



MAXINE BAKER

DOCUMENTARY IN THE DIGITAL AGE



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Maxine Baker

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Finally, of course, I thank my long-suffering friends. And I would like to dedicate the book to my godmother and aunt, Kate Ford, to my brother Roy and to the memory of my parents Margaret and Wilfred Baker.

Maxine Baker
London

Introduction: Life on the Run

There are very few clearly definable turning points in history. One of those rare moments happened in Paris in December 1895, when the Lumière brothers introduced their brand new moving picture show to a paying audience. That was the day that cinema was born. All the experiments, the invention of different systems to project moving pictures in different parts of the world, had been of great interest, technologically, but cinema requires an audience. At that first cinema show, run by the Lumières, was pure documentary. They described the scenes of everyday life, filmed around their home and factory near Lyons, as 'life on the run'. I have always thought this a perfect description of those vibrant fragments of French life at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century; a great definition, as well, of the word 'documentary'. The phrase is so much more evocative than John Grierson's clinically precise description of the genre, 'the creative treatment of actuality'.

This book looks at life on the run, twenty-first century style, Documentary in the Digital Age. The Lumières' brilliant invention, the cinematograph, was a machine which filmed, processed, projected and also, being portable, it could be taken anywhere with a minimum of fuss and used to record and display to an audience the world in which they lived. The Lumières chose to film real people in real situations, never showing any interest in dramatic stories. That is why I think that they are the true fathers of the documentary form.

It has taken film technology 100 years to catch up and overtake them. A century after the first screening in Paris, we finally have a camera which can rival and outstrip the cinematograph. Granted, the digital video camera cannot project its pictures to an audience but it can play them back in the camera. And it can keep filming for long periods without having to change tapes. And it records sound. It is cheap, it is lightweight, the picture and sound quality are constantly improving, and it is user friendly. A single operator can take it anywhere and record our own contemporary lives on the run.

The invention of the DV camera has had a massive influence on documentary. So too has the development of digital video editing, sound recording and post-production, and of course also digital tools for animation. This book will not be concentrating on the camera or indeed any other particular aspect of the technology, although the technology is fundamental to the story.

It is my considered opinion that all new aesthetic developments in documentary have followed on from technical breakthroughs. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, some of the most compelling and beautiful documentaries were made, but they only really became possible after sound came to the movies. In the 1960s, the invention of 16 mm cameras with synchronous sound shepherded in the movements known variously as *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema or film on the wall. Now we have the digital technology which has liberated film-making in so many ways. In documentary, the effect has been immense.

I believe that we are now in the middle of a new golden age of documentary. What makes the

one different and therefore, for me, more exciting is that there are so many people working different styles with different approaches to the documentary genre. For years, the *vérité* aesthetic dominated documentary production and this, as a form, was often unduly restrictive and creatively stifling. Of course, some brilliant films came out of that whole movement, but I am convinced that some other brilliant films, stylistically different films, were not being made when they could and should have been made. After all, film-making was a very expensive business until recently, so the small number of television commissioning editors – still the main source of funding for most documentarists – had a great deal of power. Some of them were very narrow-minded, even conservative, in their approach.

Things are different now. Because of the lightweight, relatively inexpensive digital equipment more and more people are funding their own films, which gives them the creative freedom that my generation never had. These people, the mavericks who want to express themselves without censorship or who have projects with no obvious big audience appeal, are now leading the way, creatively speaking. Their films are often purchased after they are shot, even sometimes, after they have finished editing. Only at that stage are schedulers prepared to admit that the film-makers were right in the first place. The maverick films are everywhere. They refresh the television schedules, often get international distribution deals in cinemas and win major awards.

The situation for the documentary film-maker now is completely changed and those with belief in their own ideas have everything to gain. Each chapter in this book examines the work of one director. They are all people with strong convictions and they are all very different. I have chosen them, first, because I admire their work and, second, because they all represent a different approach, style and attitude in their films. It seems to me that documentary now has many sub-categories, or sub-genres, to use an accurate but ugly constructed expression. Each director in the book makes work that belongs in one of these sub-categories. Some of them still shoot on film, some on DigiBeta or DV. All of them work digitally on sound and editing and mixing. So the emphasis in the book is not on the technology itself but on what these people do with the technology.

The film-makers come from very different backgrounds and countries. Two are American, one is Polish, one Russian, one French, one German resident, one Irish-Portuguese, one Scottish and three English. Through looking at the work of these very different people, I want to encourage others to open themselves up to the many possibilities that are out there today in documentary production. It is an exciting time to be working in factual film and a great time for taking risks, as all of the directors in the book regularly do.

Documentary has been my passion all my working life and it has been a stimulating experience for me to write this book. I worked, myself, as a documentary film-maker for many years, mostly for television companies – the BBC, CBC Canada, Granada, Scottish Television. I have been a researcher, producer, director, executive producer and commissioning editor. Apart from a short spell as Chief Executive of the Scottish Film Council I have always worked in documentary and never wanted to do anything else. The siren calls of the fiction film industry never appealed to me.

Now I restrict myself to executive producing and teaching documentary direction. I am

Visiting Senior Tutor at the National Film and Television School in the UK and Visiting Professor at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Television in Cuba. My students in both schools come from all over the world and I also teach workshops in other countries, most recently in Ghana, where the students came from all over sub-Saharan Africa, and in the Philippines. I have written about the aspects of the work of the directors in the book that I know will interest film school students, because I know what questions they invariably ask. But I think the book will be useful also for other film-makers, indeed for anybody who is interested in documentary.

Having spent so many years working as a documentary producer/director in television, it is wonderful for me to now see the growing popularity of documentaries in the cinema. I have always believed that audiences would not be prepared to pay out good money to watch documentaries when they could watch them for nothing on television. The obvious exception to this rule for me was the USA, but only because their television is so limited in its scope and so seriously talented people, both factual and fiction filmmakers, tend to gravitate towards the cinema. Now, even in the UK, that situation is changing and I hear on a regular basis how my friends and colleagues have got themselves international distribution deals in the cinema for their documentaries. More and more, films shot on DV cameras are being blown up to 35 mm. Ten years ago, I never would have believed that was even possible.

I wanted to write this book because I wanted to share my passion for the documentary film. This is not an objective or analytical book. It is not a book of academic theory and it is not comprehensive – which would probably be an impossible task in any case. So what is it? It is a book by a film-maker for other film-makers. And it is a salute to the featured documentarists and to the many categories and sub-genres that they so creatively subvert. Put simply, it is a fan letter – to the factual film – from a lifelong supporter.

1 Errol Morris American Iconoclast



Errol Morris

Errol Morris, the American documentary film-maker, is a complex character. At university, he studied the History and Philosophy of Science, an unlikely sounding background for a popular filmmaker. But these academic influences inform all of his work. His films are always stylish but also packed with innovative ideas. They work on a number of levels and at the same time they are highly entertaining. Often, they interrogate the very form of the documentary genre which they belong. Maybe that is the reason why it took many years before the American Academy of Motion Pictures finally gave him the Oscar he deserves, for *The Fog of War* (2003), his film about Robert McNamara. The Academy is conservative in its judgements and in its ideas about form.

For years, American documentary was dominated by the style of film-making once described as 'direct cinema', now more commonly known by the French expression, *cinéma vérité*. Errol says that when he first started making movies he made a conscious attempt to break with the *vérité* tradition. He says:

You take any of the principles of vérité, I was interested in doing the exact opposite. Perhaps because of a certain contrary inclination by nature, but also it seemed to me that the idea of vérité, the metaphysical baggage of vérité, seemed to be quite false. I have nothing against vérité as a style of shooting but, to me, the idea that if you adopt a certain style of shooting, that would make what you do more truthful, strikes me as utter nonsense.

Vérité, he says, developed 'a crazy set of rules'. You are supposed to handhold the camera, use only available light and remain as unobtrusive as possible. He says that, from the beginning, his films broke those rules. He tells a story about a book that influenced him. The book was about imaginary numbers, the usual light reading you would expect from a person with postgraduate degrees in the history and philosophy of science. The book discussed the difficulty of introducing the idea of the square root of minus one. It quoted Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who described how influenced he had been by Kafka when he first read him as

teenager. Errol says that Kafka has the best opening lines in the business. Marques read the first paragraph of *Metamorphoses*, 'One fine day, Gregor woke up and found himself transformed into a giant dung beetle.' Marques said, 'I didn't know you were allowed to do that.'

As far as breaking the *vérité* rules was concerned, Errol did not know you were allowed to do that. But he did it anyway. He says about his early films:

In Gates of Heaven, Vernon, Florida, The Thin Blue Line, we always put the camera on a tripod, we tried to be as obtrusive as possible, we used the heaviest equipment we could find, people looked directly into the camera, which is considered to be the great 'no-no'. To break that cinéma vérité notion of observing without being observed, I lit everything. I can't think of a single instance where I used 'available light'. For me, available light is anything you can produce, anything you have at hand.

Errol points out that *The Thin Blue Line*, which examined the case of Randall Adams, a man who had been wrongly convicted and sent to jail for a murder he did not commit, would have had no evidentiary value at all if *vérité* was correct in its claims. Yet, he says, he is hard pushed to name another movie which resulted in a man being released from prison, not because the movie had drawn attention to the case and raised a public outcry, but because there was evidence recorded during the making of the movie that could be produced in court of law and used to prove that the major witnesses in the 1977 trial had committed perjury.

The Thin Blue Line has become one of the most influential films in recent documentary history, not only in factual film-making but also in fiction. It has become fashionable these days for fiction films to use the language of documentary, and the influence of Errol Morris can easily be spotted, particularly in films coming out of Hollywood. At the same time, *The Thin Blue Line* also uses many of the techniques of fiction. At the time of its release this caused great controversy and was mainly responsible, Errol was told, for stopping the film from being nominated for an Oscar. The re-enacted sequences, highly cinematic in their execution, were said to make the film 'not a proper documentary'. Nowadays, the techniques are commonly used in documentary though, it should be said, rarely as skilfully as in *The Thin Blue Line*.

The movie opens with a simple credit sequence, with Philip Glass music playing over the graphics. The first three shots of the film show the Dallas skyline at night, lights flickering, the back sky blue. The scene is vaguely familiar. Something about it is reminiscent of the television series *Dallas*, still hugely popular all over the world when *The Thin Blue Line* was made. The Glass music emphasizes the feeling that something dramatic is about to happen. Over the third shot, a voice-over begins. A man tells how he and his brother were driving to California from Ohio and stopped in Dallas. One more cityscape shot and then the picture cuts to the person talking. He is not identified, in the conventional manner, with a caption or commentary. The background picture gives no clues. He simply tells his story. He is looking directly at the audience. He says he got a job within half a day of arriving in the city, 'as if it was meant to be here'. With the Glass music still running quietly under the picture, it cuts to

revolving red light, a police car light. Another man, younger, wearing a red shirt, is not talking. He tells how he ran away from home a couple of times, at 16 took a pistol and shotgun, stole a neighbour's car and ended up coming to Dallas.

The young man describes a night out with the first man – who he names as Randall Adams and his brother. There was a lot of drinking, marijuana and a movie, no suggestion of anything unusual. The only hint of menace up until now has been the softly playing music of Philip Glass. Randall Adams then appears, expressing what sounds like an internal monologue. He got up and went to work on Saturday morning. Why did he meet that kid? Why did he run out of gas at that time? He doesn't know. Suddenly, the film cuts to a dramatized reconstruction. This, the first of a number of re-enactments of the crime, fundamental to the story, is carried on picture and music alone. The first shot shows a car pulled up at the roadside, a police vehicle behind it. The scene continues with very short shots, dramatically lit. The point of view seems to be that of the driver of the car, looking through his rear view mirror, seeing a policeman getting out of the police car and coming up to him. We only see the driver's hand. When the policeman is level with the car of the driver who has been stopped, a hand clutching a gun begins to shoot. The cutting is now very fast. From the gun to police artists' line drawings of the bullet wounds the police victim suffered. The dead policeman lies by the side of the road, a foot stamps on an accelerator and there is the sound of a car driving off at speed. Now a policewoman jumps out of the police car and shoots at the disappearing vehicle.

A morgue photograph of the dead policeman is cut with pictures of his bullet-riddled uniform and a colour picture of him smiling, in uniform, a handsome young man. There follows a rostrum sequence, cleverly conceived. A newspaper front page, the camera tracks in to the headline: 'Officer's killer sought'. Then the picture story: 'Officer killed Sunday. Robert Woods'. The camera roams around, picking out key words: '12.30 a.m.'; 'Oh my gosh'. Then, a huge enlarged, grainy picture of the victim. Another quote, 'The description could not be the assailant.' The date 'November 29' mixes into 'December 22 1976'. The camera pans down to a picture of an official-looking guy, holding onto the arm of a hapless arrestee. A voice-over interview begins. The picture cuts to the man we saw at the beginning of the film, Randall Adams. He is the man in the newspaper photograph, but no longer resembles him. He has been in jail for many years.

The film now begins a detailed analysis of what actually happened on that night, 27 November 1976. There are a number of interviewees, police and public, lawyers, witnesses, all talking to or just past, the camera. They are all framed the same way, head and shoulders shots, no camera movement. There are no name captions but it is obvious from the content of the interviews what role each person plays in the story. It is a painstaking investigation, tracing and retracing, step by step, the events of that night and the backgrounds of the convicted man and the chief witness for the prosecution. Randall Adams is convicted but is he really guilty? Ultimately, the mystery is solved. Adams is innocent and the real killer is the young man in the red shirt, David Harris.

While the story itself is utterly absorbing, I am just as interested in the visual, musical and graphic techniques that Morris uses to drive his story along. The simply framed interviews are compelling because the people talking are articulate and lively characters with a murder

mystery to tell. In principle, however, we can see a good factual cop story on television any day. What distinguishes this film from investigative television is the skilful storytelling and the juxtaposition of interview, reconstruction and other diverse visual illustration. The key images in the film revolve around the scene of crime itself. As the story progresses, the point of view of the camera changes as different witnesses discuss what they claim actually happened. The murder of the policeman is shown over and over again, but each time it is filmed from a different angle and each time the audience is being given new, usually contradictory information. Errol says, 'It is a re-enactment of lies. Not reality. It is unreality, falsehood.' Based on the point of view of the witnesses, you are treated to the spectacle of imagery which you are told shows you something of the real world but which is untrue.' The high production values of these episodes, stylishly shot like a Film Noir movie, enhance the feeling that this cannot be real, we are watching fiction. Then the picture cuts back to a simply shot interviewee and we realize that it is indeed a factual account we are hearing. But which of the people in this film are lying and who is telling the truth?

Sometimes the visual material is used in an almost satirical way, debunking what an interviewee has said, or is about to say. At one point, the lawyers for the defence explain that the judge at Adams's trial would not let them introduce evidence about a crime spree that David Harris had been on. One of them says that she felt that the reason why the judge was determined to put Randall Adams on trial and not David Harris was because Adams was 21 and could be given the death sentence, while Harris was only 16 and could not. An artist's impression of a scene in the courtroom shows a picture of the trial judge. So we recognize him when he appears as the next interviewee, talking about how he learned to respect the law from his father, who was an FBI man in Chicago in the 1930s. As he speaks, the picture cuts to an old black and white movie showing a man in 1930s clothes shooting a rifle. The judge is still talking when a classic movie episode, in which John Dillinger is assassinated, is shown. He says his father was there when it happened and tells with glee how, as a child, he had been told about the people who dipped their handkerchiefs in Dillinger's blood for souvenirs. On the picture, guns are blazing, there is absolute mayhem on screen but no soundtrack, only the voice-over interview with the judge and Philip Glass's music. The sequence is vintage Errol Morris, acutely perceived and wittily executed. It is also a very effective way of underlining the casual attitude to the death penalty that prevails in the state of Texas, a penalty that could be handed down to the unfortunate Randall Adams.

Adams was convicted in May 1977, on the basis of evidence given by David Harris and two other key witnesses who came forward very late in the day and perjured themselves. He was still in jail in December 1986, when Errol interviewed David Harris about the murder, for the last time, on sound only. The final shots in this richly cinematic film are of a cassette recorder filling the frame and filmed from every conceivable angle. The starkness of the image makes the content of the interview even more shocking.

EM: Is he innocent?

DH: Did you ask him?

EM: Well he has always said he is innocent.

DH: There you go. Didn't believe him huh? Criminals always lie.

EM: Well what do you think about whether or not he's innocent?

DH: I'm sure he is.

EM: How can you be sure?

DH: Because I'm the one who knows.

EM: Were you surprised that the police blamed him?

DH: They didn't blame him. I did. A scared 16-year-old kid. Sure would like to get out of it if you can.

The interview ends with Harris asserting that Adams is probably only in jail because he would not give Harris a place to sleep for the night after he had helped him when he ran out of gas.

A final caption reveals that Adams has been in jail for 11 years. David Harris is on death row in Huntsville, Texas for a murder he committed in 1985. Material recorded for *The Thin Blue Line* was introduced as evidence at an appeal by Randall Adams. The witnesses who lied were proved to be perjurers and Randall Adams was finally set free.

Mr Death (2000) is another film which caused a great deal of controversy. It is subtitled *The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr.* The opening credit sequence owes something to the Hammer House of Horror genre of movie making. The music, composed by Caleb Sampson, is pure Ealing Studios, circa 1955. A series of images, intercut with black flash frames, show what looks like a mad scientist's laboratory lit up by the lightning that comes with an electrical storm. It is obviously a set, elaborately dressed and lit. Almost subliminally, we see a man sitting there. This must be Mr Death. You get the feeling that Errol and his regular collaborator, production designer Ted Bafaloukos, had a lot of fun putting this elaborate pastiche together.

In the last shot in the sequence, a light shines directly on the man and we see him more clearly, albeit briefly. The picture cuts to black for a full five seconds. Then, we see a man's eyes reflected in the mirror of a moving car. He is wearing glasses. It is the man we just saw in the laboratory. Cut to a hand on the driving wheel. These two shots are in black and white. Soothing, contemporary music plays over the pictures and the man's voice-over begins. He says, 'I became involved in the manufacture of execution equipment because I was concerned with the deplorable condition of the hardware that's in most of the state's prisons which generally results in torture, prior to death.' Cut again, this time to colour footage, back of head shot, the driver suddenly seems like a rather ordinary-looking fellow. He carries on talking. 'A number of years ago I was asked by a state to look at their electric chair. I was surprised at the condition of the equipment and I indicated to them what changes should be made to bring the equipment up to the point of doing a humane execution.'

A humane execution? Who is this man and what sort of a world is Errol Morris inviting us to join him in? When I spoke to him, Errol asked the questions himself:

What is going on in Leuchter's head? He has a whole set of beliefs which one could honestly describe as being utterly repellent. He is in love with the death penalty. I think that is the best way to describe it. He loves execution devices. Loves them. And he has become a Holocaust denier. One question I have, is he for real? Is this just some whacky

joke or has he really invested in these beliefs? Is he an anti-Semite or a Nazi, who is this man? And is it possible to hold a set of utterly wrong, ridiculous, pernicious beliefs and still imagine oneself to be a good guy?

And this is where I suddenly begin to understand why this philosopher/film-maker wanted make this film. He says:

It is an endlessly interesting story to me because people, after all, do generally believe in their own rectitude, do not think of themselves as bad people or evil agents. They see themselves as acting from the best of all possible motives. Leuchter sees himself as having a collection of genuine heroic traits. He is the Florence Nightingale of Death Row. He is Galileo besieged by the forces of repression and ignorance. A true scientist. People said that they were appalled by my suggestion that Leuchter could be an example of Everyman. I loved the idea.

In the early part of the film, we are invited into the life of this 'true scientist'. He talks directly to camera, in the style Errol Morris has made his own. He talks about his research, his experiments and his quest to perfect the art of killing prisoners humanely. While the talking camera interviews are always static, the camera roams around him in other scenes, often tilting at an extreme angle, suggesting the off-centre view of the world that Leuchter holds. In one truly bizarre sequence, he talks about his health routine. It starts with him addressing the audience directly, 'I have often been asked, generally by some kind of adverse party, whether I sleep at night, or how well I sleep at night. My answer is always the same. I sleep very well at night and I sleep with a comforting thought, knowing that those persons who are being executed with my equipment have a better chance of having a painless, more humane and dignified execution.' The picture cuts to a silhouette shot, a hand pulls down a handle, the sounds are reminiscent of the echo in a prison hall. The next shot is a close-up of a spoonful of coffee. So, maybe it was the lever on a coffee machine we saw, not an execution after all.



Errol and cameraman Peter Donahue at Auschwitz-Birkenau

The film now moves, visually, into the style that is pure commercial advertising. Turn the sound down and you are looking at a slick, beautifully produced cinema advertisement. The sound is something else. Leuchter, in voice-over, is saying he loves coffee and it does not bother his ulcer. He tells the story about how he went to see his doctor years ago and was asked how much coffee he drank a day. He said 40 cups. The doctor repeated the question, thinking he was joking. He was not. The doctor then asked how many cigarettes he smoked a day. He said six packs. The doctor told him he should be dead. Now Fred is sitting at a counter in a café; he is talking about a woman who came into his life. She was a waitress and he was a good tipper. The woman's voice takes over. She says he came into the café on his way to the gun club. He taught her to shoot. This is the woman who married him.

They had only been married a month when he took her to Poland, the only honeymoon she had. They stayed at the Auschwitz Hotel, once the headquarters of the German officers who ran the infamous wartime concentration camp. A man called Ernst Zundel had invited Fred to carry out some research for him. Zundel was a Holocaust denier who was on trial in Canada as a result of his publication, 'Did Six Million Really Die?' Described in one of the film's captions as 'Revisionist Publisher/Broadcaster', he says in an interview that you cannot just open up a phone book and find an expert on gas chambers. 'Fred Leuchter was our only hope.' So Fred went to Auschwitz to take samples from the walls of what he called 'presumed gas chambers' to test later and establish whether any trace of cyanide gas could be found in the fabric of the buildings. His every move was recorded by a Canadian video cameraman.

His wife of one month, Carol, was given the job of lookout, standing in the doorway in the freezing cold. Fred did not want to get caught violating these internationally sensitive historical sites.

Leuchter made detailed drawings of the buildings and kept notes also. These, together with the video footage, were produced in evidence at the trial of Zundel. Fred sent his samples, chiselled from the walls of the Auschwitz gas chambers, to a laboratory for testing for traces of cyanide gas. The lab found no traces, not surprisingly, because, as one of the laboratory experts explains later in the film, the samples were taken from too deep into the wall face. Fred stood by his findings and for a time became internationally notorious, the expert witness defending the Holocaust deniers.

It is in this section of the film that it seems to depart from the integrated style and form that it had at the beginning. Understandably, use is made of the roughly shot video footage showing Fred at work in Auschwitz, which was produced in court. This is necessary because it has been exhibited as evidence, but it jars slightly because it is visually less stylish and imaginative than the camerawork in the early parts of the film. More surprisingly, however, this clever and elegant film now makes an unlikely gear shift and becomes, just for a while, something else. The historian, Robert Jan van Pelt, appears, talking to camera, saying how important it was for him to follow in the footsteps of Leuchter and to check his every result, his every move. This is a standard device, familiar to news or current affairs television audiences. The expert witness, the voice of reason, is there to provide the other point of view, what we used to call 'balance'. He makes an efficient job of proving that the physical and documentary evidence for the truth of the historical claims about the murder of millions during the Nazi Holocaust are verifiably and demonstrably true. The sequences with him are skilfully conceived and edited, but for a while Leuchter is no longer the dominant voice in the movie.

The film now introduces a number of voices. As we learn that the Canadian court has brought in a verdict of guilty, other witnesses, for and against the line that Fred has espoused, appear. While his own star seems to be on the rise, he is invited to attend meetings of extreme right parties in other parts of the world; other voices condemn and dismiss him. This part of the film combines interviews, archive film and simple graphics. For Errol Morris, this is close to conventional documentary television in its approach, but he clearly finds it necessary to make the point and clarify the storyline.

When Fred does return to dominate the film again, the glorious sense of surreality combined with a sad, almost tragic, sense of pity for a man who got it so wrong that he wrecked his own life. Again addressing the audience directly, he tells how he cannot get work because of his testimony in Canada. In a moment of almost unbelievable dislocation from the attitudes of normal people, Fred explains that because prison authorities would no longer employ him, he was reduced to putting an unfinished device, a lethal injection machine, up for sale in the *Want Advertiser*. After a lot of negative publicity, he says that the Attorney General had to announce that it was not illegal to sell such a machine. So Fred, still talking to camera, says that if any of us, the audience, would like to buy half a lethal injection machine, we should contact him.

At the end of the film Fred is in California, having gone there with the offer of a job which d

not materialize. His wife has left him, he is totally broke, has had his rental cars taken away from him, his hotel room has been locked up with all his belongings in it. He is wandering along the side of a busy motorway when the voice of British Holocaust denier, David Irving, is heard. Irving says of Leuchter's research at Auschwitz, 'It was an act of criminal simplicity. He had no idea of what he was blundering into.'

I asked Errol why he felt it necessary to include the fact-based historian or, for that matter, the interviews both for and against the Holocaust argument. Surely every halfway conscious human being on this earth knows all about the Holocaust and only a tiny bunch of weirdos doubt that it happened? He explained. Before the film was finished, he showed it to students at Harvard. (This was before the 'balance' material had been included.) He says that some of the students asked why Leuchter had not found trace cyanide and wondered if he could be right. 'Some people watch films in an uncritical fashion and one has to exercise caution for that reason alone. I wanted people to think about Fred's self-deception, the nature of his delusion. If people didn't see it clearly, the whole purpose of the movie would be lost. So the clarification, if you like, was re-proving something that had been proved many times before.' He says that the students, looking at the unfinished film, were asking a legitimate question: 'Maybe not politically correct but legitimate.'

Errol says that at the end of the student screening he decided it would be morally indefensible to release a movie like this, where there was any room for doubt. He says, 'The question was legitimate, so I examined it. I am a Jew. Have I ever entertained doubts that poison gas was used at Auschwitz. I am terribly sorry but no, I have not. Yet I put this movie together about this man who doubted the Holocaust and some people thought I was endorsing his view.' He says, with some irony, 'I thought, this is not good.' And he adds, 'I often joked that in my next film I would prove that the earth was round and that there were heavier than air flying machines.'

A Brief History of Time (1992) considers the life and work of the brilliant physicist and writer Stephen Hawking. It was inevitable that this man and his philosophy would interest Errol, with his scientific background and his fascination with what he describes as a character's internal space, their mental landscape. Hawking contracted motor neuron disease as a young man and has been confined to a wheelchair for many years. He gradually lost the use of his voice and now communicates to the world through a computer. The movie is based on Hawking's best-selling book of the same name.

Errol read the book on the plane, flying over to meet Hawking at his home in England. He was delighted by the book, which he says is not really a pedagogical work, it is a romance novel about Hawking's life and work. He says that he does not like psychoanalytical biography where you provide some reductionist explanation of why people are the way they are. However, he was fascinated by the way Hawking made those connections himself. In the book, Hawking writes about his now famous scientific theory about the black hole. Errol says 'This region of space/time from which no information can escape, cut off from the rest of the universe, when he writes about this, is he talking about himself?' He says the book is full of reflections and metaphors and illusions that are so much a part of Hawking, the man, that he knew he was going to enjoy playing with them in his film.

The film opens with a starry night sky. Hawking's voice, an almost sci-fi delivery because it is communicated through a computer, asks, 'Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Did the universe have a beginning and, if so, what happened before then? Where did the universe come from and where is it going?' So far, so regular science programme. Except that, in the middle of the voice-over, superimposed on the starry sky is an animated shot of a chicken's head. The film has hardly got going and Morris is already playing. We now see Stephen for the first time. Only his eyes, wearing spectacles, an impossibly young-looking man. He is clicking on a mouse, staring at a computer screen, which is responding to his instructions.

The next sequence features Hawking's mother, an admirably stoical woman with a striking resemblance to her son. She too has one of those 'forever young' faces. She is saying how lucky the family have been; everybody has disasters but they have survived. She goes on to tell how she bought a book at Blackwells in Oxford while waiting for Stephen to be born. It was an astronomical atlas. How prophetic, a sister-in-law said later. She talks about the beauty of the night sky when she was able to ride in a train across one of the London bridges when the bombing had stopped – this was in the middle of the Second World War. She describes lying on the ground at home, looking through a telescope at the night sky. She says, 'Stephen always had a strong sense of wonder and I could see how the stars would draw him – and further than the stars.'

In the middle of the sequence with Stephen's mother, there are two evocative archival photographs: one, right of frame, his father, holding him as a baby; the other, left of frame, the mother in identical pose. Stephen's voice runs over these classic family album shots. 'How real is time? Will it ever come to an end? Where does the difference between the past and the future come from? Why do we remember the past but not the future?' These few opening minutes are brilliantly conceived, combining the personal and the theoretical, the domestic and the scientific, drawing in to the picture even the most resistant of viewers, many of whom would surely never have considered reading a scientific book about the origins of the universe. In my view, it is the decision to foreground the mother which makes this film not only intellectually stimulating – which it was bound to be with a hero like Hawking – but also really accessible to a popular audience. It is not a pure science film, it is also a film about the heroic struggle against terrible odds of a very courageous man. Somehow, it is the philosophical acceptance of his fate and the pride in his achievement by his mother that makes the whole story more moving and altogether more human. At one point, talking about Stephen, she says to camera, 'He does believe intensely in the power of the human mind ... Why shouldn't you think about the unthinkable? He's a searcher.' Errol says that, after a screening of the film, Stephen said to him, 'Thank you for making my mother a star.'

Of all the Morris documentaries, this is the most highly stylized. This is partly because of the logistical problems, but also because it seems to suit the spirit of scientific challenge that pervades the film. Errol says that when he was discussing the movie with his team before they started he said, 'What if we made a documentary without a single "real" image?' (These are my inverted commas, by the way, not his.) The first decision was how to film Stephen, described by Errol as the first non-talking talking head. It seemed obvious that the task of interviewing him would not be the same as the task of filming him. A very unusual challenge. Errol decided that they needed to create a 'dictionary' of Stephen Hawking shots with different

lighting and different angles. The other challenge was writing the text with Stephen for the voice-over. They put together a script from things he had written and interviews Errol had done with him. They already had his voice recorded on a computer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Errol lives and works. (Hawking refers to this town as the pseudo-Cambridge, a typically British joke at the expense of the *arriviste* American universities. Hawking is an alumnus of Cambridge, England, having graduated originally from Oxford, of course.)

They recreated Hawking's office in the studio, copying accurately his real space, including the Marilyn Monroe poster, which surprised me. All the other interviews are conducted in sets made up and built by designers. All the houses, all the offices are studio built. When I heard this it came as rather a relief, because my recollection of scientists' offices is that they look nothing like that. The men are shot in sharp focus with the background visible but not obtrusive. The eye concentrates on the person speaking; just as well since most of the time they are asking for a lot of concentration, at least from the non-scientists in the audience.

Morris plays with imagery, as he always said he would. There are recurring ideas, used metaphorically, to emphasize a point. The map of the solar system, where stars are represented by tiny pearls, first appears in Stephen's mother's introduction and is reprised again at the end. A cup and saucer fall onto a tiled floor, breaking into pieces but are later restored, when the action is reversed. This is history, going forward, then backward. Time itself is represented by a flying wristwatch, which turns and turns and floats through space. Naturally, it is a Rolex. The production designer is once again Ted Bafaloukos and the music by Philip Glass.

At the end of the film, echoing the beginning, Hawking takes the floor. He says:

If we do understand a complete theory of the universe, that should, in time, in broad principle, be understandable by everyone, not just a few scientists, then we should all, philosophers, scientists and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason. For then we would know the mind of God.

Errol's Academy Award-winning film *The Fog of War* is, on the surface, a simple enough construct. It consists of a long interview with Robert S. McNamara, who was United States Secretary of Defence under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. The interview is interspersed with archive film. McNamara had never given an interview before and now, in his old age, he talked frankly and revealingly about some of the major events in recent American history and the pivotal position he held in the US government. As pure history, it is fascinating but, as always with Errol Morris, it is much more complex than that. Through the story of McNamara, Morris is exploring themes that have always fascinated him, big themes like the nature of good and evil and mankind's endless capacity for self-deception.

Of course, the film was controversial. Morris was taken to task for only interviewing McNamara. He says, 'I always wanted to make a movie with just one person. You're not supposed to make a movie with just one person.' He says that he had been deflected from his original idea, in *Mr Death*, of making a film around a single interviewee. In *The Fog of War*, he

achieved that ambition. He tells, with some amusement, about one of the challenges he received after *The Fog of War* was premiered. 'I was asked by a journalist at the New York Film Festival if I was aware that I had only interviewed one person.' He hesitates before repeating his considered answer, 'I said, "Yes. I was aware of that."'

Talking to him about this whole issue, I was reminded of his pleasure in that mischievous Marques quotation: 'I didn't know you were allowed to do that.' He goes on to explain his reasons for deciding 'to do that'. He says of the McNamara film, 'It's not balanced. Not balanced, by choice. In fact, I'm not even sure that I believe in balance. I'm pretty sure I don't. I'm not sure what it means. Is it a way of avoiding controversy, of showing you're open minded? A way of actually saying nothing, under the guise of saying something?' In my view the film does, in fact, have a balance, an internal balance which comes from McNamara himself, gently encouraged by the voice-off questioning from Morris. Looking back 'in tranquility', at the age of 85, he talks with great candour about the eventful times he lived through and questions his own role in some of the most momentous events in contemporary history. Like the fire bombing of Tokyo by US forces towards the end of World War II, which killed more people than the atomic bombs dropped later by the western allies. Like the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1961/2, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Finally, the Vietnam War, with its carnage on both sides and the chemical warfare practised by the United States with the use of napalm and Agent Orange.

Errol rarely asks questions on camera in his films, but in this one we hear his voice quite often. The voice has the quality almost of a heckler at a political meeting. Unlike the modulated delivery of the average television journalist, neck-miked and conversational in tone, he sounds as if he is interrupting the flow and being slightly provocative. He says that this was deliberate but a difficult decision to make editorially – how much of his voice to put in. Eventually, the rationale was mostly to do with clarification. He points out that not everybody is familiar with recent American political history. So, when McNamara is talking about the time when the Soviet Union, under Khrushchev, put missiles on Cuban soil, 90 miles from the Florida coast, Errol felt he had to interrupt and ask him, 'But didn't we try to invade Cuba' and later, 'Didn't we try to assassinate Castro?' He says these questions were there to clarify the situation; in a sense, a reality check for the audience. 'It was important to remind the viewer that the Soviet Union did not put missiles into Cuba for no reason.'

A regular feature of Errol Morris's work from the beginning has been his refusal to conform to the documentary convention of interviewees looking off camera, to right or left, apparently addressing a person the audience never sees and rarely hears. He has even invented a system which he calls the Interrotron, a way in which the interviewee can look directly at the camera while also seeing the image of the person conducting the interview. This has the effect of having the interviewee apparently addressing the audience directly, while the traditional technique appears to exclude the audience in some way from a conversation of which it is merely eavesdropping. At the same time, the Interrotron allows the director to maintain eye contact with the interviewee, and this was particularly important in the conversation with Robert McNamara, a man who appeared, perhaps for the first time, to be examining his conscience and his life's work.

In another significant way, this film is different stylistically than some of the other movies

While in earlier films he often used fades to black – often long enough, I am sure, to cause moments of panic in transmission control rooms when they are shown on television – in the film he regularly uses the jump cut. It is as if he is drawing attention to the form he has chosen, in a sense deliberately interrogating the form itself. Right at the beginning, in the prologue title sequence, McNamara is asking, 'Is this map at the right height, is that alright for the television people?' After the titles he is having a conversation with the offscreen film-maker. He says he knows 'the sentence' can be cut to explain what he means to say. We don't know what he is talking about and we never find out. He asks is that OK. Errol's voice off camera says, 'Go ahead.' Often he is filmed with more headroom than is acceptable in conventional shooting. At other times there is more space on the left or right of frame, giving a sense of imbalance to the picture. These are all deliberate editorial decisions to do the things you are not allowed to do.

Some people questioned Errol's non-judgemental attitude in his interviewing of McNamara and said that he should have been more aggressive. I am quite sure that it would have been a waste of time to do that. McNamara is a brilliant man and highly defended emotionally. Errol's technique paid off. He explains what actually happened, 'Out of nowhere, McNamara makes connections. Self-serving as this may sound, I do not believe these connections would have been made if I had not adopted a non-adversarial point of view.' I do not think that is self-serving and I am sure he is right.

One of the most shocking episodes in the film, for me and the friends with whom I first saw it, was the description of the fire bombing of Tokyo in 1945, at the end of the Second World War. People of my generation, the baby boomers, who grew up after the war into what was hoped would be a permanent peace, are reasonably familiar with the moral arguments about the Vietnam War. Many of us were active at the time, demonstrating, lobbying, helping draft dodgers to escape from the USA. So I am still moved by the powerful emotional punch of hearing the presidential tapes from Johnson's Oval Office, recently declassified, with McNamara trying to be diplomatic in his disagreements with an increasingly bellicose LBJ. One of the fascinating discussions about the escalation of the war, justified by accounts of attacks on US forces, like the events in the Gulf of Tonkin, some of which later turned out to be false. The details of the Vietnam War continue to shock but for me, personally, there is something even more terrible about hearing McNamara's account of what he calls 'The War with Japan'.

I think that this episode incorporates all of the strengths, visual and editorial, of *The Fog of War*. McNamara was a soldier, working under the command of General LeMay. The Second World War was nearly over when this incident happened. McNamara says, 'I was on the Island of Guam in March 1945 and in a single night we burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians, men women and children, in Tokyo.' A question from the floor – Errol's voice. 'Were you aware that this was going to happen?' 'Well I was part of a mechanism that in a sense recommended it.' McNamara wrote a report analysing bombing operations, particularly the use of the super bomber, the B29, looking at how to make them more efficient. The General in charge decided to use the B29, bring it down low, where it would be more accurate, and fire bomb Tokyo. McNamara says he does not want to absolve himself from blame for what later happened, although he only wrote a report. After the bombing, he attended the debriefing. The pilot complained about the low flying and the loss of his wingman. McNamara describes the

General's answer. This was a man of few words. As he describes what the General says, he begins to show emotion. It almost seems as if he will cry. The General said, 'I sent him there. This hurts me as much as it hurts you. But we destroyed Tokyo.' McNamara adds, 'It was a wooden city. We just burned it.' The General argued that American troops would be in danger if Tokyo had not been destroyed.

A feature of the film is the chapter headings, which contain the lessons McNamara has learned from life. This one says, 'Proportionality should be a guideline in war.' The American went on to bomb city after city. McNamara says that 67 cities were bombed; each time 50–90 per cent of the population was killed. This was before the nuclear bombs were dropped on Japan. He goes on to speculate about war crimes. He imagines a conversation with his General, 'OK McNamara, how many deaths is proportional?' He says that if America had lost its war in Japan, the two of them might well have been considered to be war criminals. He says you are only a criminal if you lose. This is a moment of extraordinary honesty, coming from a man who some people do believe to be a war criminal.

In many ways the visual elements in this film are fairly standard. None of the impish humor from some of the earlier films is evident here, rightly, given the seriousness of the subject. But as usual with Morris, it is the editing and the graphic work which raises it out of the realm of conventional history films. In the Japanese bombing section, great use is made of contemporary handwritten documents. When McNamara talks about efficiency, close-ups of statistics, lists of meaningless numbers are featured, algebraic calculations, none of them in context, just numbers. Over and over we see archive film of the terrible destruction, the exact place never specified; this is simply edited to increase the emotion level. It is intercut with colour footage from the Japanese campaign of clean-cut American soldiers, pointing at maps of the region and politely chatting to their General. At the end of the chapter, a symbol sequence, repeated through the film, of dominoes collapsing in tidy lines across a map of Asia reminds members of the audience who are old or educated enough of one of the most pernicious doctrines of the US anticommunist zealots, the 'domino effect'.

Another telling moment in the film is the story of Norman Morrison, a Quaker who burned himself to death under McNamara's window at the Pentagon. McNamara was Secretary for Defence under Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War was at its bloodiest. This was a terrible moment for America and especially for McNamara. The story of Norman Morrison, who sacrificed his life as a protest against the war, is deeply moving and McNamara tells it with some feeling. Morrison was holding a baby and he doused himself with petrol. Bystanders begged him to save the child and at the last moment he threw the baby into the crowd and she was saved. His wife issued a statement, McNamara explains. She said that human beings must stop killing each other. Then he says something really surprising. He says he agreed with her. He says, 'How much evil must we do in order to do good?' While he is speaking the picture cuts away to close-ups of three phrases, one after the other: 'Ethical Truths', 'Moral Law', 'Free Will'. McNamara goes on to compare General LeMay to Sherman, who torched Atlanta during the Civil War. They both felt that war was cruel. But LeMay was trying to save the nation and was prepared to do whatever killing was necessary. 'It's a very difficult position for sensitive human beings to be in. Morrison was one of those. I think I was.'

For Errol Morris, this is one of the key moments in the film. Morrison was a pacifist who died

in a protest against war, McNamara was running the war from his office at the Pentagon, how could they possibly be alike? But he says he asked himself, 'How can McNamara even say such a thing? Then another thought came. What if he really is like Morrison? What if he really was operating with the best of intentions, in some kind of inner agony? What does that mean? It raises a whole lot of deep questions about the nature of character, about free will, and ethics, ideas at the centre of this story. That is why it engages me in a really powerful way.'

I wondered if Errol felt that the coming of digital technology had affected his work in any significant way. He said it most certainly has. His interviews are different. *The Fog of War* is a good example of this. Every previous interview was on film, but he shot McNamara on 24-frame, high-def. digital video. He says there is a difference:

Now an interview that used to be 11 minutes, a 100-foot roll of 35 mm runs 11 minutes, then you have to take the mag off, unload it. Put another roll in. Now interviews can go on forever. I have actually interviewed for 11 hours in one day. The length of the cassette is close to two hours. Although that makes very little difference because you can eject it and put in another one in a matter of seconds, you don't need slates or any of the old apparatus of shooting on film. Also the 24-frame, high-def. Sony system is quite beautiful.

He also says his films have changed as a result of digital editing. His movie *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* (1997) tells the parallel stories of a lion tamer, a wildlife expert in search of the African mole rat, a gardener who specializes in topiary and works for a rich and eccentric old lady, and a scientist who designs robots. It is a film which is itself fast, although certainly not cheap, and the central theme for me is the need to control or be controlled. It is a highly entertaining film which nonetheless raises serious questions. It includes many elements pictorially. There is Super8 and standard 8 mm, 16 mm, Super 16, 35 mm. There is material transferred to film from old video cassettes of old movies, also 35 mm filmed off television. It would have been quite impossible to make without digital editing.

In *The Thin Blue Line*, before he used digital editing, he shot the bulk of the film on 16 mm and the reconstructions on 35 mm. There was not a lot of money so, for the edit, they had to do basic reduction onto 16 mm and it looked terrible. It made editing difficult because they were not sure about the quality of the picture. When they saw the final print back on 35 mm, it looked terrific, so it worked out but obviously it was a worrying process. Errol says:

The digital editing system gives every form of media an equal vote. It gets down to ones and zeros on the hard drive, so it matters not at all where the original material came from – VT, whatever. For the first time you can think about film and VT in a totally different way. You can see them as a kind of artist's palette. I don't believe we will move to all digital, although films will be edited digitally and delivered digitally. You can shoot on Super8 and use it as a kind of texture in a whole range of styles and shapes and forms. Fantastic. It hasn't destroyed film, it has changed the nature of how we use film and film itself has become part of a wider universe of possibilities.

With the exception of *A Brief History of Time*, Errol Morris has produced and raised the funding for all of his films. In that one, he worked, as he puts it, as 'a director for hire' and

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