Documentaries, in other words, like fiction films, rely upon aesthetics to tell their story and formulate a kind of truth. That truth may address the narratives, myths, and enchantments that structure our understandings of the world in much the same way that fiction films do. It may engage with and represent the perspective of its subjects not only on historical, political, or social issues, but also (often simultaneously) on deep personal issues as well.

I define Morris as an auteur based on three aspects of his cinema. Consistent with the Wollen framework, I will address each aspect in terms of both the similarities and oppositions that exist within his work. Therefore, in each

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<sup>11</sup> Renov, Michael. "Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction." In *Theorizing Documentary*. Edited by Michael Renov. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 7.

chapter, I will focus my analysis on two of Morris's works, each of which deals with the same motif, but in a significantly different fashion.

First, truth exists in a Morris film, but it is always elusive to individuals. An examination of the social actors searching for that truth may reveal it to be either knowable or unknowable to people generally. A crime, for example, is a knowable truth; the nature of American warfare is unknowable (Chapter III, "The Elusive Nature of Truth"). Secondly, style is no guarantee of truth, but the truth presented is contingent upon the cinematic form. In other words, in order to approach different kinds of truth, Morris explores vastly different possible ways the documentary can be constructed. These ways are often in direct opposition to the dominant stylistic approaches to documentary filmmaking (Chapter IV, "Interrogation of Form"). Lastly, individuals always deceive themselves to be able to deal with the outside world. Whether good or evil, their actions are rooted in the realities they have constructed to cope with their vulnerabilities (Chapter IV, "Self-Deception").

## Biography

Errol Morris was born in Hewlett, Long Island in 1948. Raised by his mother, a music teacher, he received training as a cellist before attending the University of Wisconsin, where he graduated with a degree in history. Morris attempted to enter different graduate schools of philosophy by “showing up at their doorstep” – with some success.<sup>12</sup> After a brief period at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, he found himself at Berkeley. While a student there, he snuck into the Pacific Film Archive screenings and eventually befriended the archives’ director, Tom Luddy, who introduced him to German film luminary Werner Herzog.

At Herzog’s encouragement and (supposed) promise to eat his shoe if Morris completed it, Morris directed his first film, *Gates of Heaven* (1978), a documentary about two California pet cemeteries. The focus of the film, however, is monologues by the subjects who own, run, and use them. The film is a departure from the dominant cinema vérité documentaries of the era. The shots are static, well-lit, and subjects face just off the axis of the lens, where Morris positioned himself during interviews in his early films. The film’s reception was extremely varied; Tom Buckley of the New York Times declared it to be “missing the mediation of an artistic sensibility,”<sup>13</sup> while Roger Ebert wrote that film

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<sup>12</sup> Singer, Mark. “Predilections.” *The New Yorker*. 2 February, 1989.

[http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/singer\\_predilections.html](http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/singer_predilections.html)

<sup>13</sup> Buckley, Tom. “Gates of Heaven: Pets Get Special Cemetery.” *The New York Times*. Movie Review. 19 October, 1980. <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9506E4D61638F93AA25753C1A966948260>

unfolds in such a manner that it becomes “ever so much more complicated and frightening, until at the end it is about such large issues as love, immortality, failure, and the dogged elusiveness of the American Dream.”<sup>14</sup> Ebert listed the film among the “10 Greatest Films of all Time,”<sup>15</sup> and Herzog ceremonially ate his shoe.<sup>16</sup>

Morris’s second feature, *Vernon, Florida*, is stylistically very similar to *Gates*. Morris originally intended to explore the penchant of some of the residents of Vernon, a small town in the Florida panhandle, to cut off their own limbs for insurance money. After receiving death threats, he stopped pursuing that story; instead, the film is a portrait of local eccentrics and their strange passions and beliefs. The following year Morris, low on funds, attempted but failed to find work as a Hollywood narrative director. He ended up as a private detective for several years before beginning his next documentary.

*The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is about the wrongful conviction of Randall Adams, accused of murdering a police officer in Dallas, Texas, while the real murderer was a key witness for the prosecution. Through noir-style vignettes, the film recreates various testimonies of the crime, a technique that became far more popular after the film’s release.<sup>17</sup> The reenactments are exceptional for their

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<sup>14</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Gates of Heaven”. 1 January, 1978. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19780101/REVIEWS/801010303/1023>

<sup>15</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Ten Greatest Films of All Time.” 1 April, 1991. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=%2F19910401%2FCOMMENTARY%2F40308035%2F1023>

<sup>16</sup> *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*. Directed by Les Blank. 1980.

<sup>17</sup> McEnteer, James. “Shooting the Truth: The Rise of American Political Documentaries.” (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 109.

meditative quality: they linger on images that provoke questions about the veracity of the testimony, while never showing the scenario the film implies is true. Two and a half years in production, *The Thin Blue Line* was the first of Morris's films to receive wide theatrical distribution.<sup>18</sup> Because it showed several key witnesses had committed perjury, after its release, Adams was granted a re-trial. The prosecution chose not to pursue the case and Adams, previously serving a life sentence, was freed.

Music has been an integral part of every Morris film since *The Thin Blue Line*, his first to use a non-diegetic score. Working primarily with dark, modernist, repetitive music, the scores have helped build atmosphere and illuminate the lives of his subjects. Two composers in particular stand out as frequent Morris collaborators: Philip Glass and Caleb Sampson.

Born in 1937, Glass is a prolific, modernist composer who has written operas, symphonies, and film scores, the latter of which have garnered him three Academy Award nominations.<sup>19</sup> Despite a contentious relationship with Morris, after *The Thin Blue Line*, Glass scored two more of his films: *A Brief History of Time* (1991) and *The Fog of War* (2003). According to Morris, he continues to use Glass because his music is the best in “existential dread.”<sup>20</sup> Caleb Sampson, a Cambridge-based composer who committed suicide in 1998, similarly wrote in

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<sup>18</sup> Singer, Mark. “Predilections.” *The New Yorker*. 2 February, 1989.

[http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/singer\\_predilections.html](http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/singer_predilections.html)

<sup>19</sup> “Philip Glass Biography.” Dunvagen Music Publishers. <http://www.philipglass.com/bio.php>.

<sup>20</sup> McDonagh, Michael. “Classical Music Review: New Releases”. <http://www.classical-music-review.org/reviews/Fog.html>

the minimalist vein. According to Morris, Sampson was “also an ironist [who brought] together klezmer, Viennese waltzes, techno-pop, and circus music.”<sup>21</sup> His collaborations with Morris include *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.* (1999), *Fast Cheap, & Out of Control* (1997), and the television episode *Stairway to Heaven* (1998). The latter is dedicated to Sampson, a close friend of Morris. Often, the two would enjoy afternoons playing classical chamber music together.<sup>22</sup>

After *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris directed *A Brief History of Time* (1991), a biographical film about theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking. Because he has Lou Gherig’s disease, Hawking is forever wheel chair bound, and he speaks through a computer-synthesized voice, which serves as voice-over to the documentary. In the film, Morris presents Hawking’s condition as integral to understanding his life-long search for a grand theory to explain the origins of the universe. This was the first project Morris worked on that he did not initiate. Stephen Spielberg, an uncredited executive producer, asked Morris to direct the film.<sup>23</sup>

Later that year, Morris directed *A Dark Wind* (1991), his only narrative film to date. Because of creative differences with producer Robert Redford, he was let go before editing. The production was plagued with difficulties, many of

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<sup>21</sup> Peary, Gerald. “Caleb Sampson”. June 1998. <http://www.geraldpeary.com/essays/stuv/sampson.html>

<sup>22</sup> Same

<sup>23</sup> Gourevitch, Philip. “Interviewing the Universe.” *The New York Times Magazine*. 9 August, 1992. [http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/bhot\\_gourevitch.html](http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/bhot_gourevitch.html)

which were related to filming in the Navajo Nation. Morris has said he had “no control over [the film that] emerged.”<sup>24</sup>

*Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997) constitutes a radically different work. Morris weaves together interviews of a topiary gardener, a cognitive scientist, a naked mole rat expert, and a lion trainer with heavily stylized b-roll illustrating their work, their thoughts, and their imagination (or perhaps more accurately, Morris’s thoughts and imagination). The result is a meditative exploration of death, self-presentation, science, and other philosophical quandaries. Critics praised the cinematography by two-time Oscar-winner Robert Richardson (*JFK* and *The Aviator*) and Caleb Sampson’s eerie, poignant score. The film marked Morris’ s first use in a feature-length work of the Interrotron, a modified teleprompter that allows interview subjects to gaze directly into the lens while also looking at the interviewer’s face (the name combines the words “terror” and “interview”).<sup>25</sup> Morris has used his invention on every film since, as well as in much of his commercial work.

*Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter* (1999) probes what led the lonely Fred Leuchter, an unlicensed engineer of execution equipment, to preach at white supremacist conferences worldwide that the Holocaust did not occur. The film embodies Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil concept: nerdy and mousey,

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<sup>24</sup> Ryan, Tom . “Errol Morris”. *Senses of Cinema*. August 2001. <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/16/morris.html>

<sup>25</sup> “Interrotron.” *FLM Magazine*. Winter 2004. <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/eyecontact/interrotron.html>

Leuchter seems absurdly clueless amongst his racist, anti-Semitic company, but holds tremendous faith in his scientific evidence. “What happens” Morris asks, “if you really need to be loved and the only people who will love you are Nazis?”<sup>26</sup> The film approaches Leuchter in such a manner that both the Jewish Anti-Defamation League<sup>27</sup> and the famed Holocaust denier Ernest Zündle (an interview subject in the film) praised *Mr. Death* as an important step forward. Zündle referred to the film as “a true milestone - even with its ethical flaws, [the film is] more than we [Holocaust deniers] have ever dared to hope.”<sup>28</sup>

*The Fog of War* (2003) is, in some respect, a thematic continuation of *Mr. Death*: it gives a human face to evil and reveals history through the lens of a single man. While *Mr. Death* was originally edited with only Fred Leuchter speaking - the other voices in the film were added later so the film would not be seen as complicit in holocaust denial – the *Fog of War* has only one interview subject.<sup>29</sup> Here, the film focuses on three central points in Robert McNamara’s political life: his involvement with the firebombing of Tokyo in World War II, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Vietnam War. The film probes how a supposedly brilliant man and liberal-minded thinker could be responsible for such terrible, destructive conflicts – is he a war criminal himself, or only complicit in a system

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<sup>26</sup> Singer, Mark. “Predilections.” *The New Yorker*. 2 February, 1989. [http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/singer\\_predilections.html](http://www.errolmorris.com/content/profile/singer_predilections.html)

<sup>27</sup> “Errol Morris’s ‘Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.’” *Anti-Defamation League*. January 2000. [http://www.adl.org/issue\\_holocaust/leuchter\\_film.asp](http://www.adl.org/issue_holocaust/leuchter_film.asp)

<sup>28</sup> Zündel, Ernst. “Fred Leuchter on the Silver Screen.” <http://www.vho.org/aaargh/engl/filmleuchter.html>

<sup>29</sup> Ryan, Tom . “Errol Morris”. *Senses of Cinema*. August 2001. <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/16/morris.html>

that condones atrocity? Former New York Times film critic Frank Rich aptly describes the film's dramatic trajectory: "We see that it is the man's vanity, his narcissistic overestimation of his own 'skill set' (to use current C.E.O. lingo), that leads him [...] inexorably heading toward disaster, in his case taking a country with him, and we are powerless to stop it."<sup>30</sup> *The Fog of War* earned Morris an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature – at his acceptance speech, he established a parallel to the conflict in Iraq, referring to the war as a "rabbit hole" America was once again descending into.<sup>31</sup>

*The Fog of War* differs from Morris's earlier films by its use of ironic visualizations of ideas, such as dominos falling across a map of south of Southeast Asia. It is also the feature film debut of the Megatron, a modified Interrotron that can contain a theoretically infinite number of additional, smaller "lipstick" cameras.<sup>32</sup> Thanks to a complex system of two-way mirrors, the subject still appears to be looking directly into the lens on all of them. Therefore, Morris can film an interview from a variety of angles and image sizes without the viewer noticing he has switched to a different camera.

Morris stayed in the realm of contemporary political concerns with *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008). Here, he interviews the people behind

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<sup>30</sup> Rich, Frank. "Oldest Living Whiz Kid Tells All." *The New York Times*. 25 January, 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/25/movies/oldest-living-whiz-kid-tells-all.html?pagewanted=5&src=pm>

<sup>31</sup> Morris, Errol. "The Fog of War: Academy Award Acceptance Speech". [http://www.errolmorris.com/film/fow\\_speech.html](http://www.errolmorris.com/film/fow_speech.html)

<sup>32</sup> Pantinga, Carl. "The Philosophy of Errol Morris: Ten Lessons." In *Three Documentary Filmmakers: Errol Morris, Ross McElwee, Jean Rouch*. Edited by William Rothman. (Albany, NY: SUNY Albany Press, 2009), 53.

the notorious photographs taken at the Abu Ghraib prison. With a haunting score by Danny Elfman, the film questions whether the photographs were documenting aberrant behavior or systematic abuse, and probes the way photographic evidence is received by the media. It shows that the photographs served as both evidence of prisoner abuse and a coverup of other abuses, because people believed the images revealed all there was to see.

His most recent film, *Tabloid* (2011), moves away from explicitly political concerns, but continues with a theme present in his work since *The Thin Blue Line*: media filtration of reality. The film is a comical exploration of tabloid sensationalism through the life of Joyce McKinney, a former Miss Wyoming who supposedly kidnapped a Mormon man and forced him to have sex with her against his will; as of this writing, the film has not been released.

Morris has produced and directed two half-hour documentary television series, *Interrotron Stories*, a mini-series in 1995, and *First Person*, in 2001. Both deal with the same quirky, gothic subjects and thematic concerns as his features. Morris also works as a commercial director, with several award-winning ad campaigns to his name; often, these involve interviews conducted with an Interrotron. He has intermittently directed documentary shorts for a variety of institutions, including Stand Up to Cancer, IBM, and most famously, the opening film for the Academy Awards in 2002 and 2007. The former, in which he interviews celebrities, politicians and ordinary people speaking passionately

about their favorite films and characters, was nominated for an Emmy. More recently, he has been working an essayist for *The New York Times*, writing primarily on the concept of truth in photography.

My analysis will focus on his documentary features and television series, using examples from some of his best-known works. These include *Gate of Heaven*; *The Thin Blue Line*; *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*; *Mr. Death*; *The Fog of War*; and the 1998 television episode *Stairway to Heaven*. As Morris was unhappy with the result of his one completed narrative effort, *A Dark Wind*, I will exclude this film. Additionally, the formal features of his works being central to my analysis, it would be too great a leap to include his written essays.

Lastly, I will exclude his commercials and short films from my analysis, though they often have similar thematic and stylistic as his documentaries. However, partially due to their length, but also because their ultimate function is always as promotional material, they do not contain the same underlying structures by which I define Morris as an *auteur*. Morris himself considers directing them a radically different effort from directing his longer documentary works.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cunningham, Megan. "Errol Morris: Revealing unexpected realities." *Motion Design Center*. 2006. <http://www.adobe.com/designcenter/dialogbox/errolmorris>.

## Elusive Nature of Truth

Bill Nichols, in his attempt to define the documentary, finds that a non-fiction film “invites our engagement with the construction of an argument, directed toward the historical world.”<sup>34</sup> It presents history as a stable, knowable narrative, and often uses discourses of objectivity (the presentation of truth as independent of individual judgment) to satisfy our desire for knowledge. Rarely does the documentary, in Nichols's conception, attempt to enter the subjective perspective of the people it represents with the same intensity as the fictional film – this risks drawing attention to the cinematic representation, and away from the logic of the argument or story.

Errol Morris's films, however, differ significantly from Nichols's vision. Morris considers the alignment of documentary with the discourses of objectivity to be a product of the cultural and institutional reification of non-fiction film as a branch of journalism, which does not account for the many possibilities of the form.<sup>35</sup> His films ignore the subjective/objective dichotomy that Nichols imagines separating fiction and non-fiction cinema. “Movies are movies,” says Morris.<sup>36</sup> In other words, if audiences understand cinematic stories similarly regardless of their relation to reality, then there is no reason a non-fiction film cannot engage

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<sup>34</sup> Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 118.

<sup>35</sup> Huges, James. “The Eleven-Minute Psychiatrist: The Stop Smiling Interview of Errol Morris.” March 2006. <http://errolmorris.com/content/interview/stopsmiling0306.html>

<sup>36</sup> Jaffe, Ira. “Errol Morris's Forms of Control.” In *Three Documentary Filmmakers: Errol Morris, Ross McElwee, Jean Rouch*. Edited by William Rothman. (Albany, NY: SUNY Albany Press, 2009), 42.

deeply in the subjectivity of the people it represents. In a Morris film, there is no risk subjectivity will distract from the story, because the story itself lies in the examination and illustration of those subjectivities.

Like many documentaries, a Morris film revolves around a central historical question, place, event or idea. But rather than using his subjects to directly support a fixed historical argument about the film's unifying theme, Morris probes their subjectivities. As they attempt to reconcile their inner traumas with the outside world, his subjects search for (or believe they have found) a truth through which they may understand reality. Their search for the nature of this truth is consistently the object of Morris's cinematic investigation.

In *Gates of Heaven*, for example, we see how Floyd McClure's search for meaning in the death of his dog prompts him to start a pet cemetery business. He believes it would be unjust for pet owners not to give their animal companions a proper burial. Thus, to cope with his loneliness, he constructs a particular truth about the nature of a pet's life, and he takes the action this truth requires in the world. Therefore, rather than forming an argument through the discourses of objectivity, a portrait of history emerges by an examination of the subjectivity of the social actors involved in the search for an elusive truth.

*The Thin Blue Line* is a useful example to illuminate the status of truth in Morris's work. In one sense, *The Thin Blue Line* stands apart from his other films for the straightforward singularity of its historical argument. Randall Adams, at

the time serving a life sentence for the murder of police officer Robert Wood, is innocent and David Harris, a key witness for the prosecution, is guilty. But the method through which Morris supports this thesis reveals the film's unification with his body of work. It is only by exposing contradictions, underlying interests, and irrationality that Morris builds a portrait of the failure of the Dallas justice system.

*The Thin Blue Line* is also a useful example because it is different – it shows how the Morris film is not simply an excursion into the life-worlds of his subjects, but a critique or examination of some element of contemporary life. In this case, by revealing that five witnesses had committed perjury, *The Thin Blue Line* led to Adam's release from prison. Thus, the film shows the ways truth is elusive (who killed Robert Wood?), reality is constructed (Randall Adams is convicted), and the present can be re-imagined (Adams is proven innocent) by an interrogation of the conflicting narratives that led to the contemporary situation. Morris's other films follow a similar pattern, but none of them has had as concrete or public an impact as *The Thin Blue Line*'s upending of a criminal conviction.

Fredric Jameson is a Marxist cultural theorist who writes about art in the postmodern era; his concepts are applicable to connect Morris's cinematic choices in *The Thin Blue Line* to broader concepts on truth. In his seminal essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Jameson argues that

in the contemporary, late capitalist era, our connection to history has been greatly weakened. Images have lost an authentic connection to their referents; thus we understand the past through texts and aesthetic styles that evoke nostalgia for an imaginary past.<sup>37</sup> There are the two points I will address upon which *The Thin Blue Line* is in accordance with Jameson's vision of late capitalism's relationship to history: (1) the status of images and (2) the role of text. As I will show, Morris uses both images and text to investigate the ways the reality of Wood's murder proved elusive and a lie was constructed.

Outside of interviews, images in *The Thin Blue Line* rarely have an indexical relationship to reality. Rather, Morris primarily uses reenactments to illustrate various inaccurate testimonies. As we never see the one scenario the film implies is true (Harris killing Wood), these staged vignettes are all ultimately fantasies. Through them, we enter the subjectivity of the witnesses and investigators, allowing us to contemplate the disparities among them and the limited perspective of each account. In one sequence, for instance, Morris probes whether Theresa Turko, Wood's partner on the night of the murder, had followed procedure and stood in front of the squad car, or was waiting in the passenger's seat. First, we see an investigators' account of the crime: following the murder (committed by an actor playing Adams) Turko runs behind the car and discharges her pistol into a fleeing vehicle. According to the investigator, Turko

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<sup>37</sup> Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 1, no. 146 (1984).

was supposed to follow procedure by immediately calling a hospital on the police radio. We then see an untouched radio in the car: the reenactment of the investigator's account thus follows the details that ought to have been important had she followed procedure, rather than the action as it unfolded in the actual event. The reenactment reveals the limitations of his vision: he can only see what transpired insofar as the events followed his conception of how things ought to have occurred.

Next, we see an extreme close-up of a picture of Turko from a newspaper. The extreme close-up on a face or eyes is a trope repeated throughout *The Thin Blue Line* and most subsequent Morris films to indicate the narrative is entering someone's subjectivity. Then, there is a zoom in on a photograph of blood in the street, supposedly Wood's, over voice-over from the investigator about how Turko was so shocked about the murder, she failed to perform her duty. The photograph, representing Turko's perspective, appears a more 'authentic' image than the high-quality reenactments, but like Turko's account, it offers no hint of what she saw of the murder – rather, it indicates her horror at what occurred, and the limits of her vision. Even though she was present at the scene of the crime, she was overwhelmed by the event and therefore failed to obtain information the police desired. Ultimately, neither image (radio nor blood) offers us passage to the truth; despite differing degrees of separation from the actual crime, both perspectives are limited in their ability to reveal reality.

Images in *The Thin Blue Line* are also a way of revealing people's enchantments. For instance, the first time we see Emily Miller, a key witness for the prosecution in the Adams trial, she talks about her attraction to detective films, and how she wanted to be a detective herself. Morris overlays this with footage from a classic police drama, *Boston Blackie*. The music takes on a lighter, almost bouncy quality. Similarly, when we first meet Adams' trial judge, Don Metcalfe, his description of the difficulties police officers face is cut with footage from a 1945 gangster film depicting a gunfight with law enforcement officials. The implication is that Miller and Metcalfe sees themselves as crucial players in a heroic, justice narrative, and their participation in this fantasy is more important to them than whether or not Adams committed the murder. Consistent with Jameson's argument, history is commodified through the imagistic productions of mass-culture (the police drama and gangster film) that evoke an idealized past. Hoping to associate with this idyllic justice narrative therefore limits Morris's subjects' ability to understand actual history.

Similarly, the stylization of the false reenactments of Wood's murder alludes to the way cinema mediates our understanding of crime. Morris, a *film noir* buff, shoots these scenes with high contrast lighting, significant backlight, and long shadows in the style of 1940's American crime films.<sup>38</sup> These reenactments reflect the perspective of those witnesses and law-enforcement

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<sup>38</sup> Morris, Errol. "Berkley School of Journalism Commencement." Lecture. <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/lecture/berkeley.html>

officials, such as Emily Miller and Don Metcalf, who attempt to make sense of the world in accordance with a fantastical image of criminal justice. Because mass culture plays a role in the way his subjects recall or imagine events, Morris implies that inauthentic images shape the way they view the real world.

But when images recede, and we examine the ways truth is mediated, we can begin to understand the nature of reality. In the final sequence of *The Thin Blue Line*, we hear Morris's voice questioning David Harris. But instead of Harris, we see a variety of angles on an Olympus recorder; as the interview proceeds, the camera moves closer and closer to the device (during this interview, Morris's camera broke, and he was forced to use a portable tape recorder).<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Harris moves closer and closer to a confession, seeming more honest and self-reflective than at any other point in the film. Feeling distanced from the murder, he probes his past subjectivity. Morris asks, "Were you surprised that the police blamed [Adams for the murder]?" Harris replies, "They didn't blame him. I did. Scared sixteen-year-old kid. He sure would like to get out of it if he can."<sup>40</sup>

Adopting the third person, Harris becomes a spectator of his own deeds; seeing only the tape recorder underscores his removal from the events. The sequence suggests that if we leave aside the images that sway our experience of the world, and pay close attention to the ways in which the process of memory is mediated (for Harris, it was initially mediated by the police; now it is mediated by

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<sup>39</sup> Curry, Renée R. "Errol Morris' Construction of Innocence in 'The Thin Blue Line.'" *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 49.2 (1995), 155.

<sup>40</sup> *The Thin Blue Line*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1988.

Morris's recording device), we can begin to understand history.

In addition to images in *The Thin Blue Line*, texts (or more broadly, documents) reflect a subjective vision of history. They do not serve directly as evidence for an argument. In one sequence about Turko's court testimony, for instance, newspapers effectively limit access to truth. Beginning on an extreme close-up of the headline "Death scene described by officer," Adams explains how Turko's testimony changed radically from her initial account to what she gave at trial. Next, we see single-word details from a newspaper article on her trial testimony. These extreme close-ups parallel the manner in which the text only allows us access to a narrow, filtered version of her memory. This version, which initially entered the historical record, is the one that conformed to the needs of the prosecution. Newspaper headlines were sensationalized selections of the police's version of events.

Similarly, when an investigator describes extracting the license plate number of the fleeing vehicle from Turko, we first see a photo reenactment of what the investigator now knows to have been the correct plate number (beginning with the letters "JN"), followed by a line in a newspaper describing the incorrect plate number (beginning with the letters "HC"). Morris then cuts to an extreme close-up on the letter "HC" in the newspaper. Once it was printed, Turko's faulty memory was unquestionable seen as truth; we learn that people throughout Texas began searching for a blue Vega with the license plate "HC."

Therefore, Morris's camera move closer to the newspaper parallels the extreme selectivity of the paper's vision of the past, and it focuses us upon the text as a means of truth production.

The construction and reception of one document in particular, Adam's initial statement of what happened that fateful night, further reveals the limitations of textual evidence. In voice-over, Adams describes how a stenographer wrote his testimony, then left the room to type it up. We see these moments re-enacted: the camera slowly zooms close to a pen writing in shorthand on a pad of paper, then shots progress closer and closer to words as they are written on typewriter. The camera focuses on selections such as "I do not remember anything" and X's for where the statement ends. The sounds of tapping keys echo in the soundtrack. Next, we learn from investigators they consider this a confession; in their view, Adams' vivid memory of everything but the ten minutes during which the murder took place is only a "convenient memory lapse."<sup>41</sup> In this case, regardless of whether the text records accurate history, it is contextualized by the police's vision of events. Select details, such as Adam's inability to recall those ten minutes, provoke questions but provide in themselves no passage to truth. But when the police read the text as a confession, they eliminates possible alternate histories the document could illuminate, including the correct one.

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<sup>41</sup> *The Thin Blue Line*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1988.

Even the police are challenged by the text's restricted access to truth: "We couldn't have," one of the officers recalls "made a case of his confession, we had to rely upon witnesses" – over these words, we see an extreme close-up of the "X" key on the typewriter.<sup>42</sup> Once again, we are confronted with the limitation of the apparatus to produce only a select representation of history. The text reveals a perspective, but it proved to be a means of evading, rather than uncovering, an accurate depiction of events.

Therefore, Morris concurs with Jameson that images and text offer no direct route to authentic history – they enchant us and deceive us with their truth-potential, but can only reflect the conflicting narratives that structure our understanding of life. This tension between authentic history and our imagistic reproductions of it is a central opposition within not only *The Thin Blue Line*, but all of Morris's work. However, Morris is not quite as hopeless as Jameson, as he finds the narratives that create history ultimately reside within people. A hermeneutic examination of these narratives through interviews can lead us to understand how the past unfolded. In other words, the past is not, as Jameson believes, entirely erased when it is reproduced stylistically, but these reproductions reflect only a subjective vision of the past.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, an objective truth exists in Morris's cinema, it simply elides our

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<sup>42</sup> *The Thin Blue Line*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 1, no. 146 (1984).

grasp most of the time.<sup>44</sup> Morris has referred to himself as an “anti-postmodern postmodernist”<sup>45</sup> – while he associates with philosophical realism, believing the world exists independent of our knowledge of it, reality is often unknowable to people, who are locked into their subjectivities.<sup>46</sup> The only way to understand truth and to begin to intervene in its construction (changing, in some manner, our orientation towards the world) is to understand how people search for it and why it is, more often than not, outside our grasp.

Like *The Thin Blue Line*, *The Fog of War* examines the personal narrative in order to understand how history unfolded. But *The Fog of War* takes this concept of probing the past through subjectivity to its logical extreme: a single person’s perspective on history. The film revolves around eleven lessons Morris draws from the political life of Robert McNamara, the film’s only voice. Morris frames these lessons as though they arise from McNamara’s subjective reflections on history (Though McNamara disagreed with the choice of lessons, and he issued his own eleven lessons on the DVD extras, oriented more specifically towards foreign policy).<sup>47</sup> However, the lessons are elusive: “There’s something beyond oneself” and “Never say never” are two examples. Does the final lesson,

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<sup>44</sup> Morris, Errol. “There Is Such a Thing as Truth.” All Things Considered. *NPR*, May 2, 2005. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4620511>.

<sup>45</sup> Morris, Errol. “The Anti-Post-Modern Post-Modernist.” Harvard University. <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/lecture/theantipost.html>

<sup>46</sup> Pantinga, Carl. “The Philosophy of Errol Morris: Ten Lessons.” In *Three Documentary Filmmakers: Errol Morris, Ross McElwee, Jean Rouch*. Edited by William Rothman. (Albany, NY: SUNY Albany Press, 2009), 47

<sup>47</sup> Ryan, Tom. “Making History: Errol Morris, Robert McNamara and *The Fog of War*.” April 2004. [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/31/errol\\_morris\\_interview](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/31/errol_morris_interview)

“You can’t change human nature” negate all the others?<sup>48</sup> In this way, the film is quite different from *The Thin Blue Line*: the truth it explores, the nature of American warfare, is ultimately unknowable to a single man. Therefore, the lessons of *The Fog of War* are unstable and ironic because McNamara’s life does not reveal the correct way to approach warfare. Despite being a political authority, he was often insecure and uncertain about the wars he helped fight. The film does, however, illuminate that he is locked into his subjectivity; though McNamara was close to history, his voice is in no way an objective arbiter on the historical record.

I examined *The Thin Blue Line* through subjective textual and imagistic representations. The status of these representations is similar in *The Fog of War*: they lack an authentic connection to history. Though *The Fog of War* uses stock footage far more frequently than *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris often modifies this footage to more explicitly represent Robert McNamara’s subjectivity; thus, Morris shows us how even images with an indexical relationship to reality reveal only a particular, limited perspective of an event. Like the reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line*, this footage is ultimately an illusionistic reproduction of reality. But instead of text and images, I will focus my analysis of *The Fog of War* on the way in which Morris presents McNamara’s authority – how, in other words, can truth be elusive and ultimately unknowable without presenting McNamara as a

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<sup>48</sup> *The Fog of War*. Directed by Errol Morris. 2003.

'liar' whose account we cannot trust or relate to? I focus on authority because Morris cannot rely upon the same interplay of conflicting testimonies that he does to help undermine authority in *The Thin Blue Line*.

Ultimately, McNamara, like all Morris's subjects, is an authority on his own subjectivity; he is only narrating his own perspective. In other words, Morris's camera is conducting a hermeneutical examination of the way McNamara sees the world, representing his worldview not for the purpose of presenting it as 'true' or 'false', but to show how he is stuck in a particular mindset. To develop this subjectivity within the film Morris (1) prefigures the performative elements of McNamara, (2) represents famous events only in the context of the way McNamara sees them, and (3) shows literal representations of historical ideas to demonstrate the manner in which McNamara views his role in history.

First, Robert McNamara is a politician; therefore, he is a performer. He had given many interviews in his life before *The Fog of War* and, as he describes in the movie, was well-versed in evading questions. The "Robert McNamara" we normally see on television is a constructed identity. Thus, to begin to access his subjectivity, Morris shows us ways in which McNamara is constantly performing. For instance, in the opening of the film, we see McNamara giving a press conference in the 1960's. He asks the audience if a map of Vietnam is high enough for them, then turns to ask whether the television cameras are ready.

Before anyone answers, Morris cuts to black and Philip Glass's music begins. This suggests Morris has wrested control of McNamara's representation away from him. McNamara's authority on issues such as the Vietnam War is not immediately significant. Rather, what is important is that McNamara will attempt to ensure his vision is properly represented. Therefore, Morris initially focuses us on the manner in which McNamara presents himself physically and linguistically, rather than the content of his arguments.

After a montage of naval officers preparing for war at sea, we see a much older McNamara in Morris's studio, asking whether Morris is ready. We hear Morris's voice respond with frustrated affirmation. McNamara declares he will finish the sentence he left off on because he had been cut off in the middle. Morris cuts to black for a moment, then returns to McNamara telling Morris he can "fix it up some way."<sup>49</sup> By not "fixing it", Morris is fighting the persona McNamara wants to present, drawing attention both to the ways in which McNamara sees himself as a performer and to the ways Morris is manipulating his performance. Therefore, by showing us these elements outside of his act, Morris implies he will present a more honest version of McNamara than we have seen in the past.

McNamara then offers a surprisingly earnest proclamation for a politician: he tells us that any honest military commander has killed people unnecessarily. A

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<sup>49</sup> *The Fog of War*. Directed by Errol Morris. 2003.

commander may have killed hundreds of thousands of people, but with nuclear weapons there is no room for mistakes – one wrong move, McNamara warns, and he will destroy nations. Having turned our attention to the ways in which the McNamara is constantly constructing his television persona, Morris has focused our attention upon his presentation and language. For example, listening to McNamara’s statement, one might consider: what really is the difference between killing hundreds of thousands of people and destroying a nation? Why is McNamara so invested in the idea of the nation? Though we may see him as honest, Morris asks that we simultaneously consider how McNamara’s performance reveals his subjectivity.

In one sequence, Morris asks McNamara how all the protests of the Vietnam War affected his thinking. Never cutting away from McNamara’s face, we see him evade the question (“It was a very tense period”), then when Morris rephrases it more broadly (“How was your thinking changing during this time?”) McNamara declares his thinking was not changing because he saw the Vietnam War as an integral part of the Cold War.<sup>50</sup> Suddenly the footage slows down, and Morris cuts to an old picture of McNamara as Secretary of Defense with a similar expression on his face. Urgent music begins, and Morris quickly cuts amongst extreme close-ups of words criticizing McNamara. “Dictator”, “McNamara’s War”, and “Fascist” flash on the screen.

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<sup>50</sup> *The Fog of War*. Directed by Errol Morris. 2003.

The cut between McNamara's similar expressions links the past and present; therefore, the much-criticized McNamara who may have orchestrated the Vietnam war is the same one we see before us – only now we see the man behind the performance, the vulnerability and hesitations virtually invisible in McNamara's public face in the 1960's. By contrast to the quick, extreme close-ups on insults that reveal the people's limited ability to understand McNamara, the long take in Morris's interview allows us to witness his insecurity. Rather than the authoritative, selfish man of detractors' imagination, we see McNamara as a man struggling to account for his role in history. Therefore, by witnessing the manner in which he is performing/evading the question, Morris makes us feel closer to McNamara's inner mental landscape. Performance, in other words, is an integral part of McNamara's subjectivity.

Secondly, in order to present the film as a representation of McNamara's subjectivity, Morris limits the illustration of famous historical events to the manner in which McNamara sees them. For instance, in spite of the plethora of historical footage and images that exist documenting the JFK assassination, Morris shows us only a single shot: President Kennedy sitting motionless at his desk, presumably before a speech. During this shot, McNamara describes where he was at the time of the death; afterwards, he tells a moving story in extreme close-up about how he choose the spot where President Kennedy is buried, then found out the deceased President had, a week earlier, named that same spot the

most beautiful place in Washington. The story may be true or false, but it reveals an important aspect of McNamara: he sees his life and views as inextricably connected with Kennedy's. Perhaps we do not see any visual documentation of Kennedy's death because to McNamara, Kennedy never truly died – he continues to live on within McNamara. McNamara will later claim, for example, that he opposed Johnson's views on Vietnam, and that if Kennedy had been president, the situation in Southeast Asia would have been radically different.

Similarly, when Morris introduces us to McNamara's role in the firebombing of Tokyo, the images unfold in a manner according to his narrow vision of events. "In that single night," McNamara shouts at the camera, "we burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo, men, women, and children."<sup>51</sup> Morris shows us a single, dark shot of a city burning up. The horror and aftermath have not entered McNamara's psyche, only the knowledge of the event and the urgency of winning the war. The song under the film's opening montage of naval officers preparing their weapons returns in this sequence. McNamara's mindset during the bombing was that of a soldier, fighting to win the war. Concerns about human rights did not enter the picture.

McNamara then tells Morris that, as a statistician during the war, he was a part of a mechanism that recommended the bombing. Morris shows us charts with blue numbers listing the success of various bombing missions, then cuts to a

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<sup>51</sup> *The Fog of War*. Directed by Errol Morris. 2003.

computer-generated graphic of blue numbers falling from the sky onto a map of Japan. This image mimics footage taken from bomber planes. Therefore, we visually experience (what Morris sees as) McNamara's view of his role in the event. We do not experience the event as a tragedy; rather, we are with McNamara fighting in World War II, figuratively destroying Tokyo. Through this sequence, we are privileged to McNamara's hyper-rational, statistical perspective on warfare. He remains unapologetic about the horror he has inflicted, as he maintains that hindsight is 20/20. At the time, he believed he was serving a greater cause.

Finally, at several points in the film Morris relies upon expressionistic images, such as the falling blue numbers, to craft literal representations of McNamara's worldview. Such is my final point on *The Fog of War*: by concretely portraying abstract ideas, Morris posits that these intangible concepts parallel McNamara's actual perspective. For example, when discussing the horrific consequences of war, we see a slow motion shot of people walking through a busy street with a fast motion shot layered atop it. The effect is a feeling that we are observing the totality of the rush of everyday life. This image occurs three times in three different contemporary locations: in New York after the film covers the Cuban Missile Crisis, in Tokyo in reference to the aftermath of World War II, and in Saigon after a discussion of the Vietnam War. Each image conveys a sense that war occurs in a realm outside the visibility of people in everyday life. They

express the incomprehensibility of the scope of the tragedy of war, and reflect McNamara's concern that we live each day without regard to the horrible violence that did or could potentially occur in any place around the world in a post-nuclear era.

A frequently noted image in reviews of *The Fog of War* is Morris's visualization of the "domino theory," the idea that if one country fell under the influence of communism, other countries in the region would follow in suit. The US government, particularly during the 1950's, promoted this idea to justify American intervention/imperialism around the world. Therefore, to introduce us to the topic of Vietnam, Morris reveals an enormous map with dominos falling down on it from Russia to Southeast Asia. The camera slowly descends onto the map, while the sounds of dominos falling rumble like an advancing tank. This parallels the similarly abstract manner in which McNamara was first introduced to the region: in the context of the cold war. He knows Vietnam only in terms of the disembodied historical forces that are significant to the power game between the Soviet Union, China, and the United States.

The next time we return to this image, McNamara is describing the decision to invade North Vietnam. He claims he and Johnson had a "mindset" that made them believe the North Vietnamese were determined to stop at nothing to conquer the south.<sup>52</sup> Over these words, we see the dominos upright, as

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<sup>52</sup> *The Fog of War*. Directed by Errol Morris. 2003.

the camera tilts up and down over extreme close-ups of the glimmering, white rectangles. Then McNamara admits he was wrong, and acknowledges there were terrible consequences: the dominos begin to fall again, the final piece landing right on Saigon. The image has now acquired multiple meanings. First, falling dominos reflect that manner in which McNamara believes the war played out. The more military operations failed, the more America grew mired in the conflict. Secondly, the image reflects how American objectives failed, with the country ultimately turning towards communism. And lastly, it mirrors McNamara's distanced perspective on the events in Vietnam, as he is unable to truly engage with the human consequences of his actions. Therefore, through this visualization, Morris interprets McNamara's subjective engagement with the Cold War, and the manner in which he took this abstract, since-discredited theory quite seriously.

Alexander Cockburn, editorial columnist for the nation, once referred to *The Fog of War* as *The Fog of Cop-Out*, criticizing Morris for letting McNamara spin a self-serving and deceitful account of history.<sup>53</sup> This is an interesting interpretation: after all, if Morris is representing McNamara's subjectivity, is he not allowing McNamara to 'spin history' in the way he wants to see it? If one reads *The Fog of War* only for its possible contributions to an objective historical record, perhaps this is the case. But Morris goes far deeper than McNamara's

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<sup>53</sup> Cockburn, Alexander. "The Fog of Cop-Out." *Counterpunch*. 24 January, 2004. <http://www.counterpunch.org/cockburn01242004.html>

historical knowledge. By showing how he is a political performer with a limited ability to understand events or emotions beyond his own narrow subjectivity, Morris critiques the idea of infallible political leaders singularly knowledgeable about world events or solely responsible for national decisions. Our leaders are vulnerable and caught up in the minutia of human drama like all of us, albeit the consequences of their blindness are far greater. *The Fog of War* therefore recalls Greek tragedies, whose tragic heroes were blinded by their hubris (pride that leads to a terrible wrongdoing). The structural unity that makes Morris an *auteur* therefore arises from his multifaceted view of human nature, not his particular political or social presumptions. Cockburn, perhaps, only saw *The Fog of War* through this lens of objective political history, and could not imagine that a documentary could deal with politics in a meaningfully different manner.

Ultimately, truth is elusive in a Morris film because people are locked into their subjectivities, which align to a greater or lesser extent with 'historical reality.' Their subjectivities are embodied through text, images, and language. Morris focuses us on these three mediators of truth in order to reveal the manner in which they may enchant, delude, and reveal subjectivity, but cannot provide a passage to objective history. However, by conducting a hermeneutical investigation into the conflicting narratives produced through these mediators, Morris begins to reveal personal and historical truths.

Morris's conception of the way truth is produced aligns closely with

poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault's view. Foucault believes people are constituted by discourses, systems of thoughts that determine the way we speak and view the world. These discourses are determined through relations of power, such as the state, which both produce and constrain truth. "The problem," writes Foucault in the essay *Truth and Power*, "is not changing people's consciousness - or what's in their heads - but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the mechanisms of power (the state, a corporation, and so forth) produce the truths that constitute our understandings of the world. To intervene in the production of this truth, it is therefore necessary to reveal the manner in which these mechanisms shape people's world views.

Thus, by examining the conflicting discourses that constitute subjectivities, Morris aims to understand the contemporary situation. In *The Fog of War*, by exploring McNamara's perspective on his life and role in American history, we can begin to understand how his vision is constrained by the powers that have shaped his life and thought. Or in *The Thin Blue Line*, by revealing how witnesses and police were enchanted by the idea of idealized criminal justice, Morris shows how the miscarriage of justice occurred. Though power does not explicitly enter into all Morris films, the discourses that constitute his subjects' understandings of the world and their relation to the production of particular truths are almost always the object of investigation. Through this investigation,

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<sup>54</sup> Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power." In *The Essential Foucault*. Edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose. New York: The New Press, 2003. 317.

his films produce a truth of their own, even if the nature of that truth may be more elusive in some films than others – *The Thin Blue Line*'s truth, about Randall Adam's innocence, of course, is far less elusive than *The Fog of War*'s truth about the nature of American warfare. In the next chapter, I will investigate the way Morris envisions the relationship between the formal elements of cinema and the nature of these truths.

## Interrogation of Form

According to documentary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, “aesthetics allow one to experience life differently or, as some would say, to give it ‘another sense’, remaining in tune with its drifts and shifts.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, the way a film orients us towards life is inseparable from the manner in which the film is constructed. The formal properties of the text do not allow us to view reality directly, but to view it differently according to the film’s presentation of the historical world. Therefore, whatever form of truth emerges from the documentary is ultimately dependent upon the aesthetics of the cinematography, editing, sound design, color correction, and so forth; it does not exist outside of them.

Film theorist John Conomos, writing on Morris’s work, claims that contrary to the “prevailing dichotomy between truth and fiction that is said to be at the root of truth in the [documentary] form, [Morris advocates] that it is not a simple choice between truth or fiction but rather a choice of formulating certain strategies of fiction to reach relative truths.”<sup>56</sup> Non-fiction films are not “more true” because of their form. Elements typical of a documentary, such as discourses of objectivity, *vérite*-style shooting, and footage with an indexical relationship to reality, only make us believe in the truth-value of the film. Rather,

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<sup>55</sup> Minh-ha, Trinh T. “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning”. In *Theorizing Documentary*. Edited by Michael Renov. (New York, Routledge, 1993), 100

<sup>56</sup> Conomos, John. “Errol Morris and the New Documentary.” *Senses of Cinema*. July 2000. <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/00/8/sfferrol.html#b3>.

according to Conomos, to develop different kinds of truth, Morris explores vastly different ways of constructing the documentary atypical of non-fiction cinema (the “strategies of fiction”).

In interviews, Morris often reiterates his belief that “truth isn’t guaranteed by style or expression. It isn’t guaranteed by anything.”<sup>57</sup> For instance, a film shot in the tradition of cinema vérité is not “more true” simple because much of the artifice (lighting, staging, reenactments) appears to be absent. But while form does not lead directly to truth, his films reveal that form may serve to develop different kinds of truth. This is the second point by which I define Morris as an auteur: in his films, Morris consistently interrogates the relationship between truth and cinematic form. The formal elements of the text shift in accordance with the manner Morris seeks to present reality.

This is not to say Morris is not a *metteur en scène*. In many respects, his style is consistent across his body of work. Interview subjects, for example, always face directly to the lens, expressionistic reenactments are filmed on a tripod or on smooth camera rigs, and non-diegetic music fills the soundscape of every film since *The Thin Blue Line*. But in many crucial respects, Morris’s style changes in accordance with the nature of the truth each film explores. Whereas for many documentary filmmakers, their form remains largely consistent across their body of work (Albert Maysles and Frederick Wiseman, for example, have

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<sup>57</sup> Williams, Linda. “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary.” *Film Quarterly* 46 (Spring 1993), 13.

made almost all their films in the *vérite* tradition), Morris's form shifts in accordance with the way he approaches the subject matter. In this chapter, I examine *Gates of Heaven* (1978) and *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* (1997); in each, I focus on those elements that are, for the most part, distinctive both within Morris's work and documentary filmmaking generally, and how these innovations allow Morris to adopt a unique discursive position towards his subjects.

*Gates of Heaven* (1978), Morris's first film, is about two pet cemeteries, one that failed and one that succeeded. He interviews pet owners, family members of the cemetery operators, investors, and the owner of a nearby rendering company. The film meanders through monologues by his subjects on topics ranging from the afterlife, to love, loneliness, and employment. The speeches are compelling, writes film critic Michael Covino, "not because what is being said is so fascinating, or absorbing, or informative, but because it is being said at all, in the manner in which it is being said. People speak English [...] so imprecise, so inexpressive, so mangled, as to have lost all meaning."<sup>58</sup> Rarely do the subjects present a coherent or compelling philosophy, nor do they give us significant information about the cemeteries. Yet behind their words are a well of emotions: determination, loneliness, love, faith, and insecurity. The words seem to have lost meaning because, as Morris makes clear through the cinematography

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<sup>58</sup> Covino, Michael. "Gates of Heaven." *Film Quarterly* 33 (Spring 1980), 47.

and production design, his subjects are not speaking directly about reality, but are attempting to reconcile their feelings with the vacuousness of their existence. They are narrating their subjectivities. There are three main points I examine regarding the way Morris employs cinematic stylization to develop his perspective on the lives of these subjects: (1) Morris employs stasis throughout the film. Frames are largely stationary, and they contain little movement. (2) The spaces the subjects occupy and the actions they perform within them appear highly artificial. (3) Imagery is depthless, both literally (many of the indicators of physical depth are absent) and figuratively (the meaning is straightforward).

First, in *Gates of Heaven* the subjects are virtually immobile. All interviews are medium, static shots, and there are no close-ups of people in the film. Often, subjects talk at length, uninterrupted, moving little within the frame. When they appear in other footage, it is almost always in a wide shot, with any movements they make remaining within the confines of the frame. For instance, when Phil Harberts (one son of the owner of the successful pet cemetery) mows the lawn, his motion takes up only a small portion of the enormous frame. The same is true when we see him and his brother Dan working together, tilling a garden. These shots reflect the manner in which both sons' lives lack mobility – just as they cannot move outside the frame, they cannot move out of their parents' home.

Similarly, in the opening shot of the film, Floyd (founder of the failed

cemetery) sits under an enormous willow tree. The wide frame is diminutive: he is a small, isolated figure dwarfed by his surroundings. When we reach the end of his story, knowing his dream of building a pet cemetery has failed, we see him in late evening from behind in the same spot. This shot reveals his wheelchair for the first time. He appears as though he were both a shamed child and an elderly man in the twilight of his days. His literal immobility (being handicapped) thus acquires figurative significance as his dream proved unrealistic. Therefore, like the Harberts brothers, Floyd's life is ultimately static, not progressing in any particular direction evident within the film.

The one character who ever enters and leaves the frame is Cal Harberts, the owner of the successful Bubbling Well Pet Cemetery. In one scene, Cal drives a golf cart down to the main garden, moving completely across the frame. His life has brought him a degree of success – he has a family and a growing business. However, filming the slow-moving cart in a wide-shot is still diminutive, as it takes a comically long time to cross the frame. In one instance, under an image of Cal driving the cart directly from left to right across the frame, we hear Dan Harberts declaring his father “wants to do a little traveling before he passes on.”<sup>59</sup> His father's life may be mobile in comparison to Morris's other subjects in *Gates*, as his life is not completely contained by the frame lines, but he is certainly not moving very far or fast.

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<sup>59</sup> *Gates of Heaven*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1980.

Secondly, Covino notes that in *Gates of Heaven*, the artificiality of the spaces where Morris interviews his subjects “corresponds perfectly with the painful artificiality of the way the people talk.”<sup>60</sup> The settings, down to the clothes subjects wear, appear to be arranged with tremendous care. They seem almost too reflective of the inner lives of subjects to be real - in some cases, such as Phil Harberts’ desk that contains so many trophies it would be quite impossible to work on, it is very likely they were arranged for the film. *Gates of Heaven* was conceived as a reaction to the dominant cinema vérité documentary tradition of the 1970’s. In this tradition, “authenticity” arises from the feeling the camera has entered a space unchanged by the filmmaker. Ironically, it is through this artificiality that *Gates* achieves a sense of realism, as the highly staged settings closely parallel the subjects’ inauthentic self-presentation, which thinly masks their fears, hopelessness, and fragility.

In one sequence, Morris cuts back and forth between two women, both of whom buried their animals in the failed pet cemetery. One woman is surrounded by an abundance of multicolored floral designs and meticulously arranged plates and glasses stamped with photos of dogs. When we first see her, she is trying to get her dog to sing. The other woman sits in a large, luxurious chair, next to a gold-painted table, her head just below a photograph of a poodle. First, she discusses how she still reaches for her dog at night. She feels awful knowing it is

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<sup>60</sup> Covino, Michael. “Gates of Heaven.” *Film Quarterly* 33 (Spring 1980), 48.

no longer there. The personification of their dead pets (one as a singer, one as a stand-in for a husband/life-partner) reflects a deep isolation – in conjunction with their setting, Morris suggests they are unable to have more than a superficial engagement with the world around them.

Contributing to this sense of artificiality, the setting of interviews often shifts in accordance with their content. For instance, in the first interview with Cal Harberts, he sits outside in front of a white house wearing a colorful hat, discussing why so many people buy pets and why they come to his cemetery to bury them. By contrast, in his next interview he is seated at his desk with a carved wooden name-plate written in an Olde English font. The background is nearly pitch black, and we see his bald head for the first time. He speaks like a powerful patriarch: “We are not content with having just an ordinary, nice, or good pet cemetery. [...] We will not stop until ours is the finest in the country. There’ll be no finer when we’re through.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, when we first meet his son Phil, he is sitting outside by a pool with a colorful, patched shirt and a bright red telephone – he is more relaxed, comfortable now that work does not dominate his life as it did when he was in the insurance business. When we next see him, he is in an office where every inch is covered in trophies, plaques, and metal, including a golden eagle statue as large as his head. In both interviews with Cal and Phil, the move from the outside location to the interior office represents a move to a space

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<sup>61</sup> *Gates of Heaven*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1980.

more reflective of the manner in which they see themselves – Cal as a crusading patriarch, Phil as a successful businessman – but the highly staged, overtness of each office simultaneously reveals how their presentation is only a thin façade for a fear of failure.

Lastly, Morris employs depthless imagery to reflect the lives of the subjects in *Gate of Heaven*. Fredric Jameson’s framework in “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” is once again relevant. Jameson considers postmodern works of art to be characterized by their depthlessness, referring to both the to metaphorical evaporation of meaning and to a literal lack of physical depth.<sup>62</sup> Given the plethora of images and styles that characterize postmodern works of art, it becomes impossible to read into any one too specifically or “deeply.” In the cinematic context, a lack of physical depth refers to an elimination of some of the typical signifiers of depth: a shallow depth of field, a noticeable difference in size between objects in the foreground and background, or a significant difference in the light falling on such objects. In *Gates of Heaven*, this depthlessness both literally and figuratively reflects the shallow lives of the subjects.

In interviews, Morris’s subjects appear physically inseparable from the environments they are placed in. Often, they sit against flat backgrounds with no foreground elements. In the case of the two women who buried their pets in the

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<sup>62</sup> Jameson, Fredric. “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” *New Left Review* 1, no. 146 (1984).

failed cemetery, for instance, their dress and character seem so integrated into their surroundings, they appear almost as ornaments in their absurdly accessorized spaces. They are as haughty, blunt, and ostentatious about their pets as their homes are decorated. Similarly, the first time we see Scottie Harberts, Cal's wife, she sits in a living room surrounded by flowers and knick-knacks. The couch, curtains, her dress, and the furniture are all a light tan color that almost blends together. When she first speaks, she tells us where the name Bubbling Well came from: "It has a meaning of live and purity, and all the good things that we love to think about."<sup>63</sup> Visually, she is nearly inseparable from the kitsch of her surroundings; thus, her words seem as shallow and superficial as the room she occupies.

Morris films photographs, headstones and other mementos in flat, straightforward shots. The image is placed directly in the center of the film frame against a level background. In one sequence, we see a long series of motionless shots of animals' headstones, most of which have pictures of the pet followed by a cliché memorial saying: "Forever in our hearts," "Our beloved son," "I knew love – I had this dog." We hear Cal describe that his rationale for installing a garden was to break up the "monotonous and not too appealing" rows of headstones.<sup>64</sup> In counterpoint to the professions of love on the headstones, everyone seems to have purchased a small, square plot based on a similar template. The slow

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<sup>63</sup> *Gates of Heaven*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1980.

<sup>64</sup> Same.

repetition of highly similar, flat memorials suggests a shallowness to the owners' engagement with the memory of their pets.

In another sequence that illustrates the use of depthless imagery, a couple shares a story about their dog finding and ripping open his Christmas presents before the family does. Overlaid, we see a Polaroid photograph in the grass of a dog sitting on Santa's lap and another of the same dog under a Christmas tree. The flatness of the photograph lying in the grass emphasizes the superficiality of their relationship with their dog. They treat their dog like a child, but do not love him in the same way. In their final moments on screen, they warn pet owners everywhere to have their dogs or cats neutered. The photos, like the headstones, are thus commodified tokens lacking emotional depth - perhaps designed to fill a void of human companionship.

Overall, the formal elements of *Gates of Heaven* are inseparable from the film's vision of the subjects' lives. In a Morris film, according to media theorist John Dorst, "His interview subjects [...] as subjects of the documentary eye, in fact become part of the cinematic apparatus through which they are recorded and projected- their textuality is inseparable from their imbrication with the device."<sup>65</sup> Morris has dispensed with the traditional view that documentaries ought to suggest reality is unmediated by the camera. Rather, Morris uses the formal elements of cinema to reveal this reality. In *Gates of Heaven*, stasis,

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<sup>65</sup> Dorst, John. "Which Came First, The Chicken Device or the Textual Egg? Documentary Film and the Limits of the Hybrid Metaphor." *The Journal of American Folklore* 112 (Summer 1999), 279.

artificiality, and depthlessness closely reflect the film's uncompromising vision of life as a hopeless struggle for meaningful fulfillment. The cinematic apparatus is thus inseparable from the truth it conveys.

In *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* (1997), Morris conveys a vastly different truth through aesthetic choices that, once again, radically depart from documentary tradition. In this film, Morris interviews four subjects: George Mendonça, a topiary gardener; Rodney Brooks, a cognitive scientist; Ray Mendez, a naked mole rat expert; and David Hoover, a lion trainer. The subjects, ostensibly unrelated to one another in any direct manner, each speak about their lives and work. The film contains a multitude of stylistic choices: analog video, black and white and color film stocks, slow and fast motion, 35 and 16mm film are all cut together in rapid succession. Morris also employs an odd effect from time to time where he films 35mm footage off of a television screen.<sup>66</sup>

The cinematography, rapid cutting, and predominant use of music evoke the postmodern music video aesthetics in the MTV tradition, where meaning is heavily dependent upon stylization. Similarly, truth in *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* rarely emerges directly from the narration of the subjects. Rather, it arises from the interplay between this narration and the other formal elements of the text (this is true of all Morris's films, but because of the highly abstract nature of the content, it is particularly evident here). Here, truth is dependent upon the

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<sup>66</sup> Cunningham, Megan. "Errol Morris: Revealing unexpected realities." *Motion Design Center*. 2006. <http://www.adobe.com/designcenter/dialogbox/errolmorris>.

emergence of abstract but meaningful connections amongst the four subjects. Therefore, (1) by overlaying the footage of one subject's work with voice-over from another, (2) by using noticeably similar formal elements in different parts of the film and (3) by using music to tie together sequences, Morris builds towards the broad, elusive truth that our impetus towards creation and exploration (be it artistic, scientific, or other) is a drive to cope with our own mortality.

Amongst Morris's four subjects, there are few obvious connections. They are middle-aged men who deal, in some manner, with animals, but whether they know each other in any capacity is unaddressed in the text. However, by overlaying the imagery related to one subjects' work with voice-over from another subject, Morris directs our attention to a different, broader concept than the matter addressed in the voice-over alone.

For instance, in one sequence, Ray Mendez describes how the mole-rats were an intellectual idea that has "now become a reality. They were a fantasy that has now become something that can be looked at."<sup>67</sup> Over his words, Morris cuts to the circus, where four women in glittery dresses mount large white balls and walk atop them up a ramp. At first, he films parts of their body in extreme close-ups. Then, as their act begins, he moves to wide shots from below, then medium shots in slow and fast motion, as well as black and white shots from a variety of angles. This quick variation of footage presents the act as fantastical, almost

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<sup>67</sup> *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1997.

other-worldly. Like the mole-rat to Mendez, the circus is another way humans are driven to actualize their fantasies. Without cutting away from the act, Brooks' voice chimes in: "It's going to be harder to distinguish what is alive and what is a machine, and that boundary may start to become meaningless."<sup>68</sup> Suddenly we see a bored-looking man holding the rails that support the women. Brooks similarly strives to realize the fantastical, but Morris ironically points out this is no fantasy: here is a man whose job could easily be replaced by a machine. Therefore, in this sequence the interplay between the voices and the circus footage develops the idea that humans constantly re-negotiate the border between what is fantastical and realizable in life.

Morris uses this overlaying technique to develop very different points throughout the film. For instance, consider another sequence where Mendez's voice-over can again be heard below images of the circus. As he describes a mole-rat colony, including their eating, excretion, and communication habits, we see people watching a high-flying act. First, we see the crowd, with everyone's eyes looking up in precisely the same direction. A motorcycle crosses back and forth on a tightrope across the screen, then we see a trapeze artist in close-up swinging back and forth. When we return to the crowd, they are now filmed in fast-motion, making people appear to move like frantic mole-rats. Juxtaposed with Mendez's mole-rat analysis, this sequence suggests the circus is an odd practice of humans

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<sup>68</sup> *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1997.

through which we are able to live in the world. We too are a part of the animal kingdom, and our collective behaviors could be scrutinized with the same analytic eye that Mendez turns to the mole-rats. Near the end of the film, Mendez tells us he looks at his profession strictly from the point of “self-knowledge” – therefore, perhaps his entire exploration of the mole-rats is another way of conducting an analysis of humans. Perhaps this impetus towards analysis is a uniquely human life-practice in itself. But Mendez does not suggest this idea directly; it is only through the overlaying of footage that it emerges.

Second, connections emerge among the four subjects through similarities in the way Morris and his cinematographer, Academy-Award winner Robert Richardson, film their lives and their work. With a medley of different stylizations rapidly shifting throughout the film, images and sequences that are designed with distinct similarities stand out. For example, early in the film, when Mendez tells us he was assigned to photograph the naked mole rat in Africa, we see a photograph of a mole rat with a wavy, white border. About a minute later, as George Mendonça describes the woman who owns the garden he works in, we see a photograph of the woman surrounded by the same white border. The parallel images frame both subjects’ inspirations. They foreshadow the connections that will emerge between these radically different professions, and they develop the theme of viewing humans through the same lens that we view animals.

In another instance, two longer excursions into the non-working lives of

Hoover and Brooks are filmed quite similarly. Both are shot in silky slow-motion (meaning they were filmed at a high frame rate, rather than slowed down in post-production) on black and white super 16mm with heavily canted angles. In Brooks' case, this is a happy moment: he approaches a group of students cheering for him. In voice-over, Brooks tells that though his work requires him to re-imagine the definition of living, often he "falls back into believing the things we all do about humans and living life that way. Otherwise, if you analyze it too much, life becomes almost meaningless." Hoover's moment, however, is more morose. He tells us: "You always operate on the principle [lions are] never going to kill you. [...] I kind of figure I'll get killed in an automobile accident [...] or maybe a heart attack. The problem with wild animal trainers is they don't retire anyway. Most of them die of heart attacks." Over this speech, we see him bringing his house cat, who lives below his trailer home, a bowl of water. We see close-ups of the cat dribbling water into its mouth off its paw. Filling the frame, it looks as though it were one of Hoover's lions. In these moments, both Hoover and Brooks confront the collapse of their idealized worlds in the quotidian moments of everyday life – the grainy, slow-paced footage contrasts with the fast-paced 35mm glossiness with which Morris films much of their work. But while Brooks is able to leave work aside in his life, Hoover is training animals wherever he goes, and likely will be training them to the day he dies. Therefore, through the stylization, a broader theme emerges about the possible different relationships

our work may have with our outside lives (and deaths).

Lastly, music serves as a connective thread to unify sequences and broaden their thematic significance. Certainly, it performs this function in most of Morris's work onwards from *The Thin Blue Line*, but given that connective threads emerge almost entirely indirectly in *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*, music functions as a unifier to a greater degree. In one sequence, David Hoover and George Mendonça consider their replacements: first, Mendonça tells us that no one currently has the knowledge, skills, or discipline to replace him. Next, Hoover describes the girl who has replaced him as inexperienced; she is in need of more training, lest the lions get her first. In the music, we hear a chord progression reminiscent of the famous *Jaws* theme, slightly higher pitched but still conveying a sense of foreboding. Additionally, a cello plays long tones that grow lower and lower in pitch, paralleling the idea that the work they devoted their lives to is ultimately ephemeral: without someone of comparable devotion, it will vanish with their death. Though the music most closely reflects the new lion trainers' dangerous position, it begins over Mendonça, and therefore serves to connect the two men's words in such a manner that they seem almost in conversation with each other about the prospect that death will bring an end to the worlds they have built. Music signals the end of the sequence as well: though footage of Hoover's replacement training lions continues to play, the music suddenly pauses and shifts to a faster, higher-pitched song woven with an

Oompah style tuba line below it.

Music also connects thematically disparate parts of the text. For instance, over the opening and closing of the film, we hear the same tune. This song has two primary musical elements: an uplifting, rapidly repeating cello part, and a slow, far more serene violin solo. The music echoes the film's overall motif – the drive to devote our lives, day in and day out, to working on pieces of art or science (reflected in the uplifting, repetitive cello part) is a struggle to cope with our own mortality (the more serene violin part). In the opening of the film, this theme plays over a mixture of footage of mole rats scuffling, circus clowns running, clips from the film *Darkest Africa*, flowers in Mendonça's garden, and so forth without any voice-over – this thematic preamble seems to warn the viewer, in Morris's words, "the movie is going to be crazy. [...] it's going to mix really diverse things."<sup>69</sup> It will mix a wide variety of different elements. When the theme returns at the end of the movie, it appears over a similar variety of footage without voice-over, but this time the violin part has become more dominant and far more tragic. We have explored their work, and we have reached the inevitable conclusion that in spite of their grandiose work, death is still the end of it all. As we see him walking through pouring rain and fog attend to his animals, Mendonça tells us: "As long as I live, I'll take care of [them]. I don't know what will happen after that." Therefore, the music helps tie together the highly abstract

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<sup>69</sup> Cunningham, Megan. "Errol Morris: Revealing unexpected realities." *Motion Design Center*. 2006. <http://www.adobe.com/designcenter/dialogbox/errolmorris>.

dramatic trajectory of the film.

It is unconventional in an auteurist analysis to consider the way an auteur uses the formal elements of the cinema as a possible category for analysis; more frequent considerations are the broad motifs related to the auteur's vision of gender, authority, ideology, myth, or other modes of seeing the world. However, I believe that Morris's works speak profoundly about the relationship between cinema and truth. Frequently, he constructs his films in opposition to the dominant presumptions of filmmakers of the era – *Gates of Heaven*, for example, was a response to cinema vérité, *The Fog of War* was a response to idea of the “objective” historical film, and *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* was a response to the belief that a documentary must deal directly with a concrete subject. These responses are not simply for the sake of resistance, but rather, to approach an idea or subject in a way it is not typically dealt with on screen. Therefore, the cinema itself is always an implicit presence in the film text.

According to Peter Wollen, the progenitor of my approach to auteur theory, “The great directors must be defined in terms of shifting relations, in their singularity as well as their uniformity.”<sup>70</sup> Because Morris constantly renegotiates this relationship between cinema and truth in his films, shifting the formal construction of the text in accordance with the nature of the film's vision of

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<sup>70</sup> Wollen, Peter. “‘The *auteur* theory’ (extract)”. In *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*. Edited by John Caughie. (New York: Routledge, 1981), 575

reality, I believe he can certainly be considered a great director in the Wollen framework.

## **Self-Deception**

Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, a fictional dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, is an elaborate metaphor for humans' relationship with knowledge and reality. In the allegory, Socrates offers that people who have been chained in a cave all their lives and are able to see nothing but shadows on the back wall would grow up believing those shadows to be all that is real. If they were forced out of the cave, the people's instinct would be to run back to the cave, because the world would seem less authentic than the shadows.

To an extent, Morris's films present a similar view of humanity. Subjects in a Morris film, like the cave-dwellers, exist in a constructed reality because dealing with the world directly is too traumatic. They are always self-deceptive, as their beliefs and social actions are an attempt to reconcile their inner trauma with the outside world. Certainly, some are more deluded (trapped in the cave) than others, but the manner in which all his subjects live and understand the world arises from the need to quiet an inner turmoil.

Cultural theorist Heather Nunn claims that the personal trauma functions in Morris's work "as the center of how subjects experience their relationship between the past and the present, between their private self and the public self. [...] Trauma functions as the enigma revealed: somewhat like the classical film narrative [...] the subject's story functions around telling how bits of the past

patch together to cause present distress or present strategies of survival.”<sup>71</sup>

Through the presentation of subjectivities, Morris explores inner conflicts. The Morris film reveals how his subjects either come to deal with these conflicts or continue to suffer from the inability to reconcile their life with their anguish or vulnerability. As shown in the previous chapter, the subjects of *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* cope with their own mortality through their work; in *Gates of Heaven*, subjects deal with their isolation by treating their pets as though they were human companions. In this chapter, I examine *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter, Jr.* (1999) and a television episode from *First Person* titled *Stairway to Heaven* (1998); both explicitly deal with the self-deception of their main subjects, but in very different ways.

In *Mr. Death*, we first meet Fred Leuchter in his capacity as a designer of electric chairs. He is concerned with the “deplorable condition of the hardware that’s in most of the states’ prisons.”<sup>72</sup> From there, we learn that he went on to design gallows, lethal injection machines, and a gas chamber; because of the latter, he is asked to testify at the trial of holocaust denier Ernst Zündle in Canada, being prosecuted for publishing “false history.” Leuchter then goes to Auschwitz with his recently-wedded wife (he tells her it was their honeymoon), examines the gas chambers, and reaches the absurd conclusion that the camps were not used for execution. He travels the world attending white supremacist

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<sup>71</sup> Nunn, Heather. “Errol Morris: Documentary as Psychic Drama.” *Screen 45* (Winter 2004), 417.

<sup>72</sup> *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter, Jr.* Directed by Errol Morris. 1999.

conferences to preach his findings, while his career and marriage are destroyed in the process. Morris often compares Leuchter to Valdamir Nabakov's clueless narrator of works such as *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*; the story is told largely from the perspective of a man who has devised his own strange ideology to understand the world.<sup>73</sup> I examine three ways Morris develops Leuchter as a man trapped deep in Plato's cave. (1) He places Fred's narrative in contention with the "accurate" historical record (2) Morris wrests the capacity to represent his own life away from Fred, and (3) he thematically emphasizes devices that mediate or reflect reality (glasses, water, cinema, and so forth).

First, dramatic tension lies in the conflict between Fred's claims and what Morris presents as historical reality. Morris sets this up by alternating Fred's account of his trip to Auschwitz with historian Robert Jan van Pelt's account of retracing Fred's investigation. Van Pelt is a one of the only subjects in any Morris film whose work aligns closely with Morris's perspective: both Morris and Van Pelt aim to uncover the manner in which Fred viewed the world that led him to make such terribly inaccurate claims (though Morris is far more interested in the implications about Fred's character and the nature of Holocaust denial than he is in defending the dominant historical record). In this interplay between the two subjects, Morris moves from Leuchter's subjectivity into Van Pelt's, and we can begin to understand the extent to which Leuchter's beliefs are distanced from

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<sup>73</sup> Livesey, Margot. "Errol Morris." *Bomb* 69 (Fall 1999).

“authentic history.”

Beginning his journey to Auschwitz, we see Leuchter looking out the window of an airplane. Morris then cuts to aerial footage from Leni Riefenstahl’s pro-Nazi documentary *Triumph of the Will*. This juxtaposition implies that Leuchter expects he is coming to observe the concentration camps essentially the same as they were 50 years earlier – in his view, he can go in and uncover Nazi practices unaffected by time. It also reflects his naïve view of the Third Reich. He, like Reifenstahl, blinds himself to its most sinister practices. Morris then cuts to low-quality analog video footage of Leuchter’s trip to Auschwitz. As Leuchter enters one of the gas chambers to take measurements and samples, campy detective music begins to play. Leuchter treats the matter as though he were an undercover detective investigating a crime – rather than, as the low-quality footage and music suggest, an ordinary man exploring matters far beyond his ability to comprehend. The sequence ends on a high-contrast, extreme close-up of a hammer chipping away pieces of a wall. In voice-over, Leuchter tells that his chiseled samples became a part of the court’s permanent evidence. According to theorists David and Marsha Orgeron, the chiseling metaphorically reflects Leuchter’s wish “to carve his name into the annals of history [but] in so doing [he] ends up eroding the history that he hoped would support him.”<sup>74</sup> In contrast to the high-key Van Pelt footage, much of which consists of extremely wide shots

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<sup>74</sup> Orgeron, Devin and Marsha. “Megatronic Memories: Errol Morris and the Politics of Witnessing.” In *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* Edited by Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas. (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 242.

of Van Pelt roaming the landscape, the chiseling shot reflects the extreme selectivity with which Leuchter views Auschwitz. Therefore, though this sequence remains within Leuchter's subjectivity, it simultaneously foreshadows his downfall.

Next, Van Pelt's voice comes in to explain more about the trial, and his own project to retrace Leuchter's steps to figure out how one could emerge with such distorted evidence. We see a high quality 35mm tracking shot towards the same gas chamber we saw Leuchter enter in the video. The music becomes darker and more complex. Compared to the low-quality of Fred's video, this higher quality footage reflects Van Pelt's "truer" account of events. Later, we see Van Pelt looking out across a wide, ruined landscape, walking through it slowly. We are now gazing at Auschwitz with his eyes, which allows us absorb far more about the camp than Leuchter could see. Therefore, through this interplay between Leuchter and Van Pelt, we begin to see Leuchter as innocent and ignorant, deliberately blinding himself to the reality of what occurred.

Secondly, the film remains almost entirely a portrait of Leuchter's subjectivity until the interplay with Van Pelt; after this, Leuchter begins to lose control over the representation of his life. Just as his life spiraled out of his control after the Zündle trial, others are now privileged to represent Leuchter. For instance, over a slowed-down clip from Leuchter's low-quality Auschwitz video, in which Leuchter is waving a hammer happily at the camera, we hear two

distinct voices. One is Shelly Shapiro, the director of the Holocaust Survivors & Friends Education Center: “I don't think he's naive. I think he was empowered by being part of this group. Who is this guy? The bottom line here, is you got a guy who basically made a deal with the devil.”<sup>75</sup> The other is Ernst Zündle: “Fred Leuchter is a hero. Not every generation gets a George Washington or a Thomas Jefferson. Our generation's heroes maybe are more humble.”<sup>76</sup> Given the vastly different interpretations of Leuchter's act, Morris suggests the image is unable to provide an authentic connection to history. Leuchter's childish mistake inspires both ferocious uproar and critical acclaim, but who he actually is seems equally elusive from both Zündle and Shapiro.

In another sequence, in which we again see the same analog videotape of Auschwitz, Leuchter is obtaining samples from an underground gas chamber; the high-pitched taps of his hammer and his pseudo-scientific pronouncements that make him seem like a child playing make-believe. Leuchter describes the chamber as “cold, wet, and kinda spooky.”<sup>77</sup> Suddenly, the footage stops and we hear Van Pelt ask that the video be rewound. The video is replayed as Van Pelt tells us, over morose music, that in this room, more people died than any other spot on earth. The footage cuts to a still, 35mm shot of water at the bottom of the chamber, as a single water droplet, like a tear, blurs Leuchter's reflection.

Leuchter's nature is suddenly obscured; the mousey, scientific man we thought

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<sup>75</sup> *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter, Jr.* Directed by Errol Morris. 1999.

<sup>76</sup> Same

<sup>77</sup> Same

we knew has a more sinister side willing to overlook great evil for his own gain. The horror of the gas chambers, this sequence suggests, is far beyond Leuchter's ability to comprehend. He is no longer the investigator, but has become the object of investigation.

Lastly, throughout *Mr. Death* Morris visually emphasizes the ways in which Leuchter's reality is mediated. In the opening scene, Leuchter is driving his car. In the first shot, we see his glasses in a close-up of the rear-view mirror. According to Devin and Marsha Orgeron, this shot places us "behind Leuchter's glasses [to suggest] the degree to which we are all beholden to the lenses through which we happen to witness and conceive history."<sup>78</sup> The film simultaneously enters Fred's subjectivity and emphasizes the impossibility of understanding the world directly: our vision is always mediated (for the audience, that mediation is cinema itself). In another instance, Robert Jan van Pelt describes Holocaust denial as "a story about vanity. It's a way to get into the limelight, to be noticed."<sup>79</sup> Over these words, we see Leuchter's reflection looking into the pool of water at the base of the underground crematorium – as he pulls a rock out of the water, his face is again obscured by the ripples. Unlike the previous sequence in the underground crematorium, this interplay with Van Pelt suggests that Leuchter's trip to Auschwitz indicates Leuchter could not see himself for who he

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<sup>78</sup> Orgeron, Devin and Marsha. "Megatronic Memories: Errol Morris and the Politics of Witnessing." In *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* Edited by Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas. (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 242.

<sup>79</sup> *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter, Jr.* Directed by Errol Morris. 1999.

was or the implications of what he was doing.

Similarly, in the penultimate sequence of the film, Fred is sitting in an apartment sipping tea, watching the analog video of himself at Auschwitz on a small television screen. The shots in this sequence progress from color shots inside the apartment, to black and white shots looking in from the outside. The shift occurs when Fred admits in voice-over to being a “reluctant revisionist historian” – in other words, he only accepts the label because his beliefs about Auschwitz align with theirs.<sup>80</sup> This sequence suggests that Leuchter views his past without regret; he is comfortable in the self-deceptive world of his imagination. It is when others observe him and label him that Leuchter believes the trouble occurs – thus, the black and white footage outside his apartment reflects Leuchter’s belief that the outside world cannot understand him, and it has been unfair by persecuting him.

Ultimately, Leuchter is obstinate in his absurd conception of reality. “Have you ever thought that you might be wrong? Or do you think that you could make a mistake?” we hear Morris ask near the end of the film, to which Leuchter replies “No, I’m past that.”<sup>81</sup> Dramatically, Leuchter is punished for his unwillingness to come to terms with the gaze of the outside world: with unyielding confidence in his skills, his response is to lash out at the outside world that chastises him, rather than to consider the evidence of his own foolishness.

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<sup>80</sup> *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter, Jr.* Directed by Errol Morris. 1999.

<sup>81</sup> Same

But not all self-deception need be egomaniacal; indeed, in Morris's conception, we all inevitably "rudderless bumblers"<sup>82</sup> locked into subjectivities that stem from our internal exigencies. In Leuchter's case, his need to be admired blinded him to historical reality. But there are countless ways people cope with personal trauma in Morris's work. For example, in *First Person* and *Interrotron Stories*, Morris deals with subjects who develop strange responses to distress in their lives. In *You're Soaking in It*, Joan Dougharty starts a business cleaning up violent crimes after she had to dispose of her stepson's body in the wake of his bloody suicide. In *The Killer Inside Me*, Sondra London deals with her failing marriage and dead-end job by fulfilling a childhood masochistic fantasy of "being swept up by the dark stranger bogeyman" – she dates two different serial killers.<sup>83</sup> Here, I focus on *Stairway to Heaven*, which is about autistic university professor Temple Grandin. Grandin, who claims to see the world primarily through pictures, understands and relates more easily to cattle than to people. In order to understand death, she visited a slaughterhouse as a child, then went on to design a more humane and effective model. Grandin's design, called the "Stairway to Heaven," is currently used by one third of all slaughterhouses in the United States. Like Fred Leuchter, she is a designer of more humane execution equipment. But while Fred is selfish and unable to cope with the world, Temple

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<sup>82</sup> Hughes, James. "The Eleven-Minute Psychiatrist: The Stop Smiling Interview of Errol Morris." March 2006. <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/interview/stopsmiling0306.html>

<sup>83</sup> Nunn, Heather. "Errol Morris: Documentary as Psychic Drama." *Screen 45* (Winter 2004), 418.

has found many strategies over the years to deal with reality, and she now lives comfortably with herself. Designing the slaughterhouse for her is a way of coping with death. Therefore, self-deception for Morris does not necessarily constitute a retreat from the world; it may also be a translation of it.

As I have examined, all Morris's films rely to some degree upon expressionistic images to convey subjective understandings. But in *Stairway to Heaven*, these images acquire particular dramatic potency because Grandin claims to see the world through pictures. Unlike, for instance, the falling domino image in *The Fog of War* that reflects McNamara's perspective on Vietnam, these are not simply visual parallels (though of course, they are always the filmmaker's subjective interpretation) but an embodiment of the manner in which Temple literally sees the world. "What would it be like if I actually was a cow?" Temple asks.<sup>84</sup> Morris's implicit response: "What would it be like if I actually was Temple Grandin?" Thus, I first examine the ways in which Morris presents Grandin's distinctive understanding of reality, then I address the ways in which Morris simultaneously undercuts the authority of the documentary image. He therefore reflexively suggests that as viewers, we are as equally beholden as Grandin to the limitations of our vision. In this way, Grandin's deception is presented as an alternative way of understanding the world, rather than a lesser one.

Part of Temple Grandin's difficulty, typical of many people with autism, is

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<sup>84</sup> *Stairway to Heaven*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1998.

her sensitivity to excess stimulation. She describes her childhood like being in a pinball machine, which Morris visually represents with black and white close-ups of a pinball bouncing amongst various bumpers and lights. By representing the specific metaphor she offers, Morris presents Grandin as (unlike Fred) highly conscious of the manner in which she sees the world. When it comes to religion, Grandin claims it was far too abstract for her to be able to deal with. Concepts like “Power,” for instance, evoked images of high-tension electrical wires. Morris similarly represents religion through abstract images: on a piece of decaying yellow parchment, we see a sun, a moon, a handshake and various religious terminology.

Instead of God, Grandin turned to examine a more concrete way of understanding death: the slaughterhouse. Near the end of the movie, Temple tells us that she has seen herself going up the “Stairway to Heaven” many times in her life. “If everything’s working right [at the end of my life], I’d feel the conveyer just pull me in with the cattle and it’d be over with. I wouldn’t feel a thing.”<sup>85</sup> Immediately after, Morris returns to the image of the handshake on the yellow parchment. This image represents the idea that through her development of the slaughterhouse, Grandin has come to terms with death. Like Leuchter, her unique way of conceptualizing the world is a method of coming to terms with her inner trauma. But unlike Leuchter, she has become comfortable with nature and

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<sup>85</sup> *Stairway to Heaven*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1998.

death, rather than defiant and selfish.

In *Stairway to Heaven*, Morris also suggests the manner in which the cinematic apparatus itself is deceptive; our faith in its capacity to reveal truth is therefore an elaborate form of self-deception on the part of the viewer. “I think in pictures,” Grandin tells us. Suddenly, the image drops away to black. When Grandin returns, she continues: “Pictures is (sic) my first language, English is my second language.”<sup>86</sup> Critic Philippa Campey, analyzing this sequence, finds that it undermines “the equalization of power inherent in the Interrotron [Morris’s device that allows people to look directly at the lens during interviews].”<sup>87</sup> In other words, by removing the image and highlighting the Grandin’s difficulty with English, Morris suggests that the usual methods through which the filmmaker approaches subjects are inadequate. Later, Morris asks Grandin to recite a prayer her blind roommate wrote. Grandin asks the off-screen Morris how she ought to pose to read the poem: if she leaned her head back, would she look strange? This brief exchange between subject and filmmaker and Grandin’s brightly lit face (as though she is looking to heaven) reminds us of Morris’s presence in shaping Grandin’s presentation. Any sense of the illusion that unmediated “reality” was unfolding before us is destroyed. Morris reminds us that though we may believe in the truth-potential of the cinema, it is ultimately

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<sup>86</sup> *Stairway to Heaven*. Directed by Errol Morris. 1998.

<sup>87</sup> Campey, Philippa. “Errol Morris’s *Stairway to Heaven*: An Exploration of the First Person Narrative.” *Senses of Cinema*. March 2001. <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/01/13/stairway.html>

inadequate to properly illuminate Grandin's life. Like the abstract visual metaphors through which Grandin understands the world, cinema itself is an illusive, mediated way to cope with reality. Therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, whether we are filmmakers, viewers, or subjects, we are all implicated in Morris's paradigm of self-deception.

## Conclusion

I hope this thesis constitutes, among other things, a defense of auteur theory and its applicability to documentary filmmakers. In one interview, Morris explicitly denies the applicability of auteur theory to his work, but his understanding of the theory revolves around the idea that a director has complete control of his work.<sup>88</sup> But in the Wollen framework, auteur theory says nothing about the nature of the film's production. Rather, applying the auteur theory is a labor of love: it is an effort to take seriously what the auteur conveys through his or her works. My conception of the theory is that it enables the decoding of a particular discursive position towards the world that is evident across a body of film texts. Therefore, if we view the documentary as a constructed representation of the historical world, then the theory is as applicable in non-fiction as it is for fiction. It is particularly compelling for those documentaries that address a complex, emotional, human truth that is carefully developed through the formal elements of cinema.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to show how the Morris film casts aside distinctions of subjectivity and objectivity that traditionally characterize the difference between fiction and non-fiction cinema. In doing so, he discards the traditional understanding of what forms of truth must arise from non-fiction. Through aesthetic choices, Morris focuses his films upon the

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<sup>88</sup> "Interview with the Believer" April 2004. <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/interview/believer0404.html>

examination of “interior states, memory and psychic trauma.”<sup>89</sup> The truth sought in the Morris film lies closer to what Walter Benjamin, in his classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” claims can be offered by cinema generally: “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride.”<sup>90</sup> Cinematic truth allows one to re-examine the moments that build everyday life, but often escape our notice. By glimpsing into another world on screen, we are actually gazing at ourselves, at our understandings, desires, and the ways in which we live.

I wish to take seriously Morris’s presumption that non-fiction may be as personal as fiction, and Wollen’s belief that the critic (or aspiring critic) is constructing a subjective portrait of the text. As Morris consistently interrogates our infatuation with images and how they shape our understandings of reality, it would be ironic for me to leave the paper without addressing how Morris’s images have shaped my perspective.

There are many different ways one could construct a portrait of Morris as an auteur. For instance, the role of death in shaping everyday life is an important

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<sup>89</sup> Nunn, Heather. “Errol Morris: Documentary as Psychic Drama.” *Screen 45* (Winter 2004), 413.

<sup>90</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. UCLA School of Theatre, Film, and Television (1936). <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

motif present in all his movies that I have only partially explored. I have chosen three facets of Morris's cinema I believe, based on my research, are the most inclusive of his body of work and crucial to understanding the structural unity of Morris's films. But I am certainly biased: these are closely related to the reasons I find him to be a powerful director.

What I love about Morris's work is that he does not evade the complications, ironies, and oddities that exist in life. Many documentaries only aim to simplify reality, finding definitive causes for historical events or declaratively stating how we ought to act in the world. Having read many, many interviews with Morris, I find that ideologically, I am more at odds with Morris than I initially realized, particularly with his unabashed support of capitalism ("I like to think of consumerism as the most effective preventative to genocide yet devised").<sup>91</sup> But Morris's films themselves evade a fixed ideological position. By prioritizing the representation of subjectivities, they are able to engage with individuals, rather than abstract or disembodied concepts. They retain a consistent, reflexive awareness of their own process of truth production, frequently alluding to the cinematic apparatus within the text. They speak powerfully to the historical, political, or social zeitgeist of the time of their production, but because they are ultimately about the drama that occurs within and among individuals, his films retain an audience decades later.

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<sup>91</sup> Grundmann, Roy. "Truth is not Subjective: An Interview with Errol Morris." *Cineaste* 25 (Summer 2000), 12.

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