

“Let 'em Talk Until the Truth Flows”: Errol Morris and the art of silence

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The purpose of this paper will be to analyze the work of documentarian Errol Morris under the auspices of *auteur theory*, and more specifically through the definition presented by Sarris (1962).

I will present my argument for Morris as an *auteur* using a contrastive approach in the form of a case study. Using not only a number of films presented in class, this paper will explore several examples from his television series, the award winning and critically praised *First Person*, and opinions and beliefs expressed by Morris from a variety of literary sources to support the analysis formulated in this paper.

I contend that Morris' utilization of silence and framing are essential in the analysis of Morris as an *auteur*. Morris utilizes these stylistic components in such a particular way that these techniques transcend the utilitarian and succeed in entering Sarris' inner circle, attaining a model of interior meaning.

Morris uses silence and framing in his films to project his vision of the subjects in his film with such precision, there can be no doubt as to the purpose for which he uses this narrative technique. In *Vernon, Florida*, he allows the eccentric rubes he films to babble on and on about their particular obsession, knowing that the east coast elites for whom the audience is formed will look at the subjects he interviews as nothing more than country bumpkins worthy of derision. I contend that Morris cares little for the eccentrics and wack-a-doodles, and holds some -- such as the rennet manufacturer in *Gates of Heaven* -- in complete disgust and ridicule. He accomplishes this by a distinct interview style where silence is the key revealer. This minimalist approach allows the subjects to talk at length until such point Morris feels the subject has himself in the particular light and frame Morris wishes:

I've done interviews in one day that went on for fifteen, sixteen hours. And at a certain point, the control over what they're saying breaks down; it becomes different. It becomes really powerful, and for me, *real*. It becomes out of control. (Poppy, 2004)

While this paper will discuss silence in the greatest detail, framing is of profound importance in Morris' films. "Morris will often cut to extreme close-ups that typically feature an eye, sometimes composed with other parts of the face" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 52). Plantinga notes this "material manifestation of the face" is essential in establishing the narrative Morris hopes to reveal in his interviews. Morris argues he is not creating the narrative as much as exposing it. What does Morris say about his work? What does he say about himself?

Morris on Morris

One of the key components in this analysis will be how Morris views not only his art (and the commercial implications of its place in the marketplace), but also himself and his agency in these endeavors.

Morris fashions himself not as a proactive force in the discovery of truth from his subjects, but as a passive bystander. Morris is much less of a camera wielding activist, but simply Toto pulling back the curtain and allowing the Wizard (in this metaphorical case, truth) to reveal itself to the camera.

Morris himself states, "No hand-held camera, no available light, no nothing of that sort. A camera planted on a tripod in front of people speaking. Breaking stylistic conventions but still pursuing truth" (Morris, 2005).

'Pursuing the truth' is a running theme throughout Morris' earliest films, ethereal as they may be, and increases in prominence in later films such as the *Fog of War*, *Standard Operating Procedure* and the television series *First Person*.

But while Morris seldom appears on camera, even his voice or the questions he asks of his subjects are rarely heard, his presence in his films is just as immense as reflexive documentarians like Nick Broomfield, Michael Moore, and Alan Berliner. Simply because he doesn't appear on camera or even include himself in a peel back of the cinematic creation's layers, viewers should never assume that Morris is somehow left out, or that the subjects in his films are simply talking out loud to themselves, which may sadly be a virginal viewer's first impression of the Morris oeuvre.

"They are allowed to speak at length but left on their own, and we are left on our own to assess the truth of what they say. Behind them we sense an ironic author who asks few questions and yet is felt all the while as questioning" (Perez, 2009, p. 14).

Morris achieves through an interview technique that relies largely on his ability to remain silent. According to Rothman, "By contrast, the Interrotron enables Morris to efface himself completely, it would seem, enabling him to become one with the camera as long as he remains silent" (Rothman, 2009, p. 4).

While Rothman's assertion that Morris' use of the Interrotron is essential to the documentary's particular tone and narrative, note how Rothman accentuates the notion that silence is essential in the revelatory nature of his interviews. As mentioned previously, Morris is a truth seeker, and while the Interrotron is the ultimate technological expression of his focus on finding the truth, it is silence that allows Morris to become one with the camera, the tool of truth discovery, not the Interrotron.

In an interview with noted *New York Times* writer, Chuck Klosterman, Klosterman presses Morris on the ethics of his interview style, knowing his subjects were casting themselves in a poor light, misunderstanding the consequences of what they were saying, but Morris purposefully exploits the semantics of the quandary:

“Do these people not realize that this interview is going to *transform* how they are seen by others? Do they not realize it will *transform* how they see themselves?” If people were entirely reasonable, they would avoid all interviews, all the time. But they don’t. (Klosterman, 2009, p. 15)

Clearly, Morris is aware his subjects sometimes cast themselves in an unpleasant, and dare I say disastrous, light but cares not. If they fail to understand the missteps in the interview they take, so much the better for the film. Much of the literature and critique of Morris as a filmmaker read in class this semester has discussed Morris’ search for the truth. I contend that while Morris is devoutly concerned with the revelation of truth, he takes joy in the torture and excoriation of his subjects. Maybe it’s because he views the human race with such contempt. After all, he contends we are nothing but “just a bunch of apes running around” (Singer, 1989, p. 39). Morris, in all his nebbish East Coast liberal elitism, has found his divine *schadenfreude*.

With this in mind, the paper will approach the analysis of Morris project by project, citing specific examples of how the director uses silence and framing to expose his subjects as fools, lunatics, malfeasants, and as wholly dishonest and untrustworthy.

The Thin Blue Line

Morris approaches this film’s subject with all the passion and fervor of a southern evangelical on “Come to Jesus night.” Morris clearly seeks to exonerate Randall Dale Adams, a man convicted and sentenced to die for a murder he did not commit, and begs

us to meander through the brambles of the Texas judicial system that have caught this innocent man in its thorny briars.

Morris, in his breakthrough film, defines himself as an auteur with his deft use of framing and silence. This is particularly telling during the interview with Emily Miller, the woman whose testimony, in the words Adams' defense attorney, "(she's) the one that got him convicted" (*Thin Blue Line*, 1988).

Morris adeptly allows Miller to talk at length about her delusions of criminal deduction. To listen to Miller, she lives her daily life with an intuition and a masterful suspicion of criminal activity even Sherlock Holmes would envy. Morris said,

In many ways it's the interview that I'm most proud of, because in the course of that interview, she revealed things that were an admission—albeit an unwitting admission—but an admission of perjury. The line that I love, she says, "Everywhere I go, there's murders. Even 'round my house. (Poppy, 2004)

Not only is Morris convinced the woman is lying, based on her grandiose fantasy of being a sleuth of the highest order, but in his quest to prove Adams' innocence, he *must* show her to be a fraud:

I listened to that, I remember when she said it, and I thought to myself, "I like this." I imagine that in her head that she's living in some kind of crime drama. And maybe in her head everywhere she goes "there's murders"—in the bedroom, in the kitchen, in the dining room. But do I really think that there were murders in all these places? I don't. And the fact that I don't informs my belief that what she saw on that roadway that night had been little or nothing. (Poppy, 2004)

In addition, Morris isolates the picture on Miller's eyes, accentuating a piercing gaze that could signify an eye for determining criminal misdeeds, or that stare of a

madman. While he never overtly says so, Morris remains silent and allows the subject to frame themselves via their mad ramblings and exposition.

When Miller continues to explain herself and the reasons she came forward to testify against Adams, she reveals herself to beholden to racist ideas, despite her interracial marriage. “But see when you have black people like that, they don’t like getting’ involved in nothin’. That’s just common” (The Thin Blue Line, 1988). By staying silent, as quoted above, Morris accords Miller every opportunity to convict herself of perjury. A few minutes later, Morris further digs Miller’s hole when her husband incalculably details his wife’s accusations against him, furthering to cast aspersions against this malignant pair.

Morris had an agenda, and his use of silence and framing is essential in establishing it:

I like to think that I differ from other interviewers in the sense that I hide my agenda more successfully, and I’m more open to hearing stuff that is surprising and unexpected. That I’m actually involved in an investigation, through monologue, at times. (Poppy, 2004)

Fog of War

When Morris does speak, it is simply to reassert a display of control in his films. On the surface, the Oscar winning *Fog of War* seems to be a film by disgraced and vilified Robert McNamara as much as Morris. McNamara speaks in long monologues efforting to qualify his place in American history; attempting to define a picture of himself the political narrative has already clearly determined. McNamara is one of the most polarizing figures in American political history, described as a war criminal of the highest order and emblematic of the insidiousness of the industrial-military complex.

As a manifestation of the filmmaker's role and the space he occupies, Morris's voice contributes to the clarity and the reduction of mystery important to both McNamara and *Fog of War's* form or style. The voice also serves to remind the viewer that Morris as filmmaker, not McNamara, determines the film's legitimacy and realism, goals that the two men share. (Jaffe, 2009, p. 33)

Jaffe argues that in this way, Morris uses his voice to direct the film in a particular way. It is clear the opposite is true as well; the *absence of his voice*, ergo Morris' silence, is just as effective in revealing how Morris feels toward the subjects he films with the Interrotron.

Fog of War's brilliance is not only determined through Morris' use of silence in the interview process, but from the subject, McNamara himself. As Rosenbaum writes:

But for me, the great moment in the film is when Mr. McNamara's rationalization machine finally breaks down. It's in the epilogue, when Errol -- who rarely interrupts the stream of rationalization, instead allowing it to deconstruct itself -- asks the Big Question, the one about Mr. McNamara's silence. (Rosenbaum, 2003)

Rosenbaum contends that by framing the most difficult and daunting question of the interview, the damning question every viewer of the film desperately wishes to ask McNamara themselves, Morris reveals much about McNamara's complicity as much as a hedged and much deliberated answer could come from his subject:

But all of this is irrelevant, in a way, to that final silence. It comes in an epilogue in which you see Mr. McNamara driving a car. Almost all of it is in tight close-ups on his eyeglasses, or his eyeglasses in the car's rear-view mirror. The eyes

themselves -- the "I" itself, you might say -- are conspicuously concealed.

(Rosenbaum, 2003)

Without explicitly stating so, Rosenbaum alludes to Morris' use of framing as he discusses the filmed silence of McNamara. Morris again uses a tight shot of McNamara's sad weathered eyes, and the viewer realizes that McNamara just doesn't have the energy to summon such an answer required. It's more than a question of *will not*, but one of *cannot*. Yet we the audience already know the truth from McNamara's silence and the reality of the answer that never comes.

I will concede that many critics have called Morris' portrayal of McNamara as a "cop-out," that Morris went too easy on McNamara as a despicable mass murdering sociopath (Cockburn, 2004, p. 9). Perhaps it's that Morris simply treats McNamara with a modicum of respect, but all of McNamara's sins are still displayed in all their hideous glory. Morris does not empathize with McNamara any more than he does the many subjects he holds in such disdain:

In many of my earlier films, I was told that I was setting people up for ridicule. I used to defend myself – usually, by denying it. Now, I am less excited about doing so. Properly considered, filmmakers in general and documentary filmmakers in particular should not be creating ads for humanity "*Wow. Look how great the human race is. I never thought that being human could be so wonderful*"

[Morris' emphasis]. Nor should I be protecting my subjects from themselves. If they are ridiculous, why can't I show that? Does it make the other humans nervous? Am I writing ad copy for some kind of television program on Neptune on why the human race should be allowed to continue? Do I have to show us to our best advantage? (Morris, 2005)

The answer is no, but there should be an acknowledgement from Morris of the ulterior motive he interviews his subjects with, one that he never supplies. Plantinga (2009) notes that his most recent works have softened in the approach, that *Fast, Cheap, & Out of Control* and *Fog of War* and revels in these exploitative moments in less celebratory tones. But as we will discuss in just a bit later, *First Person* harkens to his earlier work, and the use of silence as a tool for mockery returns.

First Person

In discussing *First Person*, Perez (2009) writes of the episode, “I Dismember Mama” and how Morris allows this apparently insane and delusional subject to talk at length. “Crazy, incredible, though this story may sound, Morris passes no judgment on the sanity or credibility of the storyteller” (Perez, 2009, p. 17). Perez notes Morris allowing Saul Kent the floor is evidence of Morris’ irony as the self-effacing author.

I counter that despite Morris’ protestations, he is instead revealing the ugly truth surrounding a man cutting off his own mother’s head. Morris has a morbid sense of fascination with the macabre and the disturbing, and *First Person* displays this in full. Most of the subjects featured in the series are outcasts, heretics, and all wholly obsessed. Plantinga (2009) describes *First Person*:

Typical episodes of this series present extended interviews with remarkable persons, remarkable not necessarily for their great achievements or exceptional talents but for some other quality that distinguishes them from the great seas of human “normality” (Plantinga, 2009, p. 49).

Morris is not celebrating their weirdness as much as he is exploiting it. He wishes us to share his disgust and contempt, and the silence and framing in his interviews reveal this as much.

Klosterman (2009) describes the series as composed of “intense one-on-one interviews with random, unfamous weirdos” (Klosterman, 2009, p. 4). In the episode “The Only Truth,” an interview with Murray Richman, a lawyer of some renown for defending a number New York mobsters, Morris presses Richman on whether a former client set a particular restaurant on fire.

MORRIS: Do you believe he set the restaurant on fire?

RICHMAN: Probably

(silence)

What’s the problem?

(silence)

I’m not there doing God’s work. How many times do I have to tell you that? I’m doing Man’s work. If I were to wait for only innocent clients, do you know how thin I’d be? I’d be the skinniest man on the block.

Morris then peppers Richman with questions, dripping with sardonic incredulity, about how man caught with two empty gas cans, with a roaring inferno behind him, could be found innocent of arson. Morris is practically begging the audience to agree with him, and hopes they react with as much scorn for Richman’s justifications as he.

Morris frames Richman in a variety of ways in the scene leading up to his sanctimonious interrogation of his nefarious dealings. Richman at various times is shot to the left of frame, from profile, but most interestingly, just Richman’s mouth. Much as he films various subjects closed in on eyes, or even a single eye as with Clyde Roper, the squid expert in “Eyeball to Eyeball.” This particular shot, of just Richman’s jabbering jaw, is unique throughout the run of *First Person*. Morris wants the audience to question the words and statements coming out of Richman’s mouth. We should hold

Richman's words in suspect, and when Morris questions Richman's scruples seconds later, we understand why.

Gates of Heaven

Finally, this paper would be remiss if the brilliance of Morris' first film *Gates of Heaven* was not discussed. Early in his career, Morris establishes his use of silence as a tool of discovery and mockery that will be a hallmark of his career, and a key component of Morris as auteur.

Numerous examples of silence pervade the film, but the most telling and striking interview in its execution is the one with Florence Rasmussen, a doddering but sympathetic old lady who lives in near Floyd McClure's soon-to-be relocated pet cemetery featured in the first half of the movie. Morris interplays a spinning newspaper with a headline detailing the exhumation of 450 animals from the cemetery and relocation to the Bubbling Well Pet Memorial run by Cal Harberts and sons, but the majority of the scene is shot with a single unblinking camera on the front steps of Rasmussen's trailer.

"This seemingly irrelevant interview made the final cut not because it is merely humorous, and not merely because it illustrates Morris' pessimistic view of the human condition, but because Morris thinks that humans often deserve to be laughed at" (Plantiga, 2009, p. 48).

Morris is not heard from during the interview, instead allowing Rasmussen's rambling, oft-times incoherent and contradictory monologue to serve his derisive comments on the frailty of the human condition.

At one point, the screeching of car tires squeal, but as Rasmussen questions Morris as to whether it was a car or not, Morris simply responds with silence.

Eventually, after a long detailing the sordid lives of her and her son and the sad state of her existence, she rambles on about her dog Skippy and her poor lost black kitty. By staying silent, Morris allows this poor woman to remain nothing more than an odd punchline, another eccentric captured by Morris' wandering lens.

After the somewhat jarring interview, the rhyme or reason for which is never revealed, Morris surveys a wide panoramic vista of the foothills where Bubbling Well Pet Memorial sits in deafening silence.

Conclusion

As Singer suggests, a viewer does not come away from Morris's films, suspecting these elements (silence and framing) are intended to convince the audience that the subjects filmed by Morris' unflinching lens have been left free to "speak for themselves," thereby providing access to some unmediated truth (Singer, 1989).

The reality is Morris molds the truth he wishes the audience to see via these tactics discussed throughout this paper. For Morris to suggest that he plays no part in this process is folly, one that should be played with a wink and a nod. By remaining silent, without interjecting his views, he is in a very real sense manipulating the actuality of truth. Obviously, this is what makes Morris a brilliant auteur, as his films' distinct mixtures of interviews, recreations, and b-roll entertained and informed audiences for years. Most importantly, how Morris employs silence and framing is a key to what makes his films great.

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