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15. Megatronic Memories: Errol Morris and the Politics of Witnessing

Devin Orgeron and Marsha Orgeron

Since his 1978 film *Gates of Heaven*, documentary filmmaker Errol Morris has repeatedly returned to the scene of the crime. Though not always concerned with criminality per se, his work focuses on sites of trauma, micro- and macroscopic in magnitude, ranging from the humane slaughtering of farm animals to the Vietnam War. Built around an aesthetic of expressive re-creation, Morris's documentaries reveal an ongoing obsession with the relationship between memory, which forms the thematic centre of his work, and image. Morris's films transcend the quest for access to 'the event itself' and expose the imperfect process of recollection. Though he resists the term 'documentary', or at least he did before winning an Academy Award in this category, we might consider Morris's filmography an ongoing documentary on the ways human beings document their own experience. In this way, his collected work functions like a large, highly inclusive, sometimes travelling 'witness stand'. Morris has claimed that 'people construct for themselves some kind of world they live in that they reveal through language'.¹ Language, or to be more specific, testimony, is Morris's perpetual subject. His spectators are figured as part of the director's large collection of witnesses and not, as our legal metaphor of the witness stand and several generations of documentary production might imply, as jurists. When we watch an Errol Morris film, we become witnesses to the process of witnessing.

At the heart of Morris's linguistically-based process is his cinematic apparatus, which has evolved considerably over the years. The technological developments in Morris's cinema have been motivated by his desire to allow self-knowledge and self-narration to materialise on-screen: from a stationary camera trained on talking

heads in *Gates of Heaven* and *Vernon Florida* (1981); through the Interrotron, a dual-teleprompter, two-camera system that physically separates interviewer from interviewee but retains mediated eye contact between them, used in *Mr. Death* (1999); to his post-*Mr. Death* creation, the Megatron, which adds to the Interrotron system multiple, strategically placed cameras which record the interviewee.² The multiple cameras provide Morris with a vast amount of footage from a wide range of angles and allow him to create striking formal sequences atypical of the mainstream documentary form. As his layering of apparatuses has increased, so too have the intrusions of the filmmaker's voice and image. Compounded by the insistent presence of Morris's hand in the form of dramatic camera angles and lighting effects, altered projection rates, and the inclusion of eccentric found footage, these indices of authorial presence lend a considerable degree of metaphorical weight to his subjects' words. Perhaps more critically, these intrusions serve to remind the viewer of the filmmaker's guiding presence, his role in the process of creating memory.³

The aggressive presence of multiple optical devices in Morris's recent work destroys any illusion that the films are unmediated windows into history, in part because they dramatise, in near Brechtian fashion, the inherent unknowability of human psychology. This is amplified by Morris's mechanically saturated system of capturing and scrutinising the documentary subject, his focus on technological quantity and simultaneity, and even the inventive, sci-fi naming of these devices. Within Morris's system, multiple and simultaneously filming cameras articulate the slipperiness of human character, forcing the viewer to reconcile both the unreliability of Morris's many witnesses as well as his/her own perceptual deficiencies. The accretion of visual signs – the apparatus, found footage and authorial intrusion – leads to a documentary form that foregrounds multiplicity and does not disavow its ties to the fictional world; rather, Morris's films suggest (and even embrace) the degree to which memory has been shaped by mediated and often fictionalised images, as well as the degree to which the documentarian is responsible for this transformation.

In *Representing Reality* Bill Nichols, in a section titled 'The Elusiveness of Objectivity', enumerates the three distinct valences of documentary objectivity:

- (1) An objective view of the world is distinct from the perception and sensibility of characters or social actors. The objective view is a third-person view rather than a first-person one. It corresponds to something like a normal or commonsensical but also omniscient perspective.
- (2) An objective view is free from personal bias, self-interest, or self-seeking representations. Whether first- or third-person, it conveys disinterestedness.
- (3) An objective view leaves audiences free to make their own determination about the validity of an argument and to take up their own position in regard to it. Objectivity means letting the viewer decide on the basis of a fair presentation of facts.⁴

In his obsession with the process of witnessing, which is itself defined by the subject's position in relation to the memories in question, Morris seems to have taken Nichols' primer as a guide for what is essentially a career-long move away from each of Nichols' three categories. First, Morris's films rely precisely on (rather than deny) the perception and sensibility of his subjects. Second, in this reliance, they

cannot possibly escape the effects of personal bias, self-interest or self-seeking representations. In fact, Morris never attempts to conceal that his subjects narrate themselves, that their own biases are bound to materialise. Morris's carefully crafted formal arrangement, which includes his distinctive *mise-en-scène*, editing structure and cinematography, belies, almost in spite of itself, the filmmaker's own objectives. Third, the layering of Morris's various witnesses becomes vertiginous. Morris always suggests his own presence as guiding witness, largely through the formal and technological intrusions that recur in his work. His films also routinely point out the ways that the concept of witnessing itself is virtually all-inclusive: his camera, the films' spectators, and the films' subjects all operate as witnesses with varying degrees of investment and credibility. And although his films are often 'about' the judicial process, they complicate the notion of judgement. Morris's non-objective formal manoeuvring compels the viewer to indulge in the spectacle of witnessing: his subjects are often observers of the same event, though they perceive and consequently narrate this same event differently. By layering these narratives, Morris creates documentaries that seek out less a thing, an event or a person, than the many acts of remembering and retelling, and the repercussions of such acts.

NARRATING MEMORY

For many, many years I have been in search of what I would call the absolutely clueless narrator, the narrator who has absolutely no perspective about himself, whatsoever.

ERROL MORRIS⁵

Morris situates himself and his recording apparatus as witnesses to the secondary event of narrating memory. This event is most interesting when Morris's machinery allows for brief glimpses into the not-altogether-even surface of recollection, when he renders memory and its articulation through visual signs such as re-enactments, found footage or newspaper clippings. Creating a parallel universe in which memory is made observable, Morris's practice resembles that of other documentary filmmakers who deploy re-enactment footage and photographic evidence to allow the spectator to witness that which is otherwise unwitnessable. Unlike the majority of his contemporaries, however, Morris frees documentary conventions from their ties to objective realism. Stylish recreations, expressive editing, emotive musical scores and sound effects distance the films from the fact-finding missions that motivate other documentary projects.

While Morris de-authenticates the image as document in its conventional sense, his subjects frequently provide photographic evidence to underscore the relationship between memory and image. In *Gates of Heaven*, interviewees repeatedly hold photographs during interviews, have their departed pets' images emblazoned on their diminutive tombstones, and decorate their homes with formally arranged photographic representations. Their memories of their lost companions are accessed and allowed to enter the public sphere through the presentation of the photograph as evidence. Talking head-style images of one couple who share their memory of their deceased 'Trooper' are intercut with Polaroids of Trooper taken during the Christmas holiday.

The images sanctify and authenticate the memories. Morris trains his own cinematic gaze upon individuals who cling hard to the photograph to suggest the ways in which images – whether still, remembered, moving, fictive or borrowed – accrue meaning to become what appears to be a coherent story.

First-person testimony and narration are always key elements of Morris's films. His work suggests the degree to which images cannot act as witnesses in their own right without the intervention of words, and vice versa. Images are, at best, ambiguous without words, and yet words consistently fail to do justice to images. Morris's films frequently focus on multiple subjects whose perspectives are as distinctive as their voices. This is apparent as early as his first feature documentary, *Gates of Heaven*, in which pet owners, a rendering plant operator, pet cemetery owners, employees and business partners all discuss, in very different ways, the subject that connects them: the mortality of the animal kingdom and its consequences. The end result in Morris's work is, more often than not, a collection of competing subjective views.

In 'The Hybrid Metaphor' John Dorst writes that 'Morris has said that he is after a truly "first-person" documentary, an appropriate linguistic characterisation because it is in the first-person pronoun that the inherent doubleness of subjectivity, the simultaneity of the speaking subject and the object of speech, is closest to the surface of language'.⁶ Morris's characteristic accumulation of voices, however, complicates this linguistic pattern. Often his subjects narrate not just themselves but each other, switching between a first- and third-person voice, in which they tell their versions of another's story. Their stories do not exist in isolation; they are in competition with each other. The 'conflict' of these stories – the rupture that alerts us that witnessing is a fraught and imperfect process – typically occurs at points of disagreement, points where the witnessed moment is narrated differently by different parties. Morris creates first-person images to accompany the narrated memories – images that often support but occasionally undermine the utterances of the speaking characters – and suspends them in a visual and auditory environment that signifies something other than historical truth. In so doing Morris rejects the documentary form's long-standing commitment to the mimesis of the image and achieves the 'first-person' form argued by Dorst, but only by insisting on an expressive and palpable third-person role in the process.

Morris has allowed his frustration over the 're-enactment debate' surrounding his work to surface in recent interviews. This debate rarely moves beyond claims of truth or accuracy, claims which place his work alongside other mainstream documentarians in the business of making historical truth-claims. Brian Winston has argued convincingly that the acceptance of Direct Cinema's 'fly-on-the-wall' aesthetics as 'the only legitimate documentary form' is deeply uncritical.⁷ In discussing the history, ethics and multiple layers of documentary 'fakery', Winston introduces the notion of 'sincere and justified reconstruction'. He uses the term to remind us of how difficult it is to shake the old adage that 'the camera cannot lie'.⁸ Morris's re-enactments may well lie, but their aim is the 'sincere and justified reconstruction' of subjective truth.

In *Mr. Death* these questions of subjective truth revolve around expert witnesses, authorities in their field who are called upon to confirm or deny the validity of evidence disproving the Holocaust. This film interrogates the role of the image in

the process of legal, intellectual and emotional quests for proof. At one critical moment, we see an image of Fred Leuchter, an expert in execution devices, whose expertise has been called on by Holocaust deniers to 'prove' them right. Leuchter emerges from what he keeps referring to as an 'alleged' crematorium, and the image is rewound and revised (re-narrated, re-witnessed) by Holocaust historian Robert Jan van Pelt. The images themselves are identical, but are assigned different meanings by their narrators. Their divergent first-person narrations compete so that the very process of witnessing, remembering and interpreting is made into a tangible dialectic. That these issues arise in a film focused, at least partially, on the Holocaust seems especially appropriate. Marianne Hirsch has written about the handful of images from the Holocaust that are 'used over and over again iconically and emblematically to signal this event'.⁹ Memory, she argues, has been reduced to a set of widely circulated photographs. Morris, like Hirsch, points to the iconic weight of images, especially contested images, and indicates, in this film and elsewhere, the degree to which images create memory, create the illusion of 'having witnessed'.

This emphasis on the visual vocabulary of memory is made evident from the start of *Mr. Death*. Following the expressionistic, mad-scientist-style credit sequence, the film begins with a black and white long take of Leuchter's bespectacled eyes in the rear-view mirror of the car he's driving (figure 1). Already, the film suggests

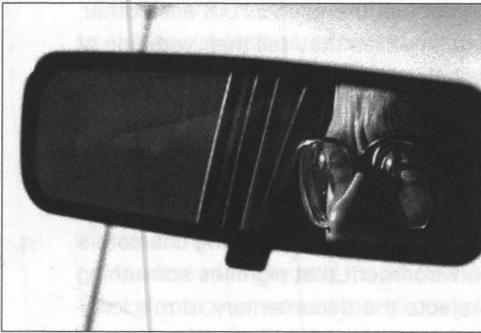


Figure 1: In this carefully composed long take from the beginning of *Mr. Death*, Morris allows Leuchter to reflect upon his own story.

the degree to which we are entering the personal vision of a narrator who looks back while moving forward. Leuchter begins to narrate his career as a designer of execution devices over a montage of black and white close-ups of car and body parts, some dramatically canted. These are followed by an extreme close-up of Leuchter's face that places the audience almost behind his glasses. This image fades out as Morris incorporates colour talking-head footage of Leuchter actually speaking what was previously the voice-over, intercut with images of blueprints and plans for the devices and structures

he is discussing. In these opening moments, Morris dramatises and abstracts the process of his subject narrating his own history. In its alteration of film stock, camera angle, framing and location in a fashion one expects from the likes of contemporary fiction filmmakers like David Fincher or Oliver Stone, Morris's eccentric formalism indicates the complexity and cinematic quality of both narrative and memory as processes.

In Morris's world, there is no such thing as a straightforward narration of history, personal or otherwise. Leuchter's first-person narration is, a mere four minutes into the film, already framed by devices that work to highlight his idiosyncrasies, his propensity to remember and perceive in his own peculiar way. When we are placed into a position nearly behind Leuchter's glasses in the opening sequence, the film suggests the degree to which we are all beholden to the lens through which we happen

to witness and conceive history. We are plunged into darkness through a fade-out that prefaces the familiar conventions of the talking-head documentary format. This editorial act functions as a reminder of the power of the image by virtue of its awkward, momentary absence; it is also a reminder of the power of the image-maker. Such heavy-handed and highly-mediated moments are more than the stylish obfuscation of some knowable 'truth' that Morris's detractors claim them to be. Rather, they remind the viewer that the witnessed event is only made tangible through the act of narration and that verbal or visual narration is itself a form of re-enactment.

This culturally-reflexive process forms the core of *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), a film overtly concerned with crime, punishment and a miscarriage of justice following the shooting of Texas police officer Robert Wood. The film is replete with depictions of its subjects' competing stories. In the opening sequence, opposing and highly subjective interviews are intercut with each other. The film goes on to weave together divergent re-enactments of the same event accompanied by different voice-over narrations.¹⁰ Morris seems intent on depicting the process by which his witnesses remember the variants of their perspectives. For example, the woman officer who witnesses Wood's shooting fails to remember the make, model and licence plate number of the murderer's car. Her story is told by a fellow officer, who describes his understanding of the events that took place on the night of the shooting and his frustration at extracting information from this sole eyewitness. His narration is accompanied by images that represent events precisely as he describes them, including the wrong car (a blue Vega). The murderer's car turned out to be a blue Comet and the licence plate number 'JNA 890' was different from that originally reported in the press as having the letters 'HC' in it.

Shortly after this sequence, the same officer is intercut with expressive images of a swinging pocket watch as he describes attempts to hypnotise the female officer in order to get at the recesses of her memory. According to his account, the hypnosis allows her to recall a licence plate from an event earlier in the day. At this point the camera zooms in to a licence plate number, reproducing her recollection as told by the officer in third-person narration. Despite this third-person narration, and the fact that the female officer here never speaks for herself, her first-person perspective is nonetheless represented on the film's image track. This first-person mimesis is at least twice removed, but its presence is part of the larger aesthetic of witnessing that allows Morris's spectators to witness the process of narration, to see 'through' the eyes of the witnesses themselves even when their voices are absent.

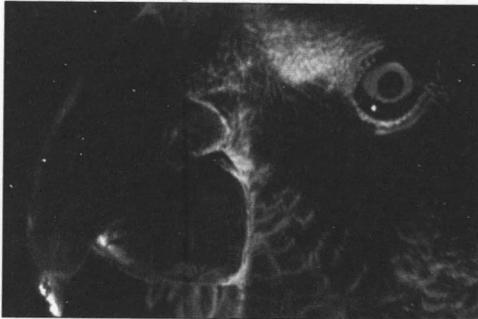
These different forms of first-person narration place the spectator in the position of being a first-hand witness, even when the memories being represented are Morris's created fictions. By virtue of watching the re-enactments, the spectator is transformed into an eyewitness and must question her own capacity for remembering and narrating. Would we remember the licence plate number or even a few of its components? Even those within the film who are critical of the female officer's faulty memory are guilty of inaccuracy. Morris subtly points this out when he includes the narration of yet another officer: 'There's a difference between a Vega and a Mercury Comet ... So you know in reality in regard to cars every piece of information that was called in they were calling in regard to a Comet ... I mean, or a, a Vega.' The slipperiness of memory and of the narration of that memory is here made auditory, while

elsewhere it is visualised. Throughout, these elisions are achieved through a layering of memories and the presentation of an array of often-contradictory first-person perspectives.

In a film in which almost all of the witnesses seem to be either accidentally unreliable or to possess ulterior motives for their erratic testimony, the decision to provide visual evidence to accompany each story reveals the pitfalls of personal testimony while also underscoring its persuasiveness. We must not forget that as a result of this film a man was absolved of murder. One interviewee describes his memories of driving past the scene of the crime and we witness him trying to remember the details, stumbling over the accuracy of his own memories. As we observe him there is a cut-in to a close-up of his eyes just before Morris transitions to yet another re-enactment of the crime scene. As in *Mr. Death*, this close-up signals our entrance into the world of a subjective perspective. Here we witness the flaws of memory, dramatised through images both of the present real testimony and of the fictional but nonetheless material recreation of that memory. We are often reminded that Morris's films are not only first-person; they are past tense.¹¹

Perhaps Morris's most telling story of memory appears in one of his *First Person* episodes, *The Parrot: A Story About Max*.¹² Max is an actual parrot with a limited, if fascinating, vocabulary. He is also the sole witness to a brutal murder, and may be Morris's dream subject/witness/narrator. Less a clueless narrator – for he does, it seems, have a clue – Max is a narrative-less narrator upon whom a variety of competing narratives are pinned. His words and perhaps memories, limited as they are, are open to even more explication than usual, and the witnesses to Max's speech are all too willing to offer their interpretations for his behaviour. In addition to Max's own witnessing act, several witnesses to the parrot's post-murder conduct claim that he mimics his murdered owner's voice, especially the repeated refrain of 'Richard, no, no, no'. In the name of self-interest others claim that, perhaps, the parrot's former owner was a man named Richard and his utterances have nothing to do with the recent traumatic event.

This 30-minute study includes a complex layering of witnesses who perform interpretive acts. Re-enactment footage of the murder is intercut with what might best be described as parrot point-of-view shots, including close-ups of the parrot's eye and corresponding reverse-shots of the imagined murder scene (figures 2 and 3). The re-enactment footage is distorted; it would not be mistaken for an authentic,



Figures 2 and 3: Shot/reverse-shot. Max from Morris's *First Person* series and his privileged, if distorted, point of view.

surveillance-like capturing of reality. Rather, it is a formal acknowledgment of the need for a visual counterpart to Max's inarticulate testimony, an imagining of what Max might or might not have seen. Max poses a series of challenges for the spectator as well as for the legal and judicial system, most especially: can a parrot, one of the great mimics of the natural world, testify in a court of law? Ultimately, Max helps Morris present his overarching thesis: that testimony and memory are always already forms of mimicry.

The episode posits that Max's testimony is as reliable as that of the other people who populate this story, many of whom have rather transparent motives for making claims about the murder, its investigation and Max's words. This episode reminds us of the degree to which the language of memory is the perpetual subject of Morris's work; the idea of parroting words and images exists in all of Morris's films. Max's status as a non-human who is incapable of being asked to remember in the same ways as Morris's usual subjects makes his perspective, as it is represented by the re-enactment, a simulation of witnessing, a re-enactment of remembering. Max's testimony does not differ substantially from Morris's other treatments of human memory. Morris does not make an argument about guilt and innocence but rather about the modes of representing the past, the complexity of bearing witness. His spectator, here and elsewhere, is invited to witness the camera's attempts to see what the documentary subject sees, even when that subject is feathered and caged.

THE ACT OF WITNESSING IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

We built a piece of Auschwitz.

ERROL MORRIS¹³

Morris's formal conventions ensure that the spectator is witness to the imperfect process of bearing witness, a notion that resonates with what Marianne Hirsch, in the context of her work on Holocaust imagery, refers to as 'postmemory'. Hirsch defines postmemory as 'the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first'.¹⁴ Morris is similarly fascinated with the various methods by which memory is absorbed, intuited and 'passed along'. Morris's films are about the universal act of spectatorship; they are about the process of seeing and the complexity of acting as a conduit for that information, as is made absurdly clear in the episode from *First Person* explored above. Although Morris rather famously resists the label of postmodernism – making him, we would argue, his own 'clueless narrator' – his ongoing collection of witnesses is a decidedly postmodern curatorial act.¹⁵

Morris believes in the potential for the documentary genre and expressive style to function in a complementary fashion. His oft-discussed stylistic overload is an attempt to debunk the notion of innocent images, but is not an attempt to purge them. In fact, Morris's films appear to celebrate the postmodern status of images despite his coy claims about that concept. Morris's formal approach is to interperse images of the interviewed subject – sometimes framed within a provocative *mise-en-scène*, as in *Gates of Heaven* or *A Brief History of Time* (1991) – with what we might call 'breakaway metaphorical moments', which are always staged and comment to varying degrees on the given subject's idiosyncratic worldview. In *A*

Brief History of Time, a computer-generated Rolex watch spins through a computer-generated representation of space as Stephen Hawking discusses the mysteries of the space-time continuum. In *Mr. Death*, the imagery alternates between Leuchter as talking head, Leuchter as living, breathing participant in the historical world and



Figure 4: A recreated, expressionistic examination of Leuchter at work in *Mr. Death*.

a series of highly stylised and metaphorically remarkable images of Leuchter's personal dreamscape: he chips away at rocks in a *mise-en-scène* of utter emptiness (at times in an Auschwitz re-created in Cambridge) (figure 4); he sips coffee before a series of mirrors endlessly reflecting into the distance; and at times, he walks towards the camera operator's telephoto lens and falls out of focus. These moments all attest to the filmmaker's guiding presence. Like his menagerie of witnesses, Morris himself always functions as a narrator.

Mr. Death, like *The Thin Blue Line*, concerns a legal case and relies heavily upon a key element of the judicial system: the witness. In both films, narrated, recreated and videotaped images are consulted to explain events. A key moment early in the film addresses acts of imagistic interpretation when Leuchter discusses a particularly haunting photograph. As Leuchter's reputation as an expert in execution devices was growing, he was contacted by the state of Tennessee to inspect and reconstruct their antiquated and, for reasons only the state of Tennessee can explain, sentimentally valuable electric chair. As Leuchter narrates, Morris provides grainy, expressive images, alternating between black and white and colour, of Leuchter and his step-son in their basement workshop. The images are highly stylised, their angles eccentric. When the cinematographer shoots a television screen playing previously recorded images of Leuchter in his workshop discussing his own amateur photography, the images shift to highly degraded, blown-up and pixilated video images. As Leuchter explains it, in order to facilitate his reconstruction of the chair, he had to photograph it in detail. One photograph, however, catches his attention, because it appears to contain, he says, two images. Leuchter offers the following interpretation of the photograph:

As far as I understand it, certain objects give off auras. And some objects that have been exposed to high intensity electromagnetic fields absorb some of that energy and will give off an aura. I don't know what we photographed. We don't know if we photographed an entity, I mean we don't know what's there. It may still reside in the parts that are in Tennessee ... But when I tore the chair apart, maybe it was freed. I don't know ... that's assuming that there was something there to start with.

The image in question, a detail of the chair's seatback and straps, does indeed also seem to contain the diaphanous image of a face. Coming just after the hyper-

bologically grainy and pixilated footage of Leuchter, Morris offers us a reminder of the inadequate transparency of any photographic images, his own included. Here, Morris facilitates spectatorial scrutiny by providing close-ups of the photograph's details. We find ourselves seeking out what Leuchter has told us that he sees: is there really a face in the photograph, or do we just see what we have been told to see? This is a highly self-conscious moment of directorial commentary, suggesting Morris's own scepticism toward the ability of images to depict truth in any reliable way. What appears to be the not-so-mysterious phenomenon of double-exposure eludes Leuchter. At least, this is the impression Morris gives us as Leuchter spins out his theories about aura, accidentally echoing Walter Benjamin's important ideas about the age of mechanical reproduction.¹⁶ This segment of *Mr. Death* offers a concise lesson in both the primacy of the photographic image and in the vagaries of photographic interpretation, points Morris's films return to repeatedly.

For Benjamin, the loss of aura brought about by the proliferation of the mechanical arts resulted in the potential liberation of art, enabling it 'to meet the beholder halfway'.¹⁷ Wrested from its specificity in time and space, the aura-less object was not beholden to a notion of the 'original' for its value. In contrast, Leuchter imagines a photograph so representative of the object's specific time and place that it carries upon its surface 'entities' from the past, ghosts of the original. This unquestioning belief that a photographic surface carries traces of the past is central to the film's larger questions about the image as witness. The use of photographic materials without Morris's consistently interrogative form leaves us all, to borrow Leuchter's words, wondering if 'there was something there to start with'. Morris does not suggest that events never happened, but that all attempts to recover them – via photography, narration or re-enactment – are imperfect, removed from the so-called original moment. As Robert McNamara's seventh lesson in *The Fog of War* (2003) instructs, 'seeing and believing are both often wrong'. Morris quips back at McNamara in a manner perfectly relevant to the present discussion, saying 'we see what we want to believe' and, we should add, we narrate accordingly.

Morris both relies upon images and also tests their stability, calling into question our faith in them as a source of indisputable knowledge. In *Mr. Death*, Leuchter's scientific journey to the concentration camps in Poland is scrutinised in just such a fashion. His trip, the subject of the second half of the documentary, was recorded by a videographer who accompanied him on his evidence-gathering mission. Leuchter, as Joel Black has argued, is himself a deluded documentarian.¹⁸ His footage is convincing to himself and to Holocaust deniers in part precisely because of its amateur aesthetic. Shaky hand-held cameras, grainy video stock and generally poor lighting combine to create a sense of 'realism', a sense so overbearing that its 'reality effect' spills over into Leuchter's specious and often childlike narration. This video footage of Leuchter at work at Auschwitz provides Morris's audience with a twice-removed test of the camera's capacity for witnessing. The images themselves appear to support the tenuous science they uphold, but only until they are scrutinised by Morris as editor or by alternate narrators, such as historian Robert Jan van Pelt. They may at first appear to present the 'facts' of Leuchter's evidence-gathering unproblematically, but these facts only take us so far.

At one point Morris slows down footage of Leuchter as he collects samples by chiselling into what we assume to be a wall at Auschwitz. As if to prove his commitment not to the integrity of the image but to its pervasive capacity to mislead, Morris presents mock footage of Leuchter at work in a recreated Auschwitz. As Morris's work continually demonstrates, all images have a questionable past, a dubious relationship to their subject. But the act of Leuchter's chiselling has a dual function: Leuchter wishes to carve his name into the annals of history and, in so doing, ends up eroding the history that he hoped would support him.¹⁹ When these images are slowed down, the invisible reveals itself: Leuchter's tragically and falsely heroic self-image is elongated and exaggerated, placed in relief. And yet, Morris, like Leuchter, is also collecting and manipulating samples. Morris, however, collects behavioural, not archaeological samples; his tool is an editing table rather than a chisel. Thus, for Morris, the conception of the camera as an impartial witness is debunked; it is always a functionary of subjective human desire.

The penultimate images in *The Thin Blue Line* formalise the degree to which Morris comments upon his own highly mediated role. Within Morris's oeuvre, this extended sequence is unusual. It contains a series of shots not of re-enactments or interviews, but of a hand-held tape recorder (figure 5). For the first time in the film,

the soundtrack introduces us to Morris's voice as he questions and gets answers from David Harris, the man not convicted of Wood's murder. Here Morris intrudes from outside of the diegesis, making an important first- and third-person foray into the world of the story. Shot from a variety of different perspectives and distances – medium shot, extreme close-up, canted angles – images of a tape recorder mimic the rhythm of shot/reverse-shot editing as each cut initiates another framing of

the device. While the editing is evocative of a conversation, the disembodied voices tell the most crucial story of the film: David Harris, in essence, confesses that he fingered Randall Adams for the murder of Officer Wood to a police force desperate to solve this high-profile crime.

When Harris speaks about why he implicated Adams in Wood's murder, he uses the third-person present tense to refer to himself instead of the more appropriate first-person past tense: 'Scared sixteen-year-old kid. He sure would like to get out of it if he can.' Morris is highly aware of the linguistic structure of Harris's narration, making his auditory appearance in this final scene the film's most revealing moment. Harris's adoption of the third-person, perhaps equally calculated, rhetorically removes him from himself, from his own personal history. In adopting this position, Harris becomes a spectator and narrator to his own acts. This process of removal is made all the more palpable in Morris's refusal to show us anything but the device that records and subsequently plays back this transformation. This is not to say that



Figure 5: In their compositional eccentricity and title placement, Morris's shifting images of the tape recorder at the end of *The Thin Blue Line* look like advertisements for the multiple truths his film presents.

Morris refuses the primacy of the image. On the contrary, he effectively implies its sway over human experience. However, Morris focuses our attention equally upon the apparatus and what it has the potential to capture: the process of memory, history and, on occasion, even truth.

Morris's style, here and elsewhere, forms a long-running commentary on our cultural faith in images, our desire to believe what we see, our hope that not all cameras lie. It is no coincidence that Morris's own cameras find themselves gazing most often upon individuals in legal or personal battles for the truth. Morris's awareness of and insistence on his own mediating hand makes for more than self-conscious images; the films make the viewer conscious of the manner by which truth, history and the witnessed moment are always reproductions.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION: OF MEMORIES AND MOVIES

Nichols provides the following sketch of realism and its function within three broadly conceived cinematic categories or types:

In classic Hollywood narrative, realism combines a view of an imaginary world with moments of authorial overttness (commonly at the beginning and end of tales, for example) to reinforce the sense of a moral and the singularity of its import. In modernist narrative (most European art cinema, for example), realism combines an imaginary world rendered through a blend of objective and subjective voices with patterns of authorial overttness (usually through a strong and distinctive personal style) to convey a sense of moral ambiguity. In documentary, realism joins together objective representations of the historical world and rhetorical overttness to convey an argument about the world.²⁰

It should come as no surprise that Morris's place within this schematic is problematic at best. Morris's work would seem to share much in common with Nichols's ideas about modernist narrative. The chorus of visual and aural, objective and subjective voices is in fact a product of Morris's own authorial overttness. Except for his interest in 'the historical world', however, Morris seems to exist outside of Nichols's documentary domain. Morris often uses clips from feature films in his attempt to visualise his subjects' own cinematically-informed dreamscapes. In fact, this interest in the fictional world as a catalyst for understanding the historical world, and the hold that the former has over it, has been a longstanding feature of Morris's work.

Perhaps no Errol Morris piece addresses the cinematic nature of memory more directly than his 2001 documentary short made for the ABC broadcast of the Academy Awards Ceremony.²¹ The ceremony itself occurred at a moment in American history when national viewing habits were being called into question. Americans puzzled over their own relationship to and reliance on the broadcast images of the September 11 'events', and the celebration of something as frivolous as 'going to the movies' appeared suspect, at best. The ceremony began with Tom Cruise assuring his celebrity audience and those at home that movies were okay, even important as a reassurance that life continues despite the threat of political events. The introduction was followed by Morris's contribution, a short film documenting people's responses

to the following general question: 'What do movies mean to you?' The exercise itself was undertaken in the spirit of Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's popular ethnography in *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1960), although the resulting film is something else entirely.

Morris's Academy Awards' film is, on the one hand, a thoroughly entertaining celebration of cinephilia. It got laughs. Judgement is not passed in any clear way: Morris slaps no hands for the crime of cinephilia, nor does he make claims about film's inherent value. However, the film's timing, its subject matter and its placement within Morris's career would suggest that within these several minutes resides a subtle questioning of our love affair with images, our chronic spectatorship, our cinematic relationship to reality, and the role that movies and other mass-produced images play in the articulation of our own memories. Morris is committed to exposing witnesses to the process of witnessing. However, in this short film, he calls both terms into question. His Academy Awards' short represents the process of spectatorship via a series of spectators-turned-spectacle.

Subject after subject, some famous, others unknown, offer cinematic soundbites against the stark white background that has become the hallmark of Morris's advertisements, a background that replicates the scope and emptiness of the silver screen itself.²² Wavy Gravy attempts to find cinema's use-value when he claims that Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (1974) ended the Vietnam War, to which Morris playfully asks 'Can movies do that?' Mikhail Gorbachev, an apparent Russell Crowe fan, likes *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000). Laura Bush is a fan of *Giant* (George Stevens, 1956). Occasionally Morris's voice is audible on the soundtrack, teasing, provoking and asking additional questions. But the overall structure of the piece is a steady stream of individuals whose very individuality is accentuated by the emptiness of the space that contains them, the space that cuts between them and their freedom to narrate themselves.

Morris has repeatedly suggested that all human beings live in their own self-created dreamscapes. His films argue, however, that these dreamscapes are often cinematically derived. Film is our mythology, providing us with images that function as our collective memory. This is an idea reiterated in *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* (1997) where characters directly express the manner in which films have influenced their career choices and their lives more generally. Morris's expressive techniques, which have on occasion been faulted for being 'too cinematic', are self-consciously so. Cinema and its grip on the imaginative life, in fact, are what these images express. The canted framings of Fred Leuchter are not simply the product of Morris's cinematically-informed mind, though they are certainly this as well; they are expressive of Leuchter's own cinematically-informed worldview.

The idea of film spectatorship is also central to *The Thin Blue Line*, which swerves into a curious 'film within a film' when Randall Adams narrates the portion of his encounter with David Harris that found them at a drive-in movie theatre watching a double feature. This unusually long narrative detour (the sequence lasts a full two minutes) shows a re-enactment of the seemingly mundane event of going to a drive-in movie, including extended footage from *Swinging Cheerleaders* (Jack Hill, 1974) and *The Student Body* (Gus Trikonis, 1976), the films that Adams and Harris had been watching on the fateful night. The camera is parked at the drive-in along with Adams

and Harris and the resulting images shift between long shots of the movie screen and glimpses inside the car where we see actors playing Adams and Harris drinking beer and smoking marijuana. Adams's narration guides us through this entire sequence, and includes his own spectatorial evaluations: he does not like the second cheerleading film and wants to leave but Harris wants to see the film through to the end. In a film about who saw what on the night Robert Wood was shot, this lengthy and seemingly inconsequential sequence offers an important reminder: every spectator sees, perceives, reacts to and evaluates things differently.

This sequence illuminates both the culture's incessant desire for spectatorship and its need to narrate and evaluate what it sees. Morris's insistence on aestheticising first-person narrations, on creating reproductions of the real in order to point out the degree to which we rely upon the fictional, suggests that remembering is, indeed, a process of re-creation. His films envision the many literal and metaphorical lenses through which we perceive: the windshield at the drive-in movie, Leuchter's spectacles, the side windows of passers-by, rear-view and side mirrors, as well as the lenses that record and project images. Morris's films offer a primer on the variable functions of memory and narration, as well as a compelling argument about the great necessity of examining the multiple layers embedded within the process of witnessing.

We would like to thank Ellen Harrington of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for providing us with a copy of Morris' 'Academy Awards' segment and Sarah Loffman for introducing us to First Person.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Joel Black, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 151.
- 2 Morris has discussed the Interrotron and Megatron on his website: 'Since the Interrotron makes use of two-way mirrors and television monitors, it is possible using lipstick cameras to add additional cameras behind the two-way mirrors.' Morris also explains that the Megatron adds a minimum of twenty cameras to the Interrotron. Online. Available <<http://web.archive.org/web/20040204132401/http://errolmorris.com/conversations.php>> (accessed 31 May 2003).
- 3 Morris descends in some ways from John Grierson who, as Brian Winston points out, opted for a documentary practice grounded in 'poetic image-making' that 'claimed all the artistic licence of a fiction with the only constraints being that its images were not of actors and its stories were not the products of unfettered imagining'. Brian Winston, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 20.
- 4 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 196.
- 5 Errol Morris, Interview with Ron Rosenbaum, Museum of Modern Art, Fall 1999, reproduced on Errol Morris' website. Available <<http://www.errolmorris.com/content/interview/moma1999.html>> (accessed 31 May 2003).
- 6 John Dorst, 'Which Came First, the Chicken Device or the Textual Egg?: Documentary Film and the Limits of the Hybrid Metaphor', *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (Summer 1999): 279.
- 7 Winston, 5. Winston also points to Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) as a point where these aesthetic prejudices began to shift.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 132-3.
- 9 Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 7.

- 10 Morris's interest in multiplicity would seem to link him to currents in postmodern thinking, with which he is clearly familiar. At the same time, Morris, with his ever-present sense of irony and calculated humour, claims distance from this thinking, as he indicates in a fall 1999 interview with Ron Rosenbaum conducted at the Museum of Modern Art: 'Yes, I believe there is such a thing as real, historical truth. I am no post-modernist. I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And one of the nice things about Cambridge, Massachusetts is that "Baudrillard" isn't in the phone book.' Online. Available <<http://www.errolmorris.com/content/interview/moma1999.html>> (accessed 31 May 2003).
- 11 Even this is somewhat misleading, since the films are both diegetically first-person and yet necessarily third-person.
- 12 *First Person*, part of Bravo's so-called 'Counter-Culture Wednesday' line-up, was a series of 30-minute Megatron-heavy interviews. Airing for two complete seasons (2000–01), this innovative series focused on Americans with eccentric careers: the highly educated and articulate autistic designer of more humane slaughtering devices, a lifelong Giant Squid follower, a crime-scene cleaner, the curator of a museum of medical curiosities in Philadelphia, and the like.
- 13 Errol Morris interview, 'Mr. Death: The Executioner's Song', *Filmmaker Magazine*, Fall 1999, 85.
- 14 Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', 8.
- 15 Morris occasionally acknowledges this curatorial connection. 'Smiling in a Jar', an episode of *First Person*, focuses on Gretchen Worden, curatorial director of Philadelphia's Mütter Museum, a museum of medical curiosities and atrocities. Not only are the similarities between Worden and Morris drawn out comically in the episode but, at one point, Worden, making a joke about Morris's teleprompter system and its effect, suggests that the filmmaker's head would look interesting in a jar. Worden states that, staring as she has been at his disembodied face on a screen, it does not seem to be too much of a stretch. Morris takes the opportunity, in his editing of the piece, to rather forwardly 'expose' the apparatus, giving the viewer a glimpse at said teleprompter and said head smiling wryly. As the series continued through its second season, these self-reflexive moments occurred with greater frequency.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, 6th edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). 791–811.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 793.
- 18 Black, *The Reality Effect*, 151–4.
- 19 James Roth, the chemist who tested the samples Leuchter brought back, explains in the film that cyanide does not penetrate more than ten microns beyond the surface and that Leuchter's samplings were therefore improperly gathered.
- 20 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 166.
- 21 The ceremony was broadcast on 24 March 2002.
- 22 Morris has had an active career in advertising, making commercials for such companies as Miller High Life, Adidas, Nike, Levis, and Volkswagen. The composition, editing, soundtrack, and overall sensibility of this work is almost instantly recognisable. A sample of his work can be seen on his website. Available <<http://www.errolmorris.com/commercials.html>> (accessed 31 May 2003).

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