

The Buffalo Film Seminars



February 20, 2004 (VIII:6½)

ERROL MORRIS

THE FOG OF WAR

2003

Island). *Biography from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia*: "Morris' fame as a documentarian of odd human behavior gained national attention with the extraordinary [The Thin Blue Line](#) (1988), detailing the wrongful arrest and conviction of Randall Dale Adams, who was accused of killing a Dallas policeman. The film was so convincing that it resulted in a new trial for Adams and his eventual release from prison. Morris, who actually worked as a private eye for two years, was a philosophy student at U.C. Berkeley when filmmaker Werner Herzog encouraged him to make his first film, the well-received documentary [Gates of Heaven](#) (1978), about California pet cemeteries. (In fact, Herzog said he'd eat his shoe if Morris completed the film; his fulfillment of the bet was chronicled by Les Blank in the 1979 short [Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe](#). His follow-up feature was [Vernon, Florida](#) (1981, about the elderly people in that small town). After [The Thin Blue Line](#) he directed [A Brief History of Time](#) (1992), about the wheelchair-bound scientific genius Stephen W. Hawking. Morris' lone attempt at fictional filmmaking to date, [The Dark Wind](#) (1991) did not receive theatrical release, and went straight to video."

ERROL MORRIS (5 February 1948, Hewlett, Long

Island). *Bio from IMDB.COM*: "He graduated from the University of Berkeley in California in 1937 with a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics and Philosophy. He went on to earn a Masters degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration in 1939 and had a job of teacher there from 1940 to 1943. He left in 1943 to join the Army Air Force, where he was awarded the Legion of Merit and promoted to lieutenant colonel before going on inactive duty in April 1946. After leaving the military he was hired by [Henry Ford II](#) who wanted educated people to help him modernize the Ford Motor Company that was near bankruptcy after years of bad management by its founder, Henry Ford. He was elected as a director of the company in 1957, and became the president in 1960. His short stay as president came to an end in January 1961 when President [John F. Kennedy](#) appointed him as Secretary of Defense. In October 1962, he was one of the key officials in the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the Vietnam War, McNamara found himself increasingly at odds with the administration's policies, particularly when [Lyndon Johnson](#) became president after the assassination of [John F. Kennedy](#). His growing opposition to both US involvement in Vietnam and deployment of a major missile defense shield troubled military officials. Robert McNamara resigned from office on 29 February 1968. President Johnson [awarded](#) McNamara the Medal of Freedom and the Distinguished Service Medal. He became president of the World Bank Group of Institutions in April of 1968, retiring in 1981. Since his retirement he has written 5 books and spoken on a variety of humanitarian subjects, which earned him numerous honorary degrees and prizes."

J. Hoberman: "A '60s Mr. Death Explains the Calculus of Military Slaughter (*Village Voice*)"

In a year distinguished by many strong documentaries, none feels more important than *The Fog of War*. Indeed, Errol Morris's new essay, a/k/a "Robert McNamara and the Ring of Power," is almost ridiculously relevant and not just because it's impossible to see McNamara's steely smile and jaunty certitude without thinking "Donald Rumsfeld."

In the deepest sense, *The Fog of War* is about the inadequacy of human intelligence. Morris's portrait of the former secretary of defense and prime architect of the Vietnam War, has been culled from over 20 hours of interviews. Elegantly annotated with archival footage and declassified White House tapes, *The Fog of War* allows this disarming 86-year-old raconteur to reveal what he was taught by the Cuban missile crisis (don't put your faith in

Although McNamara was clearly and profoundly corrupted by power, he does not come across as a grandstanding prevaricator like Henry Kissinger. One may be amazed to hear this

rational behavior) and to detail his lesser-known experiences as contributor to the World War II firebombing of Japan and pioneer of the automobile seat belt.

For Morris, who, like McNamara, studied philosophy at Berkeley, the former secretary is an epistemological case study. Explaining how we landed in Vietnam, McNamara not only supports Morris's contention that "we see what we want to believe," but demonstrates the implicit hubris. The very lessons that McNamara purports to have learned at John Kennedy's side, eyeball-to-eyeball with Nikita Khrushchev, seemed utterly forgotten once his new master, Lyndon Johnson, inherited the White House and the Indochinese quagmire.

octogenarian powerhouse abruptly launch into a critique of U.S. unilateralism. But one may also well wonder how a man so obviously brilliant can claim ignorance of historical dynamics (the

long-standing antipathy between Vietnam and China, for example) that would have been readily available to any moderately aware high school student in 1966. By November 1967, McNamara appears to have concluded that the war was a lost cause and contrived to have himself replaced. (Typically, he notes that, only weeks after he was replaced, LBJ also opted out.)

No matter what your opinion of McNamara, *The Fog of War* is a chastening experience. More than providing an old devil with a human face, the film offers additional evidence that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Who was ever better or brighter than Robert McNamara? Unfortunately, as the Vietnam debacle abundantly demonstrated, intelligence hardly guarantees against its own failures. McNamara supplies the movie's title—a phrase meaning that war involves variables too complex for the human mind.

Bruce Jackson: "Making war, making movies: the collaboration of Robert S. McNamara and Errol Morris on *Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*" ([BuffaloReport.com](#))

The Secretary

"I can't help but admire Robert McNamara," Errol Morris said recently.* "Whether it's futile, misguided, self-serving, here is a man who devoted himself to trying to mitigate or prevent war, a man who was involved in creating the limited test ban treaty, a man who has advocated the creation of an international court to adjudicate war crimes. I really admire him."

Fortunately, not a bit of that is in *Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, Morris's film about the man who was secretary of defense from 1961 through 1968 for John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. McNamara diligently executed the Vietnam war for both of them, though he seems to have developed doubts about it as time went by. When he became too vocal in private meetings about his reservations, Johnson banished him in the presidency of the World Bank.

Postmodern documentary

The film is gorgeous and the editing usually seamless. Images slide in and out and though you can tell the difference in what is staged and what isn't, it makes no difference because the elements are all there as part of Morris's construct. No documentary filmmaker is more adept than Morris at dissolving the line between totally fabricated and reconstructed. He is the perfect post-modern filmmaker; by comparison, he makes Frederic Wiseman look didactic.

Few filmmakers are as skilled as Morris at visualizing other people's abstractions and ideas, which is why he has been so successful doing major commercials for Apple, Coors, Adidas, 7-Eleven and other such companies. He is brilliant at illustrating possibility. He managed to make a fascinating film out of Stephen Hawking's book on quantum theory and relativity, *A Brief History of Time* (1992). His film about the wrongful murder conviction of Randall Adams in Texas, *Thin Blue Line*, dramatizes every theory about how that murder happened but the one that in all likelihood did happen.

Fog of War is organized into chapters built around pithy things McNamara says—"Believing and seeing are both often wrong." "Rationality will not save us." "Empathize with your enemy." "In order to do good you have to be willing to do evil."—but it's the lugubrious and insistent score by Philip Glass that glues the whole thing together. It is not unlike the lugubrious and insistent score

The Fog of War is framed by McNamara's assertion that all military commanders make mistakes. More honest, at least in public, than his successors in acknowledging that "in order to do good you have to be willing to do evil," McNamara broaches the subject of war crimes in regard to his former commander and eventual nemesis, air force general Curtis LeMay. He hints at his own errors in judgment, but seems unwilling to accept any personal responsibility. Nor will he discuss his possible feelings of guilt.

Given his double bind, McNamara finally tells Morris, "I'd rather be damned if I don't." As the Frodologists of the '60s might have put it, he carries the Ring of Power to the rim of Mount Doom, but he won't throw it in. Asked by Morris why he didn't speak out against the war, McNamara takes refuge in his anguish: "I am not going to say any more than I have."

Glass did for *Thin Blue Line*. Any time there's any doubt about how you might regard an image—light or heavy? peripheral or central?—Glass's music is there to lead you by the ear.

Sometimes McNamara is dead center in the frame; sometimes the frame is tilted right or left and he's moved to the side of the frame. Verticals on the backdrop accentuate the skews. It's a matter of visual variety; there's no connection with substance when the tilts happen. Sometimes bombs fall; sometimes animated names of cities and numbers of dead fall. There's no difference in the film as perhaps there is no difference from the high altitude cockpits and bombardiers' scopes, and surely none at all from the distant desks and plotting boards of the theorists putting it all into motion. That's what McNamara was in WWII, a theorist who he helped plan the firebombing of 67 Japanese cities, including Tokyo, where 100,000 civilians were burned to death.

Confusion and accountability

The film's title comes from McNamara's assertion that the human mind cannot at once contain all the variables in war, that understanding is possible only later, if ever. That post-modern theory of warfare is not merely an insight achieved. It is also, and more importantly, an excuse given. If you believe in the fog of war theory, then anyone has a perfect excuse after the fog clears. "Oh, I did that when the fog was heavy." Some—not McNamara—argue that the people we empower to kill virtually at will should be held to a higher standard of clarity than that: if you can't see through the fog, don't kill anybody, at least not until the light gets better and you have some idea what you're really doing.

In the film, McNamara never seems to consider his own accountability for anything. Morris asks him who is responsible for war and without apparent hesitation McNamara says "The president." It seems never to have occurred to him that he could have stepped up to a microphone and said, "This war is wrong and those people are dying and getting maimed for nothing," though he apparently knew and believed both statements to be true. Morris gently nudges him there, but there he will not go. How can he?

McNamara admits to errors. Everyone, he says, commits errors in war. That is part of the nature of war. What he never talks about is the moral core of war. He talks about the efficiency of this or that (firebombing Japan, say) and about the legal culpability of losers. He talks about the potential price of error in the nuclear age ("We

were *that* close," he says—holding thumb and forefinger a millimeter apart—to nuclear war with Russia over the Cuban missile crisis).

But he says nothing about good or evil, having done (as opposed to having been) right or wrong. There's a world of difference in doing right or wrong and being right or wrong. The latter is determined only by the final score; the former is determined by values with which the final score may have nothing at all to do. McNamara, even now, approaching the end, is either deaf and blind to the difference or sees no use to himself in considering them.

Justifying a life

He seems particularly proud of having been at Ford Motor Company when the seatbelt was developed, of his management team having scored higher or better or more appropriately on Ford's aptitude tests than anybody else's management team, and of having been the first president of Ford who was not a member of the founder's family. He also talks a lot about how well he did at grade school and in college. Morris shot 20 hours of McNamara talking and the entire film is 97 minutes long. McNamara talks through most, but by no means all of it. We don't know what questions Morris asked, if any, to get him talking about those matters and what level of detail he indicated he wanted. The fact that McNamara spends a lot of time in the film talking about his successes at Ford and in school is at least as much a trope of Morris as a brag by McNamara.

Much of what McNamara says here is in his 1995 book *In Retrospect*. When that was published, critics wondered, "Why now?" Was he trying to set his life in order? Justify himself to himself? He was never the kind of career-rewriting fabricator Kissinger was and is. Not that he didn't care what people thought, but the people whose thoughts he cared about weren't the general public.

Robert McNamara is perhaps Earl Morris's perfect subject. There is no truth in McNamara, only the purported recollection and recomposition of facts. McNamara, in a phrase that was a cliché in New York prisons a few years back, "is what he is." We come away from the film with as many questions as before it began, perhaps more. What does he really reveal of himself? How much can we know when all we know is what we see, and all we see here is an old man staring into a camera and dramatizations of the old man's words or brilliant combinations of archival footage and animations by Errol Morris?

We'll never know why he chose to expose himself to Errol Morris or what part of himself he exposed and what part he hid. We have what we have; the film is what it is. You know character, said Aristotle in "Poetics," by the choices a person makes. This film is an old man talking about another time, a time when he was hugely powerful and was responsible for hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of deaths.

It may well be that McNamara is a man of less guile than recent experience has gotten us to expect of public servants. He may really think that what he did, how he did it, and his recounting now of what he wants to remember as having happened are all one needs to know to understand these matters. Which is, in itself, perhaps one of the real reasons the Vietnam War happened, why it went on so long, why it was so vicious, and why we have now in the White House and Pentagon a president and secretary of defense who seem, in all regards, to have learned nothing from it.

It doesn't take any brains or guts to admit now that the US fucked up big in Vietnam. A modern-day politician who said we were right to go in there, that we killed 3.5 million Vietnamese for good reason, that we got those 58,000 Americans killed for good reason, and that we maimed and mutilated millions of others for good reason, would be hooted off the stage. Perhaps the only bearable posture is the one McNamara assumes: that we were wrong for the right reasons. He and nobody in the Kennedy or Johnson administrations knew that China and Vietnam were traditional enemies in a way that transcended the Red Menace, you see, and there was all that fog of war.

Made things and collaborators

Documentaries aren't facts; they're not even made of facts. They're made of film and tape that may or may not be of or about things that really happened. "I think in all of my films," Morris told an interviewer, "there are these questions of how we know what we know and our illusions of certainty, when in fact, we possess no such certainty, at all. There are certainly moments in all my films that deal with that very question, even in *The Fog of War*, McNamara asks the question, 'Are we omniscient?' And you hear this exchange of the commanders in the Gulf of Tonkin, where they talk about, 'Are you certain these events occurred?' and he concludes, "'Of course, I'm certain. I think.'"

Documentaries are *made* things, not found things. Every documentary has an author. Some have more than one author. Usually, the authors are behind the cameras and editing machines, mostly invisible.

But sometimes—as in *The Fog of War*—one is behind the camera and one is in front of it and the two work as a team. Errol Morris shot and edited the film, but he had a collaborator—Robert Strange McNamara—whose name could have gone on the director's line with his and perhaps should have. Because McNamara is obviously directing himself and acting his own lines through all of this. He is playing a character with his body and name, but a character in a film it is nonetheless. There are shots of him in his car that are posed. Shots of him walking that are posed. Shots of him looking into the camera and talking directly to it that are posed. Shots of him looking into the camera in silence, hardly blinking, that if not posed are surely aware of what it will look like from our side of the lens.

Bad teeth

During those closeups I kept thinking, "What lousy teeth he has. Why does a guy with so much money have such lousy teeth? What's he trying to prove?" In the earlier photographs, they're just crooked. By the time of the interview (two years ago, when McNamara was 85), the teeth in front are crooked and several of the teeth on the side have been replaced by metal substitutes or caps, none of which seem aimed in quite the right direction. Maybe he just never had time to get his teeth fixed right once he got rich in his years at Ford.

When he was a kid, there wasn't money for teeth. There doesn't seem to have been much money for anything. McNamara won a scholarship to Stanford but the family didn't have enough money to make up the difference so he went to Berkeley instead. He talks warmly of having taken there courses in philosophy and logic. It's the latter that seems to have made the greater impression on him, though Morris several times imagines both with closeups of words on a page and flowing logical symbols.

During the Vietnam War years, when I was one of the many

demonstrating against McNamara whenever I got a chance, including once on the porch under his Pentagon office window in October 1967, I wondered if he was really the cold, clinical bastard he seemed to be on tv or if it was merely the effect of the slicked back from the forehead way he did his hair and the nonsense wire-rim glasses that had none of the cool of the wire-rims worn by John Lennon. After listening to him talk in so warmly in *The Fog of War* about his course in logic I think he probably was exactly what he seemed to be.

It's good to remember that logic has no content; there is no good or bad in logic, no better or worse, no value of any kind. It is entirely a matter of process. And that's what McNamara comes back to again and again: process. He was, and remains, a manager.

He became, it is said, one of the few in the Johnson administration who turned against the war, and said so. Never publicly, but in cabinet meetings and in private meetings with JFK and LBJ. *Fog of War* has several scenes using a trope Morris perfected in *Thin Blue Line*: the turning reels of a tape recorder, the clicking dial of the recorder's counter, unseen voices talking. Implied is a real thing, back in some real time. For those objective evaluations, Johnson banished Robert Strange McNamara. He gave McNamara the National Medal of Freedom in a ceremony I remember well: McNamara stood at the lectern and said he was incapable of speaking, that his remarks would have to wait for another time.

Once I thought he meant that he was thinking that it was absurd to have received a medal for all that squandering of human life and national treasure. How could a medal and however much pomp wash away the blood, and how could one say that in a few words at a lectern in the White House with the president at his side? Later, when there was time and a more suitable forum, he'd say what must be said. But in *The Fog of War* he seems to be saying that he was silent that day simply because he was choked up with

emotion at the honor. And by saying all this in *The Fog of War* we understand that there has finally come a time when it is appropriate to say these things.

If he means that, then what a poor dumb bastard he finally is. If not, what a mendacious, manipulative sonofabitch he's been all along. We'll never know which it is. Maybe not even Robert S. McNamara knows which it is. All we have is McNamara's book and this film made by Robert S. McNamara and Errol Morris. Just because you read something in a book or see and hear something in a documentary doesn't mean it's true. It means only that you read it in a book or saw and heard it in a documentary.

The excellence of uncertainty

We cannot know the past; we can only think about it. We cannot know another person's heart; we can only make assumptions about it. Our most profound and useful act of thinking is asking questions, not delivering answers.

And therein lies the brilliance of this film. Errol Morris had his own personal belief about Robert S. McNamara, but the film, as I said before, imposes none of that. The film lets McNamara present himself, and it offers images and sounds that may or may not reflect what McNamara or Morris is really thinking. The lugubrious Philip Glass musical track may be didactic, and then again it may be leadenly ironic, thick and heavy because only thick and heavy goes with this particular stew.

Errol Morris provides no answers to anything in *Fog of War*. Instead, he gives us images and sounds that allow us to formulate difficult questions that we can't possibly answer either. That incapacity of resolution does not mean we are not obliged to wrestle with them. The appearance of fog does not free any of us of the obligation of trying to see. There is not much more we could ask of a documentary or any other kind of film.

Coming up in Buffalo Film Seminars VIII:

February 24 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *The Life & Death of Colonel Blimp*, 1943

March 2 John Huston, *The Asphalt Jungle*, 1950

March 9 Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, *Singin' in the Rain* 1952

March 23 Fred Zinnemann, *From Here to Eternity*, 1953

March 30 Akira Kurosawa, *Kumonosu jo/Throne of Blood*, 1957

April 6 Luchino Visconti, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and his Brothers*, 1960

April 13 François Truffaut, *Jules et Jim/Jules and Jim*, 1961

April 20 Sergio Leone, *C'era una volta in America/Once Upon a Time in America*, 1984

Frankenstein in Buffalo:

Saturday, February 21; Bruce Jackson introduces and leads a discussion of *Young Frankenstein* (1974) directed by Mel Brooks (Part of the exhibition "Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature." For more info, go to <http://buffalolib.org/events/frankenstein/events.asp>)

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Some of Mr. Murphy's papers show a catastrophic death rate in Germany, highlighted by a surprising comment by Mr. Murphy in discussing German demographics. He said in a State Department position paper in 1947 that the U.S. statistical projection of births, immigration and officially reported deaths showed that over the next three years the German population should be 71 million, but that to be conservative and in view of the present high death rate in Germany, a figure of 69 million will be used. Eisenhower's hatred, passed through the lens of a compliant military bureaucracy, produced the horror of death camps unequalled by anything in American history . . . an enormous war crime. Col. Ernest F. Fisher, PhD Lt.