

The Buffalo Film Seminars



Directed by Errol Morris

Produced by Julie Ahlberg, Errol Morris and Michael Williams

Original Music by Philip Glass

Cinematography by Robert Chappell (interviews) and Peter Donahue

Film Editing by Doug Abel, Chyld King and Karen Schmeer

Academy Award, Best Documentary

Errol Morris (5 February 1948, Hewlett, Long Island) has directed 9 feature documentaries: *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.* (1999), *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997), *A Brief History of Time* (1991), *The Dark Wind* (1991), *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), *Vernon, Florida* (1982) and *Gates of Heaven* (1978)

Philip Glass (31 January 1937, Baltimore, MD). Through his operas, his symphonies, his compositions for his own ensemble, and his wide-ranging collaborations with artists ranging from Twyla Tharp to Allen Ginsberg, Woody Allen to David Bowie, Philip Glass has had an extraordinary and unprecedented impact upon the musical and intellectual life of his times. The operas – “Einstein on the Beach,”



“Satyagraha,” “Akhnaten,” and “The Voyage,” among many others – play throughout the world’s leading houses, and rarely to an empty seat. Glass has written music for experimental theater and for Academy Award-winning motion pictures such as “The Hours” and Martin Scorsese’s “Kundun,” while “Koyaanisqatsi,” his initial filmic landscape with Godfrey Reggio and the Philip Glass Ensemble, may be the most radical and influential mating of sound and vision since “Fantasia.” His associations, personal and professional, with leading rock, pop and world music artists date back to the 1960s, including the beginning of his collaborative relationship with artist Robert Wilson. Indeed, Glass is the first composer to win a wide, multi-generational audience in the opera house, the concert

August 26, 2008 (XVII:1)

Errol Morris **THE FOG OF WAR** 2003 107 min.



hall, the dance world, in film and in popular music -- .

He was born in 1937 and grew up in Baltimore. He studied at the University of Chicago, the Juilliard School and in Aspen with Darius Milhaud. Finding himself dissatisfied with much of what then passed for modern music, he moved to Europe, where he studied with the legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger (who also taught Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson and Quincy Jones) and worked closely with the sitar virtuoso and composer Ravi Shankar. He returned to New York in 1967 and formed the Philip Glass Ensemble – seven musicians playing keyboards and a variety of woodwinds, amplified and fed through a mixer. The new musical style that Glass was evolving was eventually dubbed “minimalism.” Glass himself never liked the term and preferred to speak of himself as a composer of “music with repetitive structures.” Much of his early work was based on the extended reiteration of brief, elegant melodic fragments that wove in and out of an aural tapestry. Or, to put it another way, it immersed a listener in a sort of sonic weather that twists, turns, surrounds, develops. There has been nothing “minimalist” about his output. In the past 25 years, Glass has composed more than twenty operas, large and small; eight symphonies (with others already on the way); two piano concertos and concertos for violin, piano, timpani, and saxophone quartet and orchestra; soundtracks to films ranging from new scores for the stylized classics of Jean

Cocteau to Errol Morris's documentary about former defense secretary Robert McNamara; string quartets; a growing body of work for solo piano and organ. He has collaborated with Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Yo-Yo Ma, and Doris Lessing, among many others. He presents lectures, workshops, and solo keyboard performances around the world, and continues to appear regularly with the Philip Glass Ensemble.

McGeorge Bundy National Security Adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, 1961-1966.

Lyndon B. Johnson Thirty-sixth President of the United States, 1963-1969. As President, he increased U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

John F. Kennedy Thirty-fifth President of the United States, 1961-1963.

Robert F. Kennedy Attorney General 1961-1964. As Democratic senator from New York (1965-1968) became increasingly critical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Nikita Khrushchev Leader of the Soviet Union, 1953-1964. Confronted the U.S. during the Cuban Missile Crises in October, 1962.

Curtis E. LeMay Commander of U.S. 20th Air Force in 1945 that firebombed Japan and U.S. Air Force chief of staff (1961-1965). Pressed for unrestricted air attacks against North Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh Communist leader of the modern Vietnamese independent movement. Led the Vietnamese communists in the American war in Vietnam from 1954 until his death in 1969.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Thirty-second President of the United States, 1933-1945.

Dean Rusk Secretary of state during Kennedy and Johnson administrations 1961-1969.

Maxwell D. Taylor Special military adviser to President Kennedy (1961-1962), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1962-1964), U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (1964-1965), special Vietnam adviser to President Johnson (1965-1968).

Nguyen Co Thach North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry Official during Vietnam War, who led the Vietnamese delegation at a 1997 Hanoi conference with American officials from the Vietnam War.

Llewellyn Thompson Leading U.S. specialist on the Soviet Union. Advised the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War.

Harry S. Truman Thirty-third President of the United States, 1945-1953. Oversaw the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in 1945.

William C. Westmoreland Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (1964-1968), U.S. Army chief of staff (1968-1972). Led U.S. ground forces during the escalation of an American war in Vietnam.

Earl G. "Bus" Wheeler Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1964-1970. Principal military figure in Washington overseeing the Vietnam War.

Woodrow Wilson Twenty-eighth President of the United States, 1913-1921. After WWI, he failed at his attempt to form a League of Nations that he hoped would prevent future wars.

from *The Fog of War Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. James G. Bright & Janet M. Lang. Rowman & Littlefield, NY, 2005. Based on the Academy Award Winning Film by Errol Morris.

"What 'the fog of war' means is war is so complex it's beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend all the variables."

CRITICAL ORAL HISTORY:

Robert McNamara's Road to "The Fog of War"

Historians don't really like to deal with counterfactuals—with what might have been. They want to talk about history. "And how the hell do you know, McNamara, what might have been? who knows?" Well, I know certain things. what I'm doing is thinking through with hindsight, but you don't have hindsight available at the time. I'm very proud of my accomplishments. And I'm very sorry that in the process of accomplishing things, I've made errors. Robert S. McNamara, in "The Fog of War"

Errol Morris' Academy Award-winning documentary, "The Fog of War" confronts viewers with a singular fact about the 20th century: roughly 160 million human beings were killed by other human beings in violent conflict. It was the bloodiest century in human history. The film challenges us to look closely at that tragic century for clues as to how we might avoid a repetition of it in the 21st century.

The film takes the form of a one-on-one conversation between Morris (who is behind the camera) and former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara (who is on camera). The conversation traces McNamara's experiences from the end of World War I, through the course of world War II, and the unfolding of the Cold War in Cuba, Vietnam and around the world. We are encouraged to experience the 20th century vicariously as the filmmaker and his subject walk us through the experiences of leaders involved in these seminal events. Extensive archival footage and recently declassified tape recordings of presidential conversations help the viewer to place McNamara, who was eighty-five years old when Morris interviewed him, in the chapters of the history he discusses.

Cut from more than twenty hours of dialogue, the 107-minute film is organized around eleven distinct "lessons" which Morris distills from McNamara's experience. In this book, we focus on the five that apply most directly to American foreign and defense policy. These lessons underline the importance of: (1) empathy toward one's adversary; (2) the limits of rationality in foreign policy decision-making; (3) the role of misperception and misjudgment leading to war; (4) the painful moral choices necessary in a wartime environment; and (5) the significance of remaining flexible in pursuit of any nation's most important objective—the prevention of war. We deal with these lessons in chapters, 1-5 of this book. Ultimately, the lessons are cautionary tales for future generations.

America's most eminent film critic, Roger Ebert, called "The Fog of War" a "masterpiece." Stephen Holden of The New York Times wrote: "If there is one movie that ought to be studied by military and civilian leaders around the world at this treacherous moment, it is 'The Fog of War,' Errol Morris's portrait of former United States Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara." "The Fog of War" has reached an audience much larger than that which typically pays to see documentaries in movie theaters. Between its opening in theaters on December 8, 2003, through May 11, 2004, when the DVD of the film became available, more than one million people saw it in hundreds of theaters across North America. The film quickly came to be regarded as both an artistic triumph and a significant contribution

to the public discussion of some of the most pressing issues of our time.

The film is a brilliant work of art, but it is not only a work of art. Via the lessons Morris draws from McNamara's experience, the film also offers clues as to how to prevent the kind of disasters, and near disasters, McNamara describes in the film. This is why we would expand Stephen Holden's suggested audience for the film: it should include not just political and military leaders, but also ordinary citizens, of whatever age, who seek a more peaceful world. This quest must begin, we believe, with an understanding of the foreign and defense policy of the United States of America, the world's remaining superpower, and unavoidably the proverbial "600-pound gorilla" in every action affecting global security. Errol Morris' film "The Fog of War," contributes significantly to this understanding....

"The effect of *The Fog of War* is to impress upon us the frailty and uncertainty of our leaders." Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"The verdicts on [McNamara's] confessions range from mild praise...to utter rage..."
Frank Rich, *The New York Times*

"Though the movie may not change many minds about McNamara, it richly humanizes him, a valuable feat atop all the fascinating reflection." Mike Clark, *USA Today*

"For those of my generation, the true resonances in the film may be in the constant juxtaposition between the then and the now of the McNamara life." Stephen Hunter, *Washington Post*

"...a profound examination of the troubling proposition that good or well-meaning people can help create horrible and evil events." Michael Wilmington, *Chicago Tribune*

"...a spellbinding reality cinema about duplicity, and, worse, ignorance at the highest level." Richard Corliss, *Time Magazine*

Morris fills [his film with] skewed and crooked angles on McNamara himself—as if even the camera couldn't get a grasp on the elusive nature of this topic." Jeffrey M. Anderson, *San Francisco Examiner*

"Morris uses McNamara's long life and firsthand experience to indicate how technology has made the ethics of war much more difficult to tread." Dan Lybarger, *Kansas City Star*

"Truly remarkable—a history lesson, a mea culpa and one last chance to discuss a pivotal era with someone who was actually there." Larry Carroll, *Filmstew.com*

"...a riveting reminder for those who remember; a required history lesson for those who don't." Jean Lowerison, *San Diego Metropolitan*

"What's genuinely suspenseful about the movie is its journey into the heart and mind of McNamara." Jay Boyar, *Orlando Sentinel*

"...may be the scariest movie of 2003." Josh Larsen, *Sun Publications (Chicago, IL)*

"...there were two versions of me watching the movie."

When Erroll Morris appeared on the National Public Radio program "Fresh Air," listeners were treated to the unusual experience of hearing an interview by a well-known radio interviewer (Terry Gross), of an equally famous documentary film interviewer (Errol Morris), about Morris' interview that provides the central narrative of "The Fog of War" The resulting dialogue was open and sophisticated regarding the craft of interviewing, for he is famously difficult, demanding, even intimidating, and always intent on controlling both the process and the product.

Morris mentioned to Terry Gross that, in watching the movie, he has the impression that an eighty-five-year-old man is, in some sense, in conversation with his forty-five-year-old former self. This fascinated Gross. She recalled the feeling that "there were two versions of me watching the movie." On the one hand, she had no trouble empathizing with McNamara when he alludes to the terrible toll taken on his family by the stress of the Vietnam War. At the same time, however, another part of her was saying, "well, I should think so," because the war was killing so many Vietnamese and Americans. This is a dominant theme of viewers old enough to remember the Vietnam War—a strong ambivalence about whether to empathize with McNamara and the regret and remorse he seems to feel about his role in the war or simply to condemn him for his role in the disaster.



THE REVIEW: Terry Gross, "Interview with Errol Morris." NPR, 12:00 Noon EST, Monday January 5, 2004. Produced at WHYY, Philadelphia, PA.

Terry Gross: ...You know, one of the things that really astonished me watching "The Fog of War" was that McNamara was really lively, anecdotal, interesting. And I always thought of him, among other things, as cold and kind of inaccessible. In other words, that you'd never get anything out of him. What surprised you about actually talking with him?

Errol Morris: One of the things I like about interviews—maybe you feel the same way—to me, interviews are investigative. I never know what I'm going to hear. In fact, to the extent that I know what I'm going to hear, I'm not terribly interested. I want to be surprised. I want something unexpected to happen. And that certainly was the case with my interviews with Robert McNamara, a picture of a very different kind of man than I had been familiar with years ago seeing him on television, reading

about him in the papers, a far more interesting, far more complex man.

Terry Gross: Give me an example of something he said that really surprised you.

Errol Morris: Well the most surprising thing was discovering that his role in Vietnam was different than I had thought. Remember, the Vietnam War was known to many people as “McNamara’s war.” He became not only associated with the war, people thought of it as his war, as though he was the person primarily responsible for it. He was the hawk. He was the guy who pushed other people towards escalation, to bombing, to troops on the ground. You want an explanation for how we became mired in Vietnam? Look no further than Robert S. McNamara. And yet, as I got deeper and deeper into the story, my view of him and his role in history changed.

Terry Gross: How did it change?

Errol Morris: ... There’s this very odd conversation. “The Fog of War” actually has these recently released presidential recordings. Everybody knows Nixon made recordings, but it’s less well-known that Kennedy and Johnson recorded their conversations as well. Kennedy recorded Cabinet meetings; Johnson recorded phone calls. So you can actually hear the president of the United States talking with McNamara, a front-row seat in history, if you like.

And there’s one powerful conversation, October 2nd, 1963. This is less than two months before Kennedy was assassinated. We hear McNamara and the president talking, and McNamara is urging Kennedy to set a timetable, a schedule for getting out of Vietnam. This is the man who we considered to be the worst hawk of all in the administration, the most bellicose adviser of all in the administration. ...

Terry Gross: Now in talking about his role in Vietnam, he certainly gives the impression that he tried to talk President Johnson out of the war, tried to start decreasing our presence in Vietnam. Do you believe that that was consistently his point of view with Johnson?

Errol Morris: It’s a tortured story. I believe that, if Kennedy had lived, in all likelihood, there would not have been extensive bombing and half a million ground troops in Vietnam. It’s one of those great mysteries that can’t be really answered for certain, but the story leans in that direction. There is a considerable amount of evidence that suggests that’s the case.

One thing that’s really interesting—I sometimes say, well, this revised story about Vietnam that emerges in “The Fog of War,” its not necessarily a better story. It’s just a different story because it raises a whole set of different questions. If McNamara was opposed to the war, why did he become a part of its escalation? why did he continue to serve Johnson if he disagreed with his policies? why did he stay on until 1968? And why, when he left the administration, did he remain silent? War went on in ’69, ’70, ’71, ’72, ’73, ’74, ’75. Between two and three million Vietnamese died and 58,000 Americans.

Terry Gross: Now aren’t these the questions that he still refuses to answer? The questions that you just raised?

Errol Morris: Yes and no. The movie has an epilogue where I return to some of the central mysteries of this story. I feel that there are partial answers, but this is not a movie where every “T” can be crossed and every “I” dotted. There are mysteries that remain for me, having made the movie.

Terry Gross: ... [McNamara] reaches several conclusions and has several lessons that he feels like he’s learned from his involvement in World War II and the Vietnam War. And one of his conclusions is that you need to empathize with your enemy, but he says about Vietnam, “We didn’t know the Vietnamese well enough to empathize and put ourselves in their shoes. We saw the war in Vietnam as a cold war; they saw it as a civil war.” And when I heard him say that, I thought, you know, what a true and interesting lesson that is to have learned and to impart to us. But then I thought for a second, “Isn’t that what the anti-war movement was saying all along? That, you know, this isn’t just he cold war, this is a civil war? Why are we involved there?” I mean, isn’t that something that people were shouting at him for years?

Errol Morris: Yes. This is a movie with one interview, but sometimes I think there are actually two characters: the 85-year-old McNamara speaking to the forty-five-year-old McNamara. ... And one question that keeps coming up again and again: Is this the same man? Are these two different men? Well, in one sense of course they’re not. But are they the same? And in what way are they different, if they are different?

You’re absolutely right. Many of the things that McNamara says could’ve come out of anti-war demonstrators. It could have been things that they said verbatim in 1965. People who really hate McNamara—and there are many—when they hear about the lessons, they say, “why do we want to hear anything this man says? Shouldn’t he remain silent? My answer is an emphatic “no.” He has been so much a part of history, and the stories that he tells about history are really interesting and important stories. And they’re stories by a man who knows...

Terry Gross: You know, I interviewed McNamara in ’95 after his memoir was published. ... And when I interviewed him, I guess, you know, all my instincts were, “Ask him why he hasn’t apologized if he knew all this in advance. Ask him if he thinks he owes America an apology or an explanation.” ... And I’m wondering if your instinct was ever to do that yourself because the movie isn’t that. ... But was there ever an instinct in you saying, “Get him to apologize,” you know?

Errol Morris. Sure. Absolutely. But. ...

Terry Gross: But did you kind of suppress that and just, like, let him talk, or did you keep kind of getting back to that?

Errol Morris: Did I kind of suppress it? I like the idea of suppressing it. Maybe. It’s interesting because when you say there’s something missing—if people say, “Well, McNamara didn’t go as far as I would like,” or, “McNamara really didn’t apologize,” or, “McNamara didn’t really confess,” I would ask myself: “What is it that they want to hear? What exactly are they looking for?” And I ask myself: “Do I want to hear McNamara apologize for the war?” And here’s my answer: Not really.

Terry Gross: Mm-hmmm. Why not?

Errol Morris: Because I don't think there is any apology for the war in this sense: How do you apologize for the death of 58,000 Americans and two to three million Vietnamese? I think he's done something far more interesting. He has gone back over the history of the war—don't forget, this is the man who ordered the Pentagon Papers to be created. If you like, it's that same instinct to go back over the past, to look at it to try to understand it.

For the totally unsympathetic, the people who will hate McNamara no matter what, they will look at this attempt to go back over the past as excuse-making: "Oh yeah, sure, he's going back over the past. but he's going over the past just to provide a gloss on the past, to make himself look better." My answer is no. when he suggests that he and LeMay were war criminals in world War II, and he tells a story that is so different from every other story I've heard about that period, I don't look at it as an attempt to whitewash the past but as a sincere attempt to go back over the past, to think about the past.

Terry Gross: Mm-hmm, when you interviewed McNamara—and this was about 24 hours' worth of interviews we're talking about—do you think he ever expected that you were warming him up and just laying the trap and, in the end, there would be an ambush?



Errol Morris: Well, I mean. certainly. . .

Terry Gross: Because you know that is an interview technique.

Errol Morris: It's not my technique.

Terry Gross: But he wouldn't necessarily know that, I mean, 'cause you never know till it's over.

Errol Morris: I mean, I'm always surprised. You know, I said that for me, interviews are investigative. When I was making "The Thin Blue Line" years ago, a movie credited with getting an innocent man out of prison in Texas, I was surprised how if I left people alone, if I allowed them to talk without interrupting them, I could learn so much more than in an adversarial interview.. Maybe it's a difference in philosophy because when you're playing the Mike Wallace game, well-known game in interviewing, when you back the subject against the wall, try to get him to contradict himself, its kind of the police idea of interviewing. You have a subject. Break him down, make him fess up. I'm interested in something different. I'm not really interested

in backing my subjects into a corner. I'm interested in learning something about how they see the world. . . .

Terry Gross: [One of the interesting points that McNamara makes in the movie] is in talking about World War II where he served under General Curtis LeMay and he participated in the planning of the firebombing of Tokyo in which 100,000 civilians were killed. And he says something very interesting about war criminals. Why don't we hear this excerpt of your movie? This is an excerpt of Robert McNamara speaking in Errol Morris' documentary "The Fog of War." [Soundbite of "The Fog of War"]

Robert McNamara: I don't fault Truman for dropping that nuclear bomb. The US/Japanese war was one of the most brutal wars in all of human history: kamikaze pilots, suicide. Unbelievable. What one could criticize is that the human race, prior to that time and today, has not really grappled with what are—I'll call it—the rules of war. Was there a rule then that said you shouldn't bomb, shouldn't kill, shouldn't burn to death 100,000 civilians in a night? LeMay said that if we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals. And I think he's right. He, and I'd say I, were behaving as war criminals.

Terry Gross: ...Errol Morris, when he said that to you, were you surprised to hear his thoughts about what makes a war crime a war crime?

Errol Morris: Yes, particularly because this part of the interview happened very early on, probably within the first half-hour of my first interview with Robert McNamara.

The movie doesn't tell you—there's no flashing light that goes on and says, "This is really something new, this is really something extraordinary." So much has been written about the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. Comparatively little has been written about the firebombing of 67 cities in Japan before we bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And here we have McNamara, who was involved in these firebombings speak of them as a war crime. Very powerful, because aren't we all used to thinking of World War II as a just war? After all, good and evil were well-defined. We were on the side of good; they were on the side of evil. And, yet, here is Robert McNamara telling us, "Yes, that was true, but there is conduct within a just war which is criminal." Very, very powerful and very interesting.

Terry Gross: Can you talk a little bit about how you see the job of making what is basically an interview into a movie, into something that will be cinematic, that we will actually want to look at, you know, for a couple of hours, or nearly a couple of hours?

Errol Morris: ...Whenever I hear a story, particularly if it's a good story, images come immediately to mind, and it becomes very hard to resist the temptation to shoot those images. In fact, usually I am unable to resist the temptation, and I go ahead and do it. Part of "The Fog of War" is a story of dropping things from the sky—bombing if you like. And we have many instances of it in the story, from the firebombing of Tokyo to bombing in Vietnam.

There's another curious story among the many jobs that Robert McNamara had over the years. He was also president of the Ford Motor Company. Not so well known, he pushed for safety at a time where safety was never really thought about. He

argued for padded dashes, collapsible steering wheels and, first and foremost, seat belts. And he tells this remarkable story—this is the kind of thing you can't possibly make up—about how they dropped skulls down a stairwell at one of the dormitories at Cornell in order to determine the effect that automobile crashes had on the human body, an instance where dropping things actually produces good rather than evil. And, yes, I illustrated it.

I sometimes think of my movies like a dream, a dream about 20th century history, a series of questions, of puzzles, of mysteries. And the hope is that the visuals take you deeper and deeper into those mysteries, that is, if I've done my job well.



REVIEW: Andrew Lam, “A Remorseless Apology for the Horrors of Vietnam.” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 2, 2004.

Living in Vietnam during the war as a child, I witnessed enough of American military power to know that no ideology or rationale can justify killing more than 3 million civilians. So it is gratifying to hear Robert S. McNamara, ex-secretary of defense under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and one of the principal architects of that war, finally confess onscreen that he, too, thought it was a mistake for Americans to go into Vietnam.

Yet as I watched “The Fog of War, the documentary by Errol Morris about McNamara, I felt disappointed. McNamara is a highly intelligent man living a kind of self-deception. While readily confessing that the war was wrong, and that he knew it was wrong all along, he somehow absolves himself just as quickly. Arrogantly, the ex-secretary of defense suggests on camera that he did the best he could under the circumstances and that, if he hadn't been at the helm micromanaging the war's first half, things might have been far worse. Never mind that under his watch the war widened and escalated....

The documentary has a subtitle: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara. One of them is “Believing and seeing are both often wrong.” What that means to Mr. McNamara is that doing the right thing turned out to be an enormous error. To me, that means I can't trust the man's confessions. It seems the fog hasn't lifted at all for McNamara—it has only thickened with the years. ...

REVIEW: Samantha Power, “War and Never Having to Say you're Sorry.” *New York Times*, December 14, 2003, sect 2, pp1.33.

... While Mr. McNamara uses the film to propagate the “lessons” of his six decades in public life, Mr. Morris has another agenda: to raise questions that are moral, timeless and rarely broached with such subtlety. How do decent men commit or abet evil acts? And once they have done so, how should they interact with their victims, live with their consciences and pass along their insights? It is the indefatigable relevance of these questions that keep Americans at once enthralled and repelled by Robert S. McNamara. And it is the long-standing aversion of American decision-makers to address past mistakes that has helped undermine the American standing around the world and has hindered our ability to learn from history.

from *New Documentary, 2nd Edition*. Stella Bruzzi. Routledge, London & New York, 2006.

There have been several key developments in documentary film and television production since the first edition of this book appeared in 2000. In terms of generic renewal, the important evolutions that have taken place in recent years have been the renewed popularity of documentaries in the cinema (in the wake of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*) and the advent of reality television and its close relation to formatted documentary. What both of these indicate is that documentary has become a global commodity in a way it simply was not a mere six years ago. These recent interventions also serve to consolidate and reinforce the central tenet of the first edition of *New Documentary*, namely that documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity. The latter have become increasingly forefronted as defining concerns of documentary, from the continued rise of docu-auteurs such as Michael Moore, to the centrality of performance to reality television and finally to the increased presence of reconstruction in historical documentary where the use of drama has become almost a prerequisite. . . .

Worries over authenticity and the evolution of documentary are frequently linked to the increasing sophistication of audio-visual technology. Whereas technical limitations certainly influenced the kind of documentaries that were feasible in the 1930s when Grierson was first writing, this is no longer the case, so the return we are currently witnessing to a more fluid definition of documentary must have another root. The role of American *cinéma vérité* has proved the crucial historical factor in limiting the documentary's potential and frame of reference, and it is significant that, although many theorists suspect and criticise direct cinema, most of them dedicate a large amount of time to examining it. Richard Leacock and his fellows believed that the advancements in film equipment would enable documentary to achieve authenticity and to collapse the distance between reality and representation, because the camera would become ‘just a window someone peeps through’ (Donn Pennebaker quoted in Winston 1993:43). As Errol Morris has bluntly put it: “I believe that *cinéma vérité* set back documentary filmmaking twenty or thirty years. It sees documentary as a sub-species of journalism.... There's no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything.”

As Morris's timescale suggests, it has taken time for documentary filmmaking to rid itself of the burden of expectation imposed by direct cinema; furthermore, virtually the entire post-*vérité* history

of non-fiction film can be seen as a reaction against its ethos of transparency and unbiased observation. Ironically, the aesthetics of observational/*vérité* cinema have become the *sine qua non* of *faux* documentaries, the way to signal, therefore, the fakery of the documentary pastiche in series such as *Tanner '88*, *The Office* or *The Thick of It* and films such as *This is Spinal Tap*, *Man Bites Dog*, and *A Mighty Wind*. It is no longer technical limitations that should be blamed for documentary's 'contradictions' but rather the expectations loaded onto it by its theorisation. It can legitimately be argued that filmmakers themselves (and their audiences) have, much more readily than most theorists, accepted documentary's inability to give an undistorted, purely reflective picture of reality. Several different sorts of non-fiction film have now emerged that propose a complex documentary truth arising from an insurmountable compromise between subject and recording, suggesting in turn that it is this very juncture between reality and filmmaker that is at the heart of any documentary. ...

...Morris's documentary exemplifies the more contemporary nonfictional trends. Morris is an unmistakable *auteur*, and many of the tropes used in *The Fog of War* are, by now, familiar and generic: the Philip Glass score (his 'angst-drone' as J. Hoberman unflatteringly puts it), stylised dramatic reconstruction, the insertion of representative, expressive images and sequences that function as visual metaphors for the arguments of the film, the use of the 'Interrotron' for the interviews with McNamara. a common view of Morris has become that he spends his time making immensely stylish films about lightweight figures and subjects (to quote Gary Indiana: 'Much of Morris's oeuvre to date has consisted of a geek's-eye view of subjects only slightly geekier than the director himself'). This is only partially the case, and *The Fog of War*, though its focus is on McNamara, tackles particularly monumental, iconographic historical events: the firebombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities in World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War. Morris's aim is consistently to marry individual testimony with historical events; as Nunn observes: 'He focuses frequently on individual memories and places these within a tapestry of archival, poetic and reconstructed scenes.'

The Fog of War's production values are high and the moral, historical, political, intellectual and philosophical questions it poses are huge: what was McNamara's role in the Vietnam conflict? Following his involvement in the devastation of Japan in World War Two, should McNamara be considered a war criminal? How did Kennedy and Khrushchev avert nuclear war in October 1962? The manifest sobriety of the film's subject matter notwithstanding, Morris's highly wrought and visual style has, in the estimation of some critics served to undermine rather than enhance his serious intentions, as if having directed so many successful commercials (his client list includes Nike, Apple, Southern Comfort, Citibank, Miller, Adidas, Volkswagen) somehow tarnishes his documentary status. This discussion will offer a largely more positive view of *The Fog of War*. For the most part it will argue—through a close examination of the film's analysis of recent American history and McNamara's place within it—that the immense visual pleasure the film affords its spectators is a vital component of the complex dialectical debates that inform the arguments around which the film is structured. However, in discussing the end of the film, this analysis will also assess how Morris's visual style contributes to a sense of McNamara being treated far too uncritically.



Errol Morris: Director's Statement

The Fog of War is a 20th century fable, a story of an American dreamer who rose from humble origins to the heights of political power. Robert S. McNamara was both witness to and participant in many of the crucial events of the 20th century: the crippling Depression of the 1930s; the industrialization of the war years; the development of a different kind of warfare based on air power and the creation of a new American meritocracy. He was also an idealist who saw his dreams and ideals challenged by the role he played in history.

Although strictly speaking, neither a work of biography nor a work of history, *The Fog of War* has produced important, new biographical and historical material.

First, although there have been several book-length biographies of Robert S. McNamara and many books in which he is a principal figure, none have discussed the pivotal relationship between McNamara and General Curtis LeMay, the infamous U.S. General, and their involvement in the firebombing of 67 Japanese cities in 1945.

World War II is thought of as a just war. It is believed that the Allies fought on the side of good, and that what they did in their wartime effort was justified by that fact. What few people know is that before the United States dropped the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, LeMay's B-29 bombers had already killed nearly 1 million Japanese civilians, including 100,000 in Tokyo on the night of March 10th, 1945.

McNamara raises deep moral questions about his role and, by implication, the entire Allied role in winning the war against Japan by any means necessary. He asks, "In order to win a war, is a nation justified in killing 100,000 civilians in one night?" "Would it be moral to not burn to death 100,000 Japanese civilians, but instead to lose hundreds of thousands of American lives in an invasion of Japan?"

Second, for many people who are familiar with the Cuban missile crisis from the movie *Thirteen Days*, *The Fog of War* tells a very different story. Here is a story not about how John or Bobby Kennedy saved the world, but a story of blind luck and the limits

of rational judgment. A story of a world out of control, where a nuclear holocaust was averted by an obscure state department official who had the temerity to speak up to the President and to urge him to empathize with his adversary.

Third, *The Fog of War* is the first historical investigation to make extensive use of taped telephone conversations from the Oval Office of the White House between Johnson and McNamara. Much of what has been written about Robert S. McNamara rehashes a familiar story—that of a computer-like man, a technocrat, a hawk who, through his arrogance, blundered into Vietnam. However, the presidential recordings - the weight of the historical evidence itself - do not bear this out. Instead, a far more complex portrait of the man emerges—one who tried to serve two very different presidents: John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

We hear McNamara explaining to Kennedy the need to set a timetable for removing advisors from Vietnam; we hear Johnson (after Kennedy's death) admonishing McNamara for his unwarranted optimism in giving such advice; we hear McNamara urging Johnson to put the breaks on the bombing of North Vietnam; but, in the end we hear McNamara endorsing the President's wish to continue the war.



Coming up in the Buffalo Film Seminars:

- Sept 2 Ernst Lubitsch **TROUBLE IN PARADISE** 1932
 Sept 9 Marx Brothers **DUCK SOUP** 1933
 Sept 16 Michael Curtiz **THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD** 1938
 Sept 23 Jules Dassin **BRUTE FORCE** 1947
 Sept 30 Richard Brooks **THE PROFESSIONALS** 1966
 Oct 7 Károly Makk **LOVE (SZERELEM)** 1971
 Oct 14 Francis Ford Coppola **THE CONVERSATION** 1974
 Oct 21 Lina Wertmüller **SEVEN BEAUTIES (PASQUALINO SETTEBELLEZZE)** 1975
 Oct 28 Elia Kazan **A FACE IN THE CROWD** 1957
 Nov 4 Krzysztof Kieślowski **BLIND CHANCE (PRZYPADK)** 1981
 Nov 11 Wim Wenders **PARIS, TEXAS** 1984
 Nov 18 Wong Kar-Wai **IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE (FA YEUNG NIN WA)** 2000
 Nov 25 Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck **THE LIVES OF OTHERS (DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN)** 2006
 Dec 2 Stanley Kubrick **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY** 1968

CONTACTS:

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu ...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu ...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com> ...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto@buffalofilmseminars.com ...for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/>

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center and State University of New York at Buffalo with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News