It Could All Be Wrong

An unfinished interview with Errol Morris

by Paul Cronin

Tell me about the Interrotron. It seems surprising no one ever thought of the idea before.

Yes. Odd. I used it for the first time in 1992 – on Fred Leuchter – and can find little evidence that anyone used it before then. Puzzling. Because it seems obvious. But as I like to point out, nothing is so obvious that it's obvious.

What was your underlying motivation?

I've always been suspicious of *cinéma-vérité*, the fly on the wall school of documentary filmmaking where supposedly you're not interacting with things, you're just observing and recording them. The observer is hidden. I want to bring the observer stage-center.

Almost all interviews are filmed *vérité* style with a camera, an interviewer and subject. You have a triangle where the camera takes the role of an observer, even voyeur. The camera is the third person observing two people talking. It's off to the side, and even though I'm looking into your eyes and you're looking into mine, this eye contact is something that the camera, sitting some feet from us both, doesn't capture. This means that the audience isn't really part of the conversation. They're merely observing it.

But our heads are wired up in a way that means eye contact is very important. It's really an essential part of our interactions with other people. Everyone recognises the power of this connection when it happens, and I'd always looked for ways to close up that triangle. When I made *Gates of Heaven* I tried to simulate eye/camera contact with the people I was filming to the point where I would press my head against the side of the camera to narrow the parallax so it looked like they were looking into the camera, even though they were actually looking slightly to one side. Sometimes my hair would flop into shot. Sometimes my cameraman would grab my head and pull it out of shot. And sometimes that hurt. I avoided close-ups because the eye-lines would have given the game away. But I always knew this wasn't *real* first person filmmaking. Today I call it *faux* first person. So I had this crazy idea: what if the interviewer and the camera could become one and the same? What if I could *become* my camera?

And so, using a system of mirrors and video images, I created a way in which people can look into my eyes *and* directly into the camera at the same time. My invention is called the Interrotron – patent pending – the name of which comes from my wife, and is a combination of "interview" and "terror." I use a modified

teleprompter that conveys video images instead of text. Teleprompters are used when someone needs to read text and look into the camera at the same time. The copy is placed on a half-silvered mirror in front of the lens. But a newscaster looking into the camera is not looking at anyone – he's simply looking into a dead lens – and it's a relationship only between a person and a machine. I took two of these contraptions and set them up in a studio. The idea was to wire the image from one prompter, camera A, which is filming my subject, and play it through the camera B prompter, and vice versa. The subject sits in front of one Interrotron and I sit in front of the other, which means we're both talking to live television images. We could be in separate rooms, or even on separate planets. The Interrotron gives me the ability to interview someone one-on-one, but watching the video image of me on the half-silvered mirror on front of the camera lens means that the interview subject can also make direct eye contact with the viewer. Of course interviewing this way means there is also a recording of me listening, or at least me looking like I'm listening. Seeing myself on screen like that for the first time I remember thinking, "How could anybody talk looking at this person?" But thankfully they do. With the Interrotron, I become one with the camera, and it's no longer a *cinéma-vérité* moment.

My production designer, Ted Bafaloukos, said to me, "The beauty of this thing is that it allows people to do what they do best: watch television." But the people being interviewed aren't watching regular TV. They're watching a TV set that really cares and wants to know more.

Surely it's just a gimmick.

A gimmick with genuine metaphysical content. If you just sit someone down and ask them to talk to the camera for hours at a time, they won't do it. You need someone sitting in front of them who they can interact with, even though there's not anyone physically there. In fact, it's even better that someone is not right next to them. The Interrotron plays on the idea that you can say things on the phone that you would never ever in a million years say to someone sitting directly across from you. In effect, greater distance means greater intimacy.

What's the Megatron?

Well, that's the *real* gimmick. I was very interested in the possibility of shooting an interview with multiple cameras and all the possibilities of combining the images. Think of the Megatron as a super-charged Interrotron with twenty cameras all at different angles, though most aren't behind the mirror. As with the Interrotron, a really interesting editing style becomes possible. It means there is a huge variety of close-ups and medium shots. There really are so many potential stylistic possibilities. In theory there's no limit to the number of cameras that can be used. It gave me something like the compound eye of a bee.

How often have you used the Megatron?

I used it for a few of the *First Person* shows, but basically abandoned it in favor of the Interrotron. I never had a chance to experiment with the Megatron as much as I'd like to. One reason was that I don't like the look of digital video, and the cameras on the Megatron were all DV. And I don't like 30-frame interlaced DV. Maybe I just never figured out the best way to use it, but I don't think I would ever shoot an interview again in DV. The interview for *The Fog of War* was shot on 24 frame Hi-Definition, and I thought the HD cassette that we digitally projected at Cannes looked really good, better than a film print.

How have your interviewees reacted to the Interrotron over the years?

Fred Leuchter loved it, but Robert McNamara, who has done thousands of interviews over the years, took one look at the contraption and said, "What is this?" I told him it was my interviewing machine. He looked at me and said, "Whatever it is, I don't like it." But he sat down and we started talking. He got used to it pretty quickly.

Has video changed the way you shoot interviews?

Absolutely. Back in the old days I called myself the Eleven-Minute Psychiatrist because I was shooting with eleven-minute magazines. At the pragmatic level there's a big difference between shooting an interview in units of eleven minutes and being able to shoot for an hour and forty minutes in one go and then be able to switch tapes in only a few seconds. These days I often have two decks running, which means I don't even have to switch tapes. My subjects can just talk and talk. We never have to stop. Not having to interrupt an interview really makes a big difference, not least in McNamara's case because I was always afraid he was going to get up and leave. I figured that the fewer opportunities I gave him to do that, the better off I was.

Doesn't having so much material cause problems during editing?

More is more. Generally I shoot for as long as possible. It really depends on how much time the interviewee can give me. There doesn't seem to be any benefit to shooting less. Why stop if someone's saying something interesting? My interviews regularly run five or six hours. I remember shooting an interview with Rick Rosner for *First Person*, the episode *One in a Million Trillion*, which went on for something like eleven or twelve hours. It was insane. I think we were both hallucinating by the end of it. It would be great to get someone to talk non-stop for twenty-four hours.

Your editor Karen Schmeer told me that often during interviews you'll have someone sitting next to you suggesting certain things, reminding you of certain things.

Yes, sometimes Karen and a researcher will be sitting with me. You often hear this notion that editors shouldn't be on set because it can cloud their ability to look at the material "objectively." But I don't agree.

Presumably the possibilities afforded by editing systems like Avid are a factor?

Absolutely. With the Avid, just by pushing a single key, there's a way to cycle through all twenty cameras, one after the other. If you had twenty cameras with independent time-code and you had to go through the material separately in order to find it and cut it in, it wouldn't really be feasible. The fact that it would be financially possible to hook up twenty HD cameras to the Megatron, combined with the remarkable potential of the editing system I use, makes it all something worth exploring in more detail.

Do you think you would ever go back to film?

I never left film. Given the opportunity I would go back to everything. I like all media. Why does it have to be A rather than B, or B rather than C? Why not A, B *and* C? There's this idea that the future erases the past. In some instances it does, but what usually happens is that you end up with all these layers. It's not as if LPs don't exist any longer. Some people love and collect them, and people will collect CDs long after CDs go out of existence. My guess is that unless the companies stop making film altogether, and there is actually no way to shoot film, someone will always want to use it, experiment with it. People will always be intrigued by the various technologies from the past because there's a specific look or sound you get with them. Maybe that look or sound can be replicated digitally, but there's still something appealing about going back to the original.

Did you shoot the short film that opened the 2002 Oscar ceremony on the Interrotron?

Yes, over five days in Boston, San Francisco, New York and the White House. I had more than twenty-four hours of footage which was reduced to four minutes and fifteen seconds. I'd really like to do something more in that vein, perhaps a whole movie. I know there's life in the thing beyond the Academy Awards. Some of the material has ended up on my website. Donald Trump talking about *Citizen Kane*, for example. Isn't it possible that in an alternative universe, Donald Trump actually starred in *Citizen Kane*?

Your work as a TV commercial director is something that seems to take up more time these days than your features do.

I started doing commercials shortly after *The Thin Blue Line*. Clearly someone thought that with my passion for justice and my interest in reenactments I could effectively sell things to people. Often I see little difference between advertising and anything else. Branding isn't just part of commercials, it's part of how we see the world. It's all just an effort to "sell" someone on an idea, on a conception of reality. Commercials are films, albeit little films. My job is to create something compelling in the time available, whether it be two hours or thirty seconds. Think of commercials as American haiku.

Do you come up with the concept of a campaign yourself or do you have to follow ideas laid down by the advertising executives?

It depends. I'm a director for hire. Advertising agencies sometimes ask me to come up with an idea and sometimes they have their own ideas. Sometimes I have real input in a campaign, other times I am given no input whatsoever, though generally I try to avoid jobs like that.

You've created a fair amount of political advertising.

Politics is too important to be left to politicians. The same could be said about political advertising. My producer Julie Ahlberg and I tried for months to provide advertising for the Democrats, for John Kerry, but in the end no one was really interested in doing much of anything. Or, if they were, no one could make decisions. The two of us were on a conference call with the Democrats and I muted the phone, and told her: "They're going to lose." No one could agree on anything, even to disagree. It was hopeless.

You clearly take a great deal of pride in your work, so presumably when you take on a campaign you always want to see it through to the end.

I prefer to edit material myself. Sometimes I get involved in ways that are unnecessary, even counterproductive, at least on a business level. But I actually think it's appalling that many commercial directors don't edit their own work. I would have a hard time working that way. A director who doesn't edit what he shoots isn't really a director.

Would you be able to make your features without the revenue generated by your work as a commercial director?

No. My films wouldn't be possible without the commercials. Often I've been able to shoot segments of my features on the back end of commercials. In *The Fog of War* there are scenes we filmed in Shanghai and Tokyo. I didn't take a crew over to those places specifically to get those shots – we were there shooting a commercial and at the end of the working day spent a time collecting material for the McNamara film. Commercials have given me a certain freedom that I wouldn't otherwise have. I'm not constrained to make money from my movies because my primary income comes from my commercial work. I like the idea of what I do being an experimental form of filmmaking, that every time I do it I can redefine and reexamine what I do. I can rethink the underlying assumptions and premises, and try different things, all because I know I've got the commercials to fall back on.

Presumably working with such big budgets on commercials has been useful.

Sure. I usually have an awful lot of money at my disposal. I like the opportunity to experiment with all this equipment and cinematic toys. I've gained a lot of experience in this way. Plus the time commitment is much less. Compare producing an advertising campaign over three weeks to a feature project that can take two or more years.

Many of your commercials feature real people, not actors.

Yes and no. I use actors all the time in my commercials. When I started working on ads people wanted me to do reenactments because of what they had seen in *The Thin Blue Line*. None of my commercials had interviews in them – that came after 9/11 when I was hired to shoot a campaign for United Airlines, a series of scripted ads to be shot at O'Hare airport. We were scouting various locations when Bush announced the invasion of Afghanistan. It meant that overnight we lost our permission to shoot at the airport. The whole job was going to be cancelled, but because they had to pay us anyway I told them I would take some employees of the airline into a studio and shoot something. So we did a series of real-people ads, and from that point on I've been asked to do more and more.

This leads us to your thoughts about the role of truth in documentaries versus feature film. Isn't the key difference that documentaries have to be true?

Are you kidding? Of course not. Who came up with such a preposterous idea? *Cinéma-vérité* clearly carries some kind of preposterous epistemological claim. The very name suggests some kind of truthful document. The idea is that you follow the stylistic rules and out pops truth. But style most certainly does not guarantee truth.

Your interviews appear to be quite investigative.

Yes. I never know what to expect or what I am going to hear. The same goes when the tables are turned and I am being interviewed. There is one thing I can predict, however. I always know an interview is going to be bad if the interviewer shows up with a list of questions and ticks them off one by one.

Is this interview going to be bad?

We'll have to wait and see.

You would agree that interviews are essential to your kind of filmmaking?

Yes – it's part of what makes my documentaries documentaries. It's that element of reality. The interviews are investigative and unscripted. My intention in the interview process is always to get a monologue on film that I use to create a story told in the first person. I edit this material into a kind of script and then create visuals to go with it. This seems, to me at least, to be very different from how most documentaries are constructed.

Many writers have commented on your interviewing technique.

My wife has said that I can be a real nag sometimes. Maybe that makes me a good interviewer. But there really aren't many rules to follow here. I just try not to be a threatening interviewer. I allow people to go all over the place – I don't rein them in. They're not being interviewed as such, I'm just allowing them to talk about themselves. And never go in with a fixed agenda, because otherwise you learn nothing. It's always better to let the interview take whatever direction it takes, however surprising. In fact, the more surprising an interview the more interesting it usually turns out to be. Most of the time I don't know what questions I'm going to ask. I try not to bring in a preconceived plan. I'm not out to judge, I'm there to listen to what these people have to say. I truly believe my role in such situations is not to editorialise about my own feelings.

I was interviewing people long before I started working with cameras. My goal was always to say absolutely nothing. I would put my tape recorder on the table and hope that the person would just start talking. The game was to keep them talking as long as possible and not interrupt, no matter what. Because of this, a prerequisite of appearing in my films is an ability to talk at length. Extended monologues is what I like, not some kind of cross-examination. But I do try to encourage them to continue talking in such a way that my voice doesn't appear on the recording. I have one tape that I'm especially proud of that goes on for three hours, where you don't hear me speak once. Basically, I'm a member of the Shut Up and Listen school of investigation. I might use only twenty or thirty seconds of an interview fragment that's ten minutes long, but the feeling you get is that people are talking not in response to some specific question that's hanging off-screen, but that

they're talking at length. I like to think this is an essential part of the style of my movies.

Probably the best example is Emily Miller, the platinum blonde from *The Thin Blue Line*. Remember that Randall Adams was sentenced to death because of various eyewitness testimonies, including Miller's. She got on the stand and uttered that famous line – you've heard it in countless Perry Mason episodes – "That's the man! That's him!" So the jury hands down a guilty verdict and Adams is sentenced to death. During my interview with her, Miller completely forgot that at the capital murder trial she testified that she had picked Randall Adams out from a police lineup. I never asked her a specific question, but all of a sudden she started to explain why she had failed to pick Adams from the lineup. She went on about how he'd changed his physical appearance, his hair was different, about how he was looking at her in a funny way. I was really puzzled, so I said, "How do you know you failed to pick him out of a police lineup?" She said, "Because the policeman sitting next to me told me I had picked out the wrong person, and then pointed out the right person so I wouldn't make that mistake again." How can you not love that kind of thing? She had forgotten she had testified the exact opposite during the trial. It was essentially an admission of perjury. The point is that I would never have been smart enough to ask her about this. If I had been more adversarial with her – and the same goes with Fred Leuchter and Robert McNamara – I wouldn't have uncovered such interesting stuff. In fact, in McNamara's case he would have just walked out on me.

Is it true you don't even listen to what your interviewees are saying to you?

No. I listen, but I try to look like I am not listening. When you look like you are listening to another person there's a tendency to react to what you're hearing. You might twitch or look away, at which point the other person becomes aware of these reactions and in turn feels the need to ask you what you're thinking and interrupt themselves.

I devote myself to encouraging my interviewee not to stop. I'm aided and abetted in this enterprise by the fact that people really do want to tell you their story. If you let people talk without interruption, pretty quickly they'll show you who they really are. I figure people are going to say pretty much the same thing no matter what I ask them. Sure, I can prod them in certain directions, but many people have stories that will appear regardless of the questions thrown at them. In fact in *The Fog of War* McNamara even says, "Never answer the question that is asked of you. Answer the question that you wish had been asked of you." Just after McNamara said this, I asked him, "Are you doing that to me?" He just smiled.

A good interview needn't be a tug of war. I like confrontation as much as the next person, but it's not what I'm about as a filmmaker. I don't set out to impugn the character of whomever I'm talking to or to trap them in contradiction.

That sets you apart from many documentarians, at least of the journalistic style. Does your work connect with the history of documentary filmmaking, at least in your own mind?

Recently, for the first time, I watched several films by Robert Flaherty, which I found extraordinarily beautiful. What surprised me is that his work – considered to be some of the first "documentaries" ever made – is highly stylised. As we all know the igloo scene in *Nanook of the North* was achieved by using a cutaway igloo so the camera crew could get specific shots. This all goes to the whole idea of reenactments and staging and faking things. Even then Flaherty was telling us that there isn't a single way to apprehend reality, that it's not just a case of casting the net out and bringing the captured reality back into the boat. I looked at the DVD extras on *Nanook* and what's really surprising is the series of photos Flaherty took of Eskimos. What's interesting is that he divided them into two categories: looking into the camera and not looking into the camera, posed and unposed. The rule in narrative film is: Don't Look At The Camera, Don't Break the Line. In documentaries we have people inhabiting a world of their own, and the same rule applies. In both cases, we're recording these performances. It's interesting to me that Flaherty was aware of these two categories. To my mind, all these things address deep questions about the relationship between our consciousness and the world, and our relationship between photography and the world and how it is mediated by our consciousness.

Are there documentary filmmakers who have influenced you?

Of course. Herzog, Wiseman. Hara's portrait of Kenzo Okuzaki in *The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*. Flaherty for his own brand of whacked-out romanticism. Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Kino-Pravda*. The reverse slaughterhouse scene is as good as it gets. And, of course, neorealism. Everything by Bresson. Look at Werner Herzog's films, which straddle the line between drama and documentary, perhaps hopelessly blurring the distinction altogether. He's made "documentary" fictions and fictions that are hopelessly documentary in character. He's a neorealist expressionist. Bruno S. is an actor in *Stroszek* and *Every Man for Himself*, much like Nadine Nortier is an actor in *Mouchette*. *Aguirre* can be thought of as a documentary film of Herzog and Kinski's excellent adventure in the Amazon jungle.

You often claim that the differences between documentary and fiction are faint.

Of course. There are more similarities than dissimilarities. For example, we expect documentaries to have stories in the same way we expect fiction films to have stories. Every piece of film contains elements of both fact and fiction. What I like to do is draw people's attention to the fact that the line between fiction and nonfiction

– between documentary and dramatic films – is somewhat more illusory than we would like to think. For someone like Fred Wiseman, this line is probably in a very different place than it is for me. Some nonfiction films – mine for example – are highly controlled, while some fiction films, like *The Battle of Algiers*, have very strong elements of *cinéma-vérité*. Where does the real world end and fiction begin? Is an Astaire and Rogers film a documentary of them dancing or is it something more than that? I've always been fascinated by the idea of the world a filmmaker creates and its relationship to the real world out there, this notion of making a documentary that doesn't contain a single "real" image. I like to think that a film like *Gates of Heaven* treads a path between reality and fantasy. And look at *A Brief History of Time*, where all the interviews were actually filmed on studio sets constructed to look precisely like actual rooms and offices.

When we talk about the differences between fiction and nonfiction filmmaking and photography, what we're really talking about is control and lack of control. With fiction we imagine everything being tightly controlled: the actors are told where to stand, told what to say, they are lit and framed in a very conscious way. With nonfiction, however, things just unfold with – so the theory goes – the filmmaker merely observing and not interfering in any way. In one sense my films are documentaries simply because the people in them are not reading from a script. But what makes the medium of film interesting is this interplay between the controlled and the uncontrolled, something I like to draw attention to, for example by being so precise about framing the shots.

But I really have no idea what the people I'm interviewing are going to say to me, and I take pride in the fact that I don't tell people what to say. I like to think I'm receptive to anything and everything. I might write out a list of questions but then make no use of them during the interview. It's just a way of preparing myself, doing my homework. Perhaps because of this people often say surprising things of their own volition. But once the interview is over, everything's up for grabs. By the time I get into the editing room I've created a series of uncontrolled moments on film, instances of pure spontaneity where the "real" world creeps in. I've spent literally years cutting a series of interviews into little pieces and reassembling them, even if the hope is that the end result contains an overriding element of reality and spontaneity.

With *The Thin Blue Line* I wanted to do a nonfiction film as something like a piece of art rather than a piece of journalism, and in this sense the film tells its story in a very dreamlike way. The audience is meant to wonder what's true and what's not. I couldn't imagine telling that story as a narrative film, mainly because it would mean everything would be spelled out for the audience. Some true stories work well told by real people, others are best when fictionalised. With *In Cold Blood*, Capote was calling attention to the tension between reporting and art-making, between trying to portray a real story and at the same time trying to produce something carefully crafted and, above all, personal. I've always wanted to have my cake and eat it too, to make a well-crafted film that's aesthetically interesting and entertaining,

and at the same time tackles various concerns of mine and might even produce some kind of social benefit.

Such an approach seems to irritate some people.

I'm often told that I am debasing the notion of documentary. But think about it: the so-called blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction doesn't mean we're denying or manipulating the truth. What it does is make us think about truth and our relationship to the world out there.

You say that every image contains elements of both the controlled and the uncontrolled. Can we ever know where the line between fiction and nonfiction lies just by looking at an image?

No. I've been reading Sontag's book *On Regarding the Pain of Others* that was published a few years ago. She writes about photographs that are posed versus photographs – or so the argument goes – that record something that "just happened" in front of the lens of the camera. She says that when we talk about a fake painting, usually what we're talking about is a picture by Rembrandt or Vermeer which is actually painted by somebody else. It suggests intentional fraud, that somebody painted it with the expectation that audiences would be fooled into thinking it was an original by one of the old masters. Sontag says that when we talk about a "fake" photograph, we're talking about something completely different, about a photograph that has been posed, and she cites various well-known examples. My own view is that the posed/unposed distinction may be a little harder to define than she imagines and may even be spurious.

There are many unanswered, deep metaphysical questions about how the world works. One is whether it's controlled or chaotic. Is the universe completely determined and ordered? Look at the so-called *auteur* theory of filmmaking, this idea that a film is completely under the control of one person. Some people complain about the idea by saying, "Sure, there's a director in charge, but there's also a production designer, a director of photography, a casting director, a bunch of actors, and a host of other people involved in a film." Of course they're right: everyone knows that the director as the all-knowing controlling force on a film is something that never happens in the real world. There's never a situation where absolutely everything is controlled because despite our best efforts, certain kinds of happenstance always sneak in.

So what's the opposite pole to this notion of attempting to control absolutely everything? It's our old friend *cinéma-vérité*, which tells us that nothing has been orchestrated or controlled or authored, that the director is merely observing and not influencing what's happening in front of the camera. Everything you see apparently happened completely independently of the filmmaker. Of course, as soon as you put down the camera in one position rather than another, you've made a decision about

framing, content and a myriad of other things. The idea of the spectator as the fly on the wall who observes but doesn't influence reality is something of an idealisation.

For what it's worth, here's my argument. It seems to me that in every single instance of both filmmaking and still photography, there are instances of both the controlled and uncontrolled. How we look at an image and how we think about it is contingent, I believe, on how we think it was produced. Yet often we have no knowledge about how the image was produced, so we make assumptions. Let me offer a thought experiment. Look at a piece of *vérité* filmmaking, something that the Maysles brothers or Fred Wiseman might have shot. Someone turns on the soundtrack and you hear the voice of the director telling the people in the frame exactly what to do: "Walk down the street, stop, look up" and so on. Regardless of what you're hearing, what is there exclusively in the picture that tells you it's fiction or nonfiction? Take out the sound, or even include the sound because you could argue it was put in afterwards and that the picture is actually completely uncontrolled and has been made to look as if it were not uncontrolled. What is there in the picture that might conceivably tell you this is a genuine piece of *vérité* filmmaking? What is there in an image that tells you it's one or the other? The answer, I think, is nothing. My argument would be that you have to know more about how the images were constructed.

Whenever I hear people talking about photographs being "true" or "false," I don't know what they're talking about. I don't think the term has any meaning. I sort of know what people are talking about when they say a sentence is true or false, because the notion of something being true or false is one that can certainly be applied to language. I believe that it's only when language is added to a photo, when a caption is put underneath a photograph, that you can begin to meaningfully talk about what might be true or otherwise. But the photo itself is neither true nor false. Look at Robert Capa's 1936 photograph of the death of a Republican soldier, taken during the Spanish Civil War. It's called "Falling Soldier." But regardless of whether or not it was staged – and there has been much debate about that – it is still a real photograph of whatever it was photographing.

So you're suggesting that to think of a particular photograph as being a fake is to miss the whole point of the medium?

Yes. And it's also worth thinking about how images have been used to charge history and historical events with certain significance, how they have even been used to create history. Take the photograph of the raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi. Many people think it was faked or posed. It really doesn't matter. What's clear is that the image has taken on heightened significance quite independent of the reality that is being photographed. It has been used to envision history, not simply to depict a historical event.

Truth is elusive, and we avoid it. We're often wrong about things even when we are convinced that we are in complete possession of the truth. It's our capacity to

believe in untruth that fascinates me. I suppose you might call this self-deception. Ultimately I suspect our conscious explanations do not take into account the hidden layers of motivation, intention and belief that determine what we do. If I may quote from my *New York Times* op-ed: "Unhappily, an unerring fact of human nature is that we habitually reject the evidence of our own senses. If we want to believe something, then we often find a way to do so, regardless of evidence to the contrary. Believing is seeing, and not the other way around."[1]

You talked about journalism earlier. Do you absolutely reject any kind of journalistic approach when it comes to your films? Are you attempting to do something other than merely convey information to the audience?

I think that most good journalism, in whatever medium, does more than merely convey information. I should also say that I'm not quite sure what people mean by "journalism." Are my films something more than journalism? I would think so, yes. But if someone were to say that what I do is a kind of journalism, I would have no problem with that either. In fact, I would be flattered. But what I do is more than convey information, and my style is not purely journalistic.

For example, in *The Thin Blue Line* I didn't identify the interview subjects by name. Some people didn't like this, but to my mind the important thing is that you understand who the people are in the context of the story being told to you. You know the cops are the cops, the defence attorney is the defence attorney, the wacko eyewitnesses are the wacko eyewitnesses, and so on. In *A Brief History of Time* I avoided naming people as the movie progressed, and feel that the short biographical descriptions at the end of the film cleared up any ambiguity.

When we talk about style – journalistic or otherwise – and documentaries, what we really are talking about, once again, is truth. Again, my line on this is: "Style does not guarantee truth," no more so than the font of a newspaper guarantees truth. The font of *The New York Times* might make us feel comfortable and believe we're reading something that's true, but this has absolutely nothing to do with truth. There are no "truth-telling" fonts. A documentary film is likely to be as "true" or "false" as a newspaper. A newspaper may contain sentences that are true or false, but what sense would it make to talk about an entire newspaper being true or false? Similarly, there is no "truth-telling" style of filmmaking, but lots of documentaries use *vérité* methods as some kind of guarantee of truth. It's this idea that if you put in the right ingredients, like hand-held cameras, use only available light and have an unobtrusive crew, that somehow – magically – this produces truth on film. I have nothing against *cinéma-vérité* as a style of filmmaking, but to think that because you adopt the style of Maysles and Wiseman what you're doing is somehow more truthful is just plain wrong. Actually I find this claim quite repellent. Truth isn't something you go out and collect with a camera – it's

[1] "Not Every Picture Tells a Story," *The New York Times*, 20 November 2004.

something to be pursued. I've said this many times before, but it's worth repeating: truth can't be manufactured, only the appearance of truth. And there's actually another word for this: falsehood.

The idea that a director is a slave to reality when making a documentary is nonsense. Filmmakers always have the licence to do almost anything. My own particular style is completely intrusive: careful compositions, theatrical lighting, people always aware they're talking to camera. Essentially, my subjects are being asked to perform. But I certainly believe that my films are just as concerned with truth as any *vérité* film might be.

I'm interested in the fact that you shot all your interviewees in The Thin Blue Line *sitting in the same chair that was exactly the same distance from the camera. Clearly you had a specific aesthetic in mind, even though you were making a nonfiction film.*

The aesthetics of *The Thin Blue Line* were clearly very important to me. Filming was strung out over a long period of time and there were various different cameramen on the project, but I was careful to use the same 16mm Zeiss high-speed prime lens for every interview to establish some unity in the imagery. This all started off as an aesthetic choice and then became a compulsion. I wanted a uniform look for the film, a level playing field for every interview subject.

This idea ended up causing me an enormous amount of difficulty. David Harris was in jail at the time. It took close to two years before I could film him because I wanted the interview to have the same look as all the others. I could have met him earlier but chose not to, and he ended up being the last person I interviewed. I'm very glad I did manage it because without his interview I feel the film would have been a shadow of itself. David was on death row in Texas. The Texas Department of Corrections has all these rules about how death row inmates can be filmed. It has to be on a certain day of the week and through a wire screen and so on. But David would have looked different from every other interview I had shot – it would have set him apart visually. For months I kept negotiating with the TDC to try to get permission to shoot him so I would be in the same room and without a wire screen, where I could light and record him in the same way I had recorded everyone else in the film. Finally David was brought to Dallas, where they allowed me to be in the same room as him and light him as I wanted to. He had to wear handcuffs, but it's only quite a way into the film that you realise this when he raises his hands up. It becomes a very dramatic moment in the movie. So in the end David Harris was in that same chair, he was the same distance from the camera as everyone else in the film, he was lit properly. But getting that on film was a nightmare because of my stylistic requirements.

I've always thought of the interviews I do as my own version of the Museum of Natural History, where they have animals standing in stylised dioramas behind glass. It's like attempting to create some kind of exotic environment and put it on display. I hope that all of my films have an expressionist feel to them.

Gates of Heaven *and* Vernon, Florida *rail against everything* cinéma-vérité *stands for.*

Most definitions of "art" are both pretentious and unacceptable. Why should mine be any better? This is the best I've been able to come up with: set up an arbitrary series of rules and then follow them slavishly.

When I made *Gates of Heaven* my contrarian streak really came to the fore. The film came not so much out of filmmaking but of the audio interviews I had done. The idea was to replicate the notion of uninterrupted talk on film. I looked at all the basic tenets of *vérité* and threw them out. I hated them anyway, so I consciously and totally disregarded them. I did everything precisely the opposite of the way it was supposed to be done. If the camera is supposed to be hand-held, I put it on a tripod. If the equipment is supposed to be lightweight and portable, I looked for the heaviest equipment I could find. If possible, I attached a brick to it. If you're supposed to use only available light, bring in big lights. If you're there to record the world and not interfere with it, make sure you interfere in as many ways as you can. Be unobtrusive? Why? Be as obtrusive as possible. Stage scenes and put objects in the frame. In fact, carefully compose frames and put people in them. Avoid zooms. Use prime lenses so you can't zoom. And get everyone to make eye contact with the camera.

I had terrible trouble at the start of *Gates of Heaven*. I got into a big argument the first day of shooting with cameraman Ed Lachman, who I knew through Werner Herzog. He arrived the day they were digging up the dead pets at the failed pet cemetery at Los Altos and had his own ideas about how this material should be shot, namely he should be running around the site with a hand-held camera. Of course that was anathema to me. Ed told me he knew how to shoot these kinds of films and that I didn't know what I was doing. The truth of the matter, of course, is that there is no one way a film should be shot. There's no formula to be followed slavishly. I fired three cameramen from *Gates of Heaven* because they would compulsively zoom in and try to heighten the action. I had a similar kind of problem on *The Thin Blue Line*. Randall Adams was finding it difficult to talk on camera and I said something like, "I really believe that you are innocent. This is your chance to talk." The cameraman, who clearly found my whole approach abhorrent, took me aside and told me I was sick and debased. "If I'd wanted to work with a moral philosopher," I told him, "I would have hired Emmanuel Kant."

What about the reenactments in The Thin Blue Line*?*

Those came from that fact that I never liked the way reenactments looked in other films. I didn't want to have an omniscient narrator, someone telling you what apparently and definitively happened, because the main thrust of *The Thin Blue Line* is an investigation into exactly what happened that night in Dallas. Simply, the

reenactments were never used to make you think you were looking at the real world. It was my hope that they would take you into the ambiguities of the story by illustrating the various lies that people had told, or what they thought and claimed they had seen that night. I always wanted people to question the reenactments in the film, just as we should question the flawed accounts of the witnesses. They are all just different articulations of lies, existing to take you deeper into the mystery of what happened on that roadway and into the world of untruth. I scrupulously avoided showing the version of David Harris alone in the car shooting the police officer, which is the one that's closest to what actually happened. The film makes no attempt to tell you whether what you are seeing on the screen actually happened, and because of this some of the reenactments – which are illustrations of what people claimed happened – inevitably contradict each other.

This is all very different from what you see in most traditional television journalism, where reenactments have some ironic significance. There's clearly a difference between using a reenactment to acknowledge that nobody knows what really happened, and one that purports to show you reality. There has been a dangerous tendency in television journalism to stage reenactments in such a way as to suggest that they aren't reenactments at all, rather the real thing. There are lots of tricks employed here, things like purposely degrading the image to look as though it's been filmed by a hidden camera. Amazingly, when *The Thin Blue Line* came out, someone accused me of trying to trick people into thinking that I had actually filmed the murder, as if I'd had a 35mm camera and a film crew out there that night, ready and waiting. It just goes to show that images – and also writing that purports to be "nonfiction" – bear a very complicated relationship to reality. As I said in my *New York Times* piece, "Photography, because of its causal relationship to the world, seems to give us the truth or something close to the truth. I am skeptical about this for many reasons."

What about daydreams of things that haven't happened?

They're kind of reenactments of imagined events. One other thing about reenactments brings us back to the idea of what is controlled and uncontrolled. For *The Fog of War* I used footage of the U.S. Government's reenactment of the Gulf of Tonkin incident that was staged a couple of weeks after the actual incidents. History, in fact, is replete with stories of reenacted footage. When the Russians liberated Auschwitz in January 1945 there were no cameras present, so they went back and re-liberated it several days later for the cameras. I suppose you could say cynically that the Defense Department filmed their reenactments of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents in order to make them more real and to give credence to the fact that they actually happened.

You often say that what people say and how they say it is more revealing than physical action.

There's an idea I've had for a long time, that each of us live in some private reality, and that our private worlds can be revealed through language. What really interests me is the act of self-presentation, how people see the world and their place in it, this tension between how people want to be seen and how, in fact, we perceive them. I love listening to people describe themselves, how they paint a picture of themselves through language. In fact, language and how people use it to express their inner world might be my central concern. I've always been interested in speech revealing something unintended or even unconscious. As a filmmaker I am able to create something that is incredibly contrived in so many ways, yet manages to preserve an element of the real, the spontaneous, the uncontrolled – namely language. The only true "documentary" element in my films is speech. I could never invent the language, the kinds of things that people say in my films. It's probably what I'm most proud of, that moment where people say the unimaginable. Cal Harberts in *Gates of Heaven* about the pet explosion, Phil Harberts and the R2A2 formula, the Martins and the sand that grows.

My favourite line comes from Emily Miller in *The Thin Blue Line* when she says, "Everywhere I go there are murders, even around my house." She's confused, she's confabulating, she's a fantasist living in some crazy world of her own devising. Surely there aren't people being bludgeoned to death in her kitchen or immolated in the living room. To me, this line sums up so much about her and people in general, that we all live in a personal fantasy world a good measure divorced from the real world, that there can be a radical disjunction between how we see ourselves and who we are, between what we believe is true and what is really true.

This is why paper edits of my films have never worked for me. There's something so absolutely different about actually listening to an interview and seeing it transcribed on paper. What makes some of my favourite moments so interesting is something that transcends the actual spoken words. It's an odd combination of emotion, gesture and the words themselves. The key to editing – whether it's a full-length film or a short commercial – is to be aware of cadence, the subtleties in the voices, the timing, how people speak as much as what they are saying. I've been musician, a cellist, for forty years, and for me there's certainly something musical about editing an interview. When it works, when the editing is just right, there is something musical about the human voice.

Where did you get the idea to make a film about a pet cemetery?

First things first: I never saw *Gates of Heaven* as being about a pet cemetery, though I couldn't really put my finger on what it is actually about. The film was inspired by an article that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the article you see spinning on the screen in the film: "450 Dead Pets Go to Napa." I had been spending a lot of time with mass murderers and at the time was working on a script about Ed Gein, a murderer and grave robber, called *Digging up the Past*.

Once it was finished, it was unclear if *Gates of Heaven* would be seen by anybody at all. The whole business was so different back then. There weren't that many film festivals, whereas now you can't swing a cat without knocking over a couple of them. People just didn't know how or where to distribute a film like that – there was no precedent. It was accepted into the 1978 New York Film Festival but there was a newspaper strike that year, so hardly anyone reviewed it. At the Berlin Film Festival it played without subtitles and I couldn't sit through the film again, so I wandered around outside and came back just before the ending. The theatre was empty. Everyone had walked out. Many people caught up with the film years later because Roger Ebert put it on his list of the top ten films of all time.

If it's not about pet cemeteries, what is it about?

I've listened to so many audience responses to *Gates of Heaven*. Everyone seems to have their own reading of it – which is great. You have all these people in the film talking about an unsuccessful pet cemetery and the removal of all the pets to a successful cemetery. But it's not clear what the film is really actually about. There are so many people expressing themselves about things that are really important to them – and that have nothing to do with pets or cemeteries – that the film becomes about them. There are some oddly powerful moments. When Danny is playing the guitar on that hilltop I feel he's up there with his dreams and hopes intact, surveying his world. But there's also the reality of where he is. It's not an amphitheatre filled with thousands of adoring screaming fans that he's looking out at – it's a universe of dead pets.

It's said that people have pets because they can't have effective relationships with other people. I think it's the other way around: people have relationships with other people because they can't have effective relationships with their pets. Maybe that's my version of the human condition: a mixture of desperation, misplaced romanticism, isolation and a sense of being totally and irrevocably lost. *Gates of Heaven* is an incredibly misanthropic film, and yet in *The New York Observer* Ron Rosenbaum called it a "Lucretian meditation on the nature of love." I'm not sure I know what he means, and I'm not sure what the nature of love is, at least in the context of dead pets and living people. I suppose Samuel Beckett came close to a working definition when he described love as a form of "lethal glue."

Someone once asked me how I might characterise my films. Well, I think of a pie chart with three equal parts: sick, sad and funny. People seem to respond to *Gates of Heaven* – maybe more than my other films – in different ways at different times, from finding it sick or sad or funny or sick and funny or funny and sick, and on and on. But I think it can be all of those things at the same time. I used to think I was stupid because if I had only made a film with a certain level of gravitas, more people would have taken it more seriously. Not to compare myself to Nabokov, but in his books – particularly *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* – he managed to combine the

profound and the profoundly silly. The notion that the two are incompatible is simply wrong.

The accusation sometimes thrown at the nonfiction filmmaker is that he making fun of the people being documenting. For some people, the characters in Gates of Heaven *are made to look ridiculous.*

I used to defend myself by denying I was making fun of them, but that seems a little disingenuous. People *are* ridiculous. Is a documentary filmmaker responsible for creating some sort of advertising campaign for humanity? Should documentaries be offering a paean to the human condition, to the supposed wonder that is man? I think despair is a more appropriate response. Let's put it this way: I don't see myself as any more or less ridiculous than the people in my films.

My mother once told me that the lowest form of humor is the kind that makes fun of other people. But what other kind of humor is there? Are you supposed to make fun of rocks? Some people seem to think that because a film is funny, everything that's going on in *Gates of Heaven* is vitiated by that humor. Not so. Humor seems to be just one part of the story. Having said that, I don't think there's a real distinction between laughing at and laughing with. There's just laughing at. I suppose my final thought is, "So what?" I think the film is about loneliness, disappointment and desperation. The fact that it's funny as well doesn't detract from those elements.

I identify with almost everyone. Well, maybe not the lady with the singing dog. But take the two brothers who worked at the successful pet cemetery in Napa: Phil, the older brother with the trophies and Dan, the younger brother with the guitar. They're both like flies on flypaper, as trapped in the pet cemetery as the pets that are interred there. Dan with his melancholy new-age romanticism and Phil with his insane sales formulas and insurance trophies. I like them both.

For me, the end of the film is a kind of fetishistic nightmare. Phil with his insurance trophies, Danny with his Pioneer SX-1010 speakers, Cal talking about the Garden of Honor, then Mr. Howard talking about disposing of an inanimate object with some kind of reverence and care, like a living thing. I'm hoping for the day when not only people and pets are buried, but furniture as well.

You said you were spending a lot of time with murderers?

While I was at Berkeley I read a book by Herbert Fingarette called *The Meaning of Criminal Insanity* and thought about writing my thesis on criminal responsibility and the insanity plea. I started going to the trials of three mass murderers, including Edmund Kemper, who I had first visited along with Werner Herzog. This was in Santa Cruz. Then in 1974 I went back to Plainfield, Wisconsin to interview Ed Gein, the model for the Norman Bates character in *Psycho.* I was down there for almost a year and spent an inordinate amount of time in the courthouse reading through trial

documents to see what kind of crimes had been committed there, apart from Gein's. What amazed me was the number of murderers who came from Plainfield and the surrounding area, so I started interviewing them. I've got literally hundreds of hours of tapes sitting in a box somewhere, and transcripts too. I transcribed it all with the intention of one day writing a book. At the time I remember my mother asking me why I didn't spend time with people my own age. I said, "But mom, the murderers *are* my own age."

Is this when you started interviewing people?

Yes. First with a tape recorder and only much later with a camera. With the tape recorder I would play a game: see how long you can get someone to talk before you have to say something. It's become my shtick.

Vernon, Florida*, your second film, wasn't quite the film you first had in mind.*

No. Someone called it "philosophy in the swamp," which is a description I like. At the time I was looking for a film project and read an article in *The New York Times* about Joe Healy, an insurance investigator. He mentioned many of his most notorious cases and then almost in passing made reference to a town in the Florida panhandle where there was an extraordinary history of insurance fraud. There had been something like twenty or thirty people who had lost various limbs in suspicious accidents. In the insurance trade the town was called "Nub City." This guy explained that these people were actually chopping or shooting off their own arms and legs. One guy even fell asleep with his foot over a railroad track and was rudely awakened by the evening express. To me it sounded like a perfect metaphor for America, a country full of people who want to enrich themselves but who literally become a fraction of themselves in the process. I told Healey I wanted to go down there. He said it was the most dangerous place he'd ever been, that I would be – and this is singularly appropriate in this instance – risking life and limb if I started asking questions. At first he wouldn't even tell me the name of the town, though eventually he relented, and named Vernon, Florida. It's a town that I can honestly say is in the middle of nowhere, equidistant from Tallahassee and Pensacola. I told him I was going down there. "Whatever you do," he said, "don't stay long and don't go out at night."

It's hard to know what I was thinking, or if in fact I was thinking at all. At first I had no plans to make a film. I wasn't a filmmaker at that point. My first trip down there was before I had made *Gates of Heaven.* I was working on *Stroszek* with Werner in Cherokee, North Carolina, and headed south, through Georgia and Alabama to Vernon. It was my first trip down there. I stopped at Chipley, the county seat of Washington Country, Florida – Vernon is smack in the middle of Washington County, Florida – to take a look at documents in the courthouse. I

noticed that there weren't any murders in the county and asked the Sheriff about it. "Down here we don't have murders," he explained. "We just have disappearances."

So I ended up living in Vernon for a while, initially to assemble material about the nubbies, which is what the insurance investigators called the claimants with self-inflicted injuries. I wanted to find out how many there were, the nature of the insurance claims, things like that. I even went to interview a double nubbie and got beaten up by his son-in-law, who was a Marine. I remember that night very well because the nubbie was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. His nubs were really apparent. There was no doubt about what I was looking at. It's an illustration of how incredibly stupid I am. What was I thinking? That I was going to start interviewing people who have successful defrauded insurance companies? The parlance in the private investigation trade is "door-stepping," where you just show up at someone's door and start asking questions. If I'd continued in that vein I would have disappeared. It became self-evident that I couldn't make that movie, at least not as a documentary. I finally decided to make a film in the town that had nothing whatsoever to do with Nub City, though I would still like to make a feature about the nub club. It's a fantastic story.

To me, Vernon is a magical place, and it has a unique look to it. It's a swamp, but a certain kind of under-vegetated desolate swamp. I've never seen anything quite like it elsewhere in the world. I remember taking a lot of photos at the time. It's a kind of parallel universe which just happens to be our own universe. There was the feeling that I had entered a different dimension in which there was some kind of metaphysical component that came out no matter who I was talking to. Everything and everyone had this philosophical bent to it. No one ever seems to remark on it but when Coy Brock, the preacher, is talking about God he says, "Let's call God 'That just happened.'" I really do wonder: what's the difference between God and caprice? It's God as a form of complete godlessness, of happenstance. I find it compelling. God as anti-God.

Is Vernon, Florida *a kind of ethnographic film?*

Are you kidding? I'm no anthropologist. The film is not a survey of their society or culture. It's a dreamscape. It goes back to what I was saying about truth. What we know about photography is that it exists in causal relationship to the world. A relationship always exists between an image and that which it is an image of. In other words, every image has a certain reality about it. But I would never make the claim that *Vernon* is in any way a sociological examination of the town.

Once you started work on the film, what were your plans? Did you have a firm idea as to what you wanted?

No, I really didn't know what movie I was making. Once it became unclear that nobody was willing to talk with me and that I wasn't going to be able to make a film

about Nub City, it wasn't clear to me what I was doing down there at all. We began to assemble these very odd characters, one by one. The production wasn't easy, and for technical reasons a lot of the material I shot was unusable. We had a small crew and lived together in a house. I used to joke that people who knocked on the door would want one of two things: to kill you or convert you. Either way, highly undesirable. One afternoon Ned Burgess, my cameraman, was outside the town hall with the camera on a tripod, when one of the double nubbies tried to run him down with a truck. It became something of a joke. People would ask, "Why are you shooting here?" I would answer, somewhat disingenuously, "Oh well, Vernon's such a strange and magical place." Then they would ask me, "Does it have anything to do with Nub City?" and I would insist that it didn't, that the movie wasn't about nubbies at all. And oddly enough that came to be true. I think there's one single nubbie in the film, but that's it. He's sitting on the bench in front of the gas station – and he lost his limb through natural causes, not insurance fraud.

The film's structure was conceived during editing?

Pretty much, yes. I edited it with Brad Fuller. We were desperate because we weren't sure there was even a movie there. The same was true of *Gates of Heaven*. A friend of mine from Berkeley who has worked on all of my films, Charlie Silver, has a basic principle of editing, one that's unfortunately often forgotten: editing is taking out the bad stuff and leaving in the good stuff. We took a long time trying to figure out how to do that.

There is no music in Vernon, Florida.

And there's no music to speak of in *Gates of Heaven* either, save for Danny playing the electric guitar or Zella Graham singing to her dog. I started thinking about music in my films with *The Thin Blue Line*. At that point it was because of Philip Glass, who provided an essential component of that film. Once I started putting his music up against the interview I was shooting it was clear he had to do the score. But I never thought of music in my first two films. I felt they didn't need music.

There was a gap of quite a few years between Vernon, Florida *and* The Thin Blue Line*. What were you doing?*

Feeling sorry for myself. When *Vernon* came out lots of people told me I wouldn't have any trouble getting money to make my next film. I actually had horrendous trouble and was effectively out of the business for years. Then my brother Noel died, which nearly destroyed my mother. She lost my father, of a massive heart attack, when I was only two. And then my brother. My father was forty-three when he died, my brother was forty. I had always looked at my brother as the smart one

in the family. He was a computer scientist and a genius. I held him in awe. Years later, my mother told me that Noel considered *me* the smart one. Go figure.

Did you have the feeling that you would never make another film again?

It did.

What was the starting point of The Thin Blue Line*?*

I had been out of work as a filmmaker for a long time but working as a private investigator, among other things. Finally I was given money to make another film. Actually I got money to work on a story that had nothing whatsoever to do with *The Thin Blue Line.* I was so desperate that I submitted a proposal I thought would interest executives at public broadcasting, even though it didn't interest me – a project about "future dangerousness" centred around Dr. James Grigson, a Dallas psychiatrist notorious for his anti-defendant testimony in death-penalty cases. They call him Dr. Death, the Killer Shrink, the Hanging Psychiatrist, things like that. I spent quite a bit of time with him and became quite fond of him even though I find his views completely repellent. He had lost all his private clients and said to me, "You know, after I got that name Dr. Death, they just stopped coming."

Texas has a very odd death penalty statute. In order to execute someone there you have to make a prediction about their future behaviour. It's not enough to say they have done something very naughty in the past – you also have to show they are going to do something very naughty in the future. The trials were bifurcated. There would be a guilty phase, then a penalty phase. To help juries make these kinds of decisions, prosecutors would hire Grigson who, on the basis of a ten or fifteen-minute examination, was apparently able to make such predictions. He always said the same thing: "This person is a dangerous psychopath who is going to kill again and again, so you better fry them." In Texas executions are preventive murder. Kill them before they kill you. Or something like that.

I'm profoundly sceptical about our abilities to predict the future in general and human behaviour in particular, except when it comes to what Dr. Death will say in the penalty phase of a capital murder trial. This can be predicted with one hundred per cent accuracy. Grigson suggested I visit various prisons in Texas and interview people he had helped sentence to die in the electric chair about the crimes they had committed and about whether they might do similar things in the future. I must have spoken with fifteen or sixteen people, picked entirely at random, including one man who turned out to be innocent: Randall Adams, who had been convicted of killing a Dallas police officer.

Adams interested me, but not because I thought he was innocent. He had a singsong way of talking, as if he was convinced that no one was really listening to anything he had to say, that he was going through some kind of formal recitation he felt compelled to go through, even though he know it would fall on deaf ears. Of

course in Grigson's eyes such lack of remorse on Adams's part confirmed he would kill again. Using the testimony of David Harris, the kid who actually pulled the trigger, Adams had been convicted for capital murder and sentenced to death. The story that emerged in *The Thin Blue Line* evolved around me as I started looking into it, and as soon as I started uncovering weird stuff I was kind of trapped into investigating further and further.

Grigson actually examined both Adams and Harris, and got it doubly wrong. It's very hard to be two hundred per cent wrong in one situation, but Grigson managed to achieve this unlikely outcome. Not only did he say that David Harris hadn't killed anyone, adding that he wouldn't kill in the future, he also said that Randall Adams had killed and would continue to kill. Adams has been out of jail for many years now, without so much as a misdemeanor. David Harris, on the other hand, was freed by the state of Texas after Grigson testified that he was a nice boy who would mend his ways and wouldn't get into any more trouble. That diagnosis didn't prevent him from going on to kill another person.

David enlisted in the military and tried to kill his commanding officer, ending up in Leavenworth. He was released and stole a car, drove to California, picked up a hitchhiker and robbed a store. He tried to kill a police officer when surrounded, but his gun jammed and he was taken into custody, where he tried to blame the hitchhiker. It's not much different from the story he successfully told in Dallas. When I first met him he had just been paroled from San Quentin to his family in East Vidor, Texas. That's the home of the KKK, in case you didn't know – a frightening place.

Incidentally, I was wearing glasses at the time but stopped wearing them in Texas because I became convinced that the glasses secretly said J-E-W and that I would do better without them. I had a bizarre conversation with a police officer in Vidor who asked me if I lived in New York. I told him yes. "There are a lot of deli restaurants in New York, aren't there?" he said. I thought to myself, "Is this going where I think it's going?" I said, "Yes, there are a lot of deli restaurants in New York." He looked at me and he said, "I bet you really like deli food, don't you?"

When you started investigating Randall Adams's case you assumed he was just one more guilty man claiming he was innocent?

I never set out to find an innocent man, but I did become more and more interested in this particular case. I went to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals in Austin, because every capital murder trial is automatically appealed there. I sat there and read the trial transcripts for days on end. In the transcript of his trial Adams maintained that David Harris – who had given him a lift on the night of the murder – had killed the police officer, so I set out to find Harris and get his side of the story. I found him through a parole officer. Remember, this is almost ten years later, and after five and a half years he had just been paroled from San Quentin. I made arrangements with his parole officer to have David contact me in order to arrange a

meeting but he wouldn't give me David's phone number. I figured I would never hear from him. Ten minutes later David called me back and we arranged to meet at this lonely bar in the swamp near Vidor, Texas.

At this first meeting almost immediately I got the feeling he was the real killer. I didn't want to ask him any questions about the case for fear I might spook him, which meant he might not want to be filmed. Also because I find there's an element of spontaneity lost if things aren't filmed the first time around. I should say I find that interviews work best if I spend very little time with the person ahead of time. But David started volunteering all of this information about the case and asked me about Randall Adams. He wasn't even sure that Adams was still alive – that had been one of his first questions. I told him he was. At one point I started to get nervous because I was thinking he was the real killer. I don't know if you've ever had this experience. You think someone is thinking that you're thinking something, and you don't want him to think that you're thinking something, so you tell him you're not thinking that, and in the process of telling him you're not thinking that, you tell him the exact opposite. I said to David, "I'm really glad I got a chance to meet you because I can see now that you couldn't possibly have been responsible for the murder of the Dallas police officer." And he gave me this very disturbing look. At least it was disturbing to me. And as I left, he told me three times to be very careful driving home. When someone says that to you once, they're asking you to be very careful driving home. When they say it to you twice, maybe they're asking you to be very, very careful driving home. When they say it to you three times, it's a threat. I left the bar and I was convinced he was following me. I was driving these back roads back to the motel in Huntsville, Texas where I staying.

A while later David didn't show up for an interview because he was busy killing somebody in Texas. That night he broke into an apartment. A guy and his girlfriend were asleep. He abducted the girl naked and screaming and locked the boyfriend in the bathroom. The guy broke down the door, grabbed a gun and there was a shootout in the parking lot. The girl got away, but David shot and killed the man at point blank range. It's one of my favourite excuses for missing an appointment: "I'm sorry, I was busy killing somebody." I was at his trial in Beaumont, Texas. It's come full circle now. He was executed by lethal injection in June 2004 for that murder, a couple of weeks after Grigson died of lung cancer.

David Harris – and the whole case – had a profound effect on my life. It's a chapter that's more or less closed now. There's a kind of guilt that sets in. Having gotten Adams out of prison, should I have tried to prevent Harris from being executed? Could I have done anything? I hate the death penalty. State-authored death seems to be a pretty bad example of death in general. But I didn't do anything.

Did your time working as a private detective help you when making the film?

I still feel myself to be something of a detective. Actually, sometimes when I was working as a detective I would pose as a filmmaker, which really was quite

depressing. But part of what made me a good private investigator was the ability to get people to talk.

I've always believed there has to be some investigative element to a nonfiction film. There are thousands of movies that tell stories about detectives investigating crimes, but I don't know of any other movies where a crime is actually investigated with a camera. For example, the interviews in *The Thin Blue Line* with the three eyewitnesses – Emily Miller, R. L. Miller and Michael Randell – were submitted as evidence in federal and state court. The film doesn't just chronicle a murder investigation after the fact, it *is* a murder investigation. The footage I shot was submitted as evidence that was used in a court of law. People say that it's the only film to get a man out of jail. Sure, the movie brought the case to national attention, and that made it impossible for the authorities to sweep it under the rug. But it's the investigation I did – which goes far beyond anything in the film – that really led to Randall Adams's conviction being overturned. Adams was convicted on the basis of some crucial evidence, for example the eyewitnesses who happened to be driving by at that moment. I spent a long time tracking them down and interviewed four of them on camera. Each of them had, at this capital murder trial, committed perjury without knowing it.

For a while I wanted to turn the film into the strongest possible argument for Adams's innocence. I actually filmed an interview with myself in the same style as all the others which I tried to edit into the film, but it turned the whole thing into a very ordinary-looking piece of investigative journalism that was far more prosaic and less believable. Unfortunately, when I took myself out of the film, I also had to drop a lot of the material that only I could explain. If I look back objectively at what I was trying to do, it's clear that though there was no evidence that Randall Adams didn't do it or that David Harris did, there was plenty of evidence that Adams didn't get a fair trial.

I might add that if I had taken a more adversarial approach to interviewing, some people might have found the film more interesting and fun to watch – but Randall Adams would probably still be in prison.

Could you say something about the legal dispute between you and Randall Adams after he was released from prison?

The whole thing was bizarre and hurtful. And was all about money. When he got out of prison he was angry that he had signed a release giving me rights to his life story. He felt as though I had stolen something from him. I was determined to prove his innocence and would have spent another three or four years trying to get him out of prison, but as a filmmaker I also had a proprietary interest in finishing and releasing a film.

I don't speak with Randall Adams anymore for obvious reasons. My wife summed it up very succinctly: "Just because he's a victim, doesn't mean he isn't an asshole." But of course I'm still very proud of what *The Thin Blue Line* was able to

do, which was get him out of jail, no matter what he might say, whether he appreciates it or not. For not so obvious reasons I was sporadically in touch with David Harris until his execution. He was bright and personable, described by many people – including Adams – as "the kid." And it's true: he was a fresh-faced kid at the time of the killing. There was something sweet, even sympathetic about him. It just doesn't square with what he did. I found him endlessly fascinating, even though when I met him as a free man he scared me. Do you remember the sequence in the film when he tells the story about his brother drowning? It's a moving story, and I wonder what kind of psychodrama he was acting out again and again later in life.

Did Harris ever really confess the murder to you?

When I interviewed him one last time on audiotape I asked him whether he had killed the policeman that night in Dallas. He smiled and nodded his head. You can't hear it on the tape, but it's something quite unforgettable for me. It was a moment of enormous sadness and vindication at the same time. My belief in Adams's innocence was right but there was sadness that it had come to all this, that it had happened at all, that there had been this loss of life. It all felt so utterly meaningless. I've never been terribly interested in psychiatric nomenclature because such terms seem to explain very little. I wouldn't call David Harris a sociopath or a psychopath, but I do know he killed for reasons I don't completely understand.

Why do you think the Dallas authorities were intent on prosecuting Adams for the murder rather than Harris, to whom all the evidence pointed?

One answer to that question is that Harris was sixteen years old at the time and couldn't be given the death penalty, whereas Randall was twenty-six and could be sentenced to death and executed. Harris looked like a sweet kid while Adams, with his long hair and moustache, looked more like a cop-killer. My own theory as to why Harris wasn't prosecuted is that they simply didn't have a case against him. It became a choice between a weak case and no case. If Harris was telling the truth about what happened that night, then he was sitting next to Adams in the passenger seat and would have been an eyewitness to the crime. If Adams was telling the truth, then Harris was alone in that car and there were no witnesses, save for Harris himself.

What's the meaning of the title of the film?

I took it from the summation the prosecuting attorney made to the jury at the end of the trial when he spoke about "the thin blue line" of police that separates the public from anarchy.

The film raises questions not just about the American legal system but also about how bad luck and chance play a part in all our lives.

Adams came within a week of dying of a lethal injection. It was only an appellate court decision on a technicality that saved him. He came from a good Ohio family and was a workingman, and one day his car broke down and he happened to be picked up by David Harris. *The Thin Blue Line* is about destiny and luck in general. It's about how our perch in this world is a very insecure one. Adams' story is the ultimate paranoid dream where one small incident sets off an inexorable and ultimately tragic chain of events that nearly destroys everyone involved. In this sense, it's quintessential *film noir* of the forties and fifties, like Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* or *The Reckless Moment,* or a real-life *Twilight Zone* episode, the Kafkaesque nightmare of being a stranger in some faraway place where everything you say is taken to be a lie, where things happen for no reason. It was cold that morning in Dallas. Adams, who had come to Texas from Florida, had no warm clothing and was shivering. He started walking down the road with a plastic milk jug, stopped at a gas station and was told by the attendant that it was against the law to put gas in a plastic container. He started walking back toward his car when David Harris pulled up and offered his help. Just plain bad luck.

After proving such a success as a documentary filmmaker, why did you feel the need to make The Dark Wind*, a narrative feature?*

The simple answer is that I did it for the same reason that everybody does anything and everything in Hollywood: vanity and greed. I really had no idea what I was getting into and the whole experience was miserable.

Were you comfortable working with the actors on The Dark Wind*?*

I never had any trouble working with actors. Actors are people too. Conversely, people are also actors. Coaxing a performance out of someone in an extemporaneous interview isn't so different from coaxing a performance out of an actor with scripted lines. You, as the director, are creating a situation where people feel comfortable and want to perform for you.

Do you know what your next fiction film might be?

I've got lots of ideas, including a feature about Nub City and the story of Einstein's brain. For years I've been working on a story about King Boots, a dog from Michigan put on trial for murder. I have six thousand pages of trial transcripts. It's such amazing material. The dog allegedly killed the owner's mother, an 87-year-old-woman. This was no pit bull, it an Old English sheepdog called Boots who had won more prizes than any other dog in American history. Under Michigan law, Boots

was impounded and the state wanted to destroy it. It was charged with murder, even though we know dogs can't frame an intention to commit murder. The owners hired defence lawyers to get Boots acquitted. The coroner originally said the mother died from "multiple bites," but a second autopsy concluded it was a heart attack. Boots was visited in jail by a vet who found a wound on the dog's nose that had been made by a kitchen fork. It was suggested that the woman – who had a good relationship with Boots – had tripped over the sleeping dog and accidentally stabbed it. The dog bit her and she died. It's a very rich story about the American family and the justice system. Boots wasn't acquitted, although the evidence certainly suggested he should have been. He died shortly after the trial – I like to think of a broken heart.

Stories that could equally be made as nonfictions?

There are some stories that need to be told in fiction form and others that need to be told using real people. I can imagine *The Thin Blue Line* as a scripted drama, but it would be far less interesting. There is an inherent drama is looking at each of the interviews in the movie and wondering whether the speaker is lying or telling the truth. I shot several interviews with the people involved in the King Boots story, but some of the most important characters didn't agree to be filmed on camera. The story would work best as a fiction, though my viewpoint might be hopelessly infected by the reality of not being able to get some of the important interviews I wanted.

Which is more challenging: fiction or nonfiction?

Documentaries are probably harder to make than narrative features. Most people really don't understand just how hard it is to make these films. *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* and *The Fog of War* are full to the brim with images and sounds. It's not easy taking all this material and finding a narrative. Documentary combines scriptwriting, directing and editing. And it also involves performance. What's more, you can reinvent the form with each film. *Fast, Cheap* took me three years to edit. The entire structure of *The Fog of War* was developed during editing. Originally it had a relatively simple linear structure but wasn't a film – just a chronology. It was only when we started to move things around and take the movie radically out of order, and impose an idea of what it could actually be about, that it started to become a real film. Discovering a film in the dailies is not something that generally happens in narrative filmmaking. It's very hard being at sea not knowing if you have anything, not knowing how to shape it.

Where do you find your ideas?

It's not as if I have some hidden source, a dumpster filled with material, hidden out back. Many of the stories that have interested me over the years have come from the

most ordinary places. I try to keep my eyes open. I got the idea for *Mr. Death* from the front page of *The New York Times*. Most of the stories for my movies come from newspapers and magazines. I like to take the inconsequential – stories that other people might ignore – and find something consequential in them.

A Brief History of Time *seemed to surprise many people. It's certainly nothing like a cinematic physics lesson.*

No, nothing like that. Whatever cinema is, it's certainly not a good place to teach theoretical physics. Someone could make a film that goes on for a hundred hours that still wouldn't do justice to the many ideas in Steven Hawking's book. What I wanted to do was look at the kind of people who have devoted their lives to doing science, so the film is full of this fantastic cast of eccentrics. I interviewed an evangelical Christian who lived with the Hawking family and would forever try to convert Hawking – a confirmed atheist – to evangelical Christianity.

I felt there was a kind of metaphorical connection between Hawking's book and his life. As a child, Hawking believed in a universe without end: a savage, unchanging universe without boundaries. Then at the age of twenty-one he gets a death sentence when told he has two and half years to live. And what does he go on to prove? That the universe doesn't go on forever, that it has a beginning and possibly an end, and so in some way has human attributes. When Hawking talks about black holes it's hard not to be struck by the connection between his life in science – his interest in stars that collapse in on themselves – and the premature burial inside his own body. It's a Poe-like horror story of a man being buried alive, someone utterly dependent on other people for his survival but who has beaten the odds and has the temerity to ask such vast questions.

While making the film I used to joke that it was an extended essay on the naturalistic fallacy, the idea that the world around us has humanlike attributes, that it's born, it lives and then dies. Of course, the ultimate irony is that that naturalistic fallacy may be no fallacy whatsoever. John Wheeler – the man who gave black holes their name and who taught me at Princeton years ago – says that if the universe collapses much like a black hole, if it all comes to an end, how is that different from the life of each one of us?

Was the film your idea from the start?

I had approached Steven Spielberg with the King Boots project. His company was working on the Hawking film and they asked me to get involved. I did know of Hawking but hadn't read the book and wasn't even sure I wanted to make the film until I actually met Hawking in his office. He's an incredible person, on so many levels. On meeting him for the first time I was struck that here's a person totally incapacitated yet who is totally in control. One feels quickly dominated by the man – despite his physical infirmities.

I was fascinated by his voice and made a decision very early on not to interview him on film. When you spend time with Hawking you very quickly learn to accept these amazing pauses. Upon entering his office the first thing you see are computer screens that obscure his chair. There's a screen that's part of his chair and a desktop computer sitting there. You ask a question and then all you hear is this clicking that goes on and on and on, and you don't really know what's happening. Even though I was told all about this beforehand, you still don't really know what's happening. Or at least you're unprepared for it. Does Stephen like the question? Is he answering it? Is he annoyed by it? Is he ignoring me altogether? And there really is little warning when he's about to speak. But after spending some time with him I began sitting beside him, not in front, so I could read the computer screen as he wrote. As a result there's a strange kind of intimacy about all of it, and rather than being a painful experience, it becomes very natural. I grew to really like the voice. Stephen was concerned that his voice in the movie should sound exactly the way it sounds in real life. For him, the voice synthesiser is his real voice. There have been various upgrades on the synthesiser but he refuses to use them because he doesn't want to sound like anyone else.

Hawking's book is hardly obvious cinematic material.

No. It combines some of the more difficult abstract ideas about theoretical physics with a man who essentially doesn't move and can't speak in any traditional sense. As I like to describe him, Hawking is the first non-talking talking head in the media. But at the same time, the story is pretty big. In fact, it's the biggest story out there: the creation of the universe, the birth and death of the cosmos. And of course, one of the reasons I was so interested in making the film was that so many people told me it was an impossible project.

It became apparent at a very early stage of production that there was a popular misconception about Hawking's book, probably because people have an idea about its contents without having read it. It's generally seen as science pedagogy – "Let's learn a little general relativity and cosmology" – but I saw it as a romance novel. It's not purely about science. To me the book is also about Hawking's personal struggle with the universe, about how he sees the world. I was fascinated by this relationship between his life and his science. It's similar to what drew me to the characters in *Fast, Cheap*, where my primary interest wasn't in the objective details of what these four men actually do but in how they describe their work, how they envision what they do. In *Brief History*, Stephen's frailty becomes a kind of symbol of human frailty in general, particularly when you consider the scope of his investigation. We're all not in that different a position than he is when you survey the cosmos as a whole. So the film is not explicitly about scientific ideas and it's not explicitly a biography on a factual level. Rather, it's "biography as dreamscape."

How did you tackle Hawking's approach to religion?

I know that when asked if he believes in God, Stephen has said that he doesn't believe in a personal God. Notwithstanding, the book and film are both filled with references to God. Stephen's relationship with God and/or the Creator is certainly a central theme in his work. I think that's one reason why the book has such wide appeal, the fact that he does address these very large philosophical concerns. Having said this, however, I have never felt that Stephen's God is a man with a long, grey beard or a God who intervenes in human affairs.

The book mixes a kind of fantastic optimism with total despair. I think that's one of the reasons I find the material so persuasive. At the end of the book and film Stephen talks on the one hand about the possibility of knowing everything there is to know about the universe, about the world around us, about the mind of God. For me this is a fantastically optimistic idea. And on the other hand, he speaks almost like a prophet of doom with his belief that the universe is going to come to an end fifteen billion years from now. He also once told me probably the most pessimistic thing I've ever heard. He was asked about the possibility of extraterrestrial life. Stephen's explanation for why we haven't heard signals from outer space is that in the last million years our DNA really hasn't changed at all. We're still those same creatures running around in the jungle, but our destructive capacities have increased millions and millions–fold in only the last one hundred years. Why don't we hear those intelligent signals? Because if a civilisation ever reaches a point where it is able to send such messages, it would have already destroyed itself.

I admire Stephen Hawking tremendously. I find myself capable of cynicism about almost anything, but I am quite incapable of being cynical about Stephen. He's an incredible human being and scientist, and it really was an honor to make the film.

You mentioned that all the interviews in the film were filmed in a studio.

Usually you bring the crew to the people but in this case we brought the people to the crew. We shot all the interviews in studios, mostly at Elstree in London. I wanted to be able to control the sound and lighting, and give the movie a constructed look. As I said earlier, there isn't really a single "real" image in the whole film. Even the chair Hawking is using was built especially for the film, and for some of the shots we had a Hawking stand-in. I felt that since he is the central character of the movie it was important to replicate his office exactly, which means that the Marilyn Monroe posters on the walls and the books on the shelves are all identical to his actual office at Cambridge University. I wanted to create a visual unity around Hawking, and I think the fact that we shot the interviews in a studio gives them a timeless feeling. With Hawking's mother, for example, you see a window behind her, but it's not a window looking out over anything real. There is an endless sunset behind her – a world suspended for a moment outside of time.

You shy away from fancy visual displays to show the ideas Hawking is talking about. Was that a conscious decision?

Even though there was a certain amount of pressure to fill the film with high-tech graphics, I avoided this because the book is full of examples from everyday life. I really wanted to give the graphics a human face. Who's to say what a black hole really looks like anyway?

When it came to filming Hawking himself, I wanted to build up a kind of library of images to work from while editing. We ended up with hundreds of shots of him and the chair from every conceivable angle. I should say that although Hawking was involved in the movie from start to finish – he wrote the narration, looked at rough cuts, offered comments – he never approved of the chicken. We had an ongoing discussion about the chicken all through the editing process. I felt I had an unassailable argument – that this was going to be my only opportunity to put a shot of a chicken in space in one of my films and I should avail myself of that opportunity. In its own way it takes us into the central theme of the movie, about what started it all off, what was there at the very beginning, and if there was a beginning, what was there before that. It's a chicken and egg thing. I believe Stephen has grown to like the chicken.

The soundtrack to the film is certainly as crucial as the images. For me, the clicking of the mouse on his wheelchair is one of the most important elements because it's the only real connection he has with the outside world. It's the first and last thing we hear in the film. The narration was drawn from a mass of different material – from the book, his lectures, and scientific papers – that I edited together and recorded.

Do you understand everything that your interviewees are talking about in the film?

Of course not. I like to think I'm somewhere in the middle – between people who know nothing about this and people who know a great deal.

There was some criticism that the film doesn't tackle the more personal aspects of Hawking's life. Does he like the film?

To my relief he does. The decision not to deal with such things was made for me in the simple sense that a number of people I would have liked to interview for the film declined to talk to me, including Hawking's wife. It was also very clear to me that he didn't want me to go into the details of his private life. I felt responsible to him in a whole number of ways. I certainly wanted to make a film that in the end would represent his scientific ideas and that he would approve of. In terms of the story I was telling, the details of his marriage didn't seem integral. I certainly don't feel their absence in the movie.

How did you find the four characters whose stories make up Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*?*

My wife read about Rodney Brooks, the insect robot guy, and for years told me to get in touch with him. He worked down the street at MIT and when I started work on the movie I contacted him. I had read something about mole rats, the only mammal that lives like a social insect, and went to meet some mole rat scientists, but they just didn't seem suitable. And then I met Ray Mendez, mole rat enthusiast, and he was just perfect. A really fascinating character whose main job at the time was as an insect wrangler for the movies. He did the moths in *Silence of the Lambs*. Then I found out there was a topiary garden close by to where I live, in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. I met George Mendonça and realised his story fit perfectly into this mixture of animal stories. Dave Hoover, the lion tamer, I actually knew from years before, and some of the footage in the film I shot even before I made *The Thin Blue Line*. So you've got a guy who cuts animals out of privet, one who studies insect-like mammals, another who works with wild beasts in the circus, and one who builds robotic insects he thinks will eventually replace all carbon-based life on the planet.

Didn't you first plan to include Fred Leuchter in the film?

The first interview I shot with Fred, which was done in 1992, was six or seven hours long. For *Mr. Death* I shot another twelve hours of footage. I did toy with the idea of putting the original Leuchter interview into *Fast, Cheap.* At that point I hadn't done anything with it, but pretty soon I realised that Fred's story raised unique questions, independent of those in *Fast, Cheap*. And my wife has this line: "Whatever Hitler is, he isn't a spice." By adding Hitler to the soup, it immediately becomes Hitler-flavored. It dominates everything, so I decided to leave him out.

How did you go about cutting the four stories into a single narrative?

With *Fast, Cheap* I was fascinated by the possibility of making a movie where there was no clear story line at first, where it emerges slowly and unexpectedly out of the relationships between these characters and the ideas they express. It's clear quite quickly to the audience that the film has four principal characters and that their stories will eventually fuse together in some way as the film progresses.

So you shot the interviews and then pieced the film together once you had all the elements?

That's about it. While I was making the film I had that Yeats poem in my head, "Lapis Lazuli": "All things fall and are built again/And those that build them again are gay." He's suggesting there is dignity in doing something even if it's destined to

be destroyed. What I like is that you can't look at this assemblage of characters and say, quite definitively, "This is what it's all about." The themes of the movie, whatever they may be, are pretty complex and elusive. It's the ultimate low-concept movie, one that utterly resists the possibility of a one-line summary.

People often ask me to explain what I was trying to do with *Fast, Cheap*, but that's probably not my job. Without an explanation the movie doesn't fall apart – it's still the same movie. With a film like this it's inevitable that there are such divergent interpretations because there's so much in there. There's so much room for discussion about the various ideas. In *Gates of Heaven* there's a whole set of surprising and unexpected connections thrown up between these characters to the point where the film isn't really about pet cemeteries at all, and it's the same with *Fast, Cheap*. At first glance these four characters don't seem to have much to do with each other, but soon certain themes start to emerge and take over the movie: the control of nature, our ideas about mortality and obsession, about how humans use animals as a way to project images of ourselves on the world. I'm tired of talking about the film as a piece of weird and eccentric Americana because for me it's a deeply romantic movie that has real emotional substance to it.

Part of the story is this idea that all of us would like to create something that outlasts us, a microcosm of the world we can control. Maybe this is our fondest hope, to create a world where death plays no part. What I find powerful about these four stories is that with each of these people, death has managed to sneak in anyway. George Mendonça, the gardener, spends fifteen years creating a bear out of a privet hedge. He's an artist who makes these larger-than-life creations that are so absurd and beautiful and of absolutely no use. He knows they're not going to last. His life's work could be destroyed overnight by a hurricane or bugs. It's all so ephemeral. There's probably nobody to take George's place after he's gone, and yet he persists. I think there's a nobility in it all. Actually, I see him as the quintessential artist because his cause, however futile in the long run, is so noble.

In this way the film is a kind of elegy. It deals with the impermanence of all our lives and of how what we do is, ultimately, kind of useless.

Another connection between the four men is something you have already pointed out: animals.

All four stories in the film are control-of-nature tales that emerge from these men being able, in some small way, to construct a world for their own purposes. In a way it reflects the Frankenstein story – the need to create life and at the same time control it, that by manufacturing a facsimile of life we can better understand the world and ourselves, with the unfortunate codicil that something bad is going to happen.

Another possible theme in *Fast, Cheap* is that each of us constructs fantasies about ourselves and our place in the world so we feel safer about things. It's a basic survival mechanism and probably has something to do with self-deception, with the

idea that in order to survive some people have to live somewhere other than "the real world." So one question the film asks is, simply: where do we belong in all of this?

Perhaps the most basic thing that links the stories is the idea of mental landscapes. Just as with *Mr. Death* and *Brief History*, the stories of these four men are excursions into an internal rather than external realm. How much of the world is our dream of the world and how much is real? That's why I introduce each character with their childhood dream of what they want to be.

We have been talking largely about ideas. How important are the visuals in your films?

Whenever I hear a good story images immediately come to mind, and it becomes difficult to resist the temptation to film them. I often use visual techniques to telegraph certain ideas I think are worth considering. A good example is the slow-motion shot of the milkshake toss in *The Thin Blue Line*. It's a strong image, but surrounding it is this very important question of what actually happened on that roadway in Dallas. We have the police diagram of the road that evening on which is marked the spot where the milkshake landed. The milkshake collects your thoughts on where the murdered policeman's partner was when the shootings took place. Was she in the car or, as procedure dictates, was she standing outside? What did she see that night? The milkshake-toss shot was used to underline the fact that, in all likelihood, she stayed in the car and threw the drink as she was getting out of the car as the murderer sped off. She didn't get the licence plate number, she didn't get the make of the car. She got nothing.

There is something of a motif in McNamara's story, and in turn in *The Fog of War*, which comes out of the fact that he always seems to be dropping stuff from the skies, whether it be ordnance, napalm or skulls. His time during World War II working with Curtis LeMay used this motif in the sequence of numbers being dropped over maps of Japan. Another story that emerges in the film is that at one point McNamara was president of the Ford Motor Company, where he pushed for safety, arguing for things like seat belts and a collapsible steering wheel. This was at a time when safety wasn't really thought of as being too important. In the film he tells this remarkable story about how they dropped skulls down the stairwell of one of the dormitories of Cornell in order to determine the effect that automobile crashes had on the human body. When I heard this story I immediately felt this was something I had to show, and I illustrated it using a kind of stylised imagery. The images are my attempt to illustrate and dramatise what's going on inside McNamara's head.

Does this idea of "mental landscapes" tie into your use of archive footage?

Sure. My films don't document news stories or external events – they're more excursions into people's personal dreamscapes. When someone is talking on camera, describing the world around them, to a certain extent they are describing themselves. It's as if the arrow points inward, not outward. The first voice we hear in *Vernon, Florida* is Albert Bitterling's, my Cartesian philosopher-in-the-swamp. It's one of my all-time favourite lines on film: "Reality? You mean this is the real world? I never thought of that." The point is that when we think of nonfiction stories we often think of people doing things out there in the world. But I'm not so interested in describing what people do, rather in how they see the world in a subjective way, hence the title of my TV series, *First Person*. It's something I feel precludes any kind of journalistic approach. Film clips are, of course, an effective and cinematic way of taking us into the fantasy world of these characters. After all, our brains are littered with these strange collages, incredible conglomerations of virtual and real images picked up over time from real life, movies, television, newspapers. *The Fog of War* is just that: a fog, an assortment of facts, letters, presidential recordings, archive footage.

Look at the clips from *Boston Blackie* in *The Thin Blue Line* when Emily Miller is talking about how she always wanted to be a detective or the wife of a detective, and how much those television crime shows influenced her. Or the clips of Robin Hood saving the day when Andrew Capoccia in *First Person* is talking about how he helps regular people save money when they're up against the big corporations. Maybe the best example is all the sequences from the Clyde Beatty films in *Fast, Cheap* that Dave Hoover loves so much – these cheesy adventure movies he watched as a kid and that made him want to be Clyde Beatty. I think all of us probably live in some kind of dreamscape. Maybe one thing we all struggle with is moving from that fantasy world into the real world. This is the idea at the heart of *The Thin Blue Line* and *Mr. Death*, and maybe everything I've ever done.

The McNamara film was constructed on my belief that I could do history as a stream of consciousness from a single individual, instead of a structured chronological narrative moving from one event to the next. History books are full of footnotes which lead readers to primary source material. With *The Fog of War* I wanted to start with this primary material, construct a film around these intensely subjective references, and then see how they fit into the overall historical picture. Those numbers falling over Tokyo, for example, are taken from McNamara's actual hand-written notes we found in the National Archives.

Compared to Mr. Death*,* Fast, Cheap *is much more descriptive.*

I think the real difference between a film like *Mr. Death* and *Fast, Cheap* is that we're concerned with how these four characters see the world, instead of whether what they say is right or wrong. When George Mendonça is talking about hand shears versus electric shears, it's really not important whether one is better than the other. What we do care about is his personal belief that hand shears are better and

that he's spent so many years using them in his work. It would do us little good to bring in experts and have them talk about the various virtues of one kind of shears over another. But that's not the case with *Mr. Death* because when Fred says that poison gas was not used at Auschwitz, he's making a claim we absolutely have to respond to.

Fast, Cheap *is probably your most structurally complex film. How long did it take to make?*

Editing is such a terribly obsessive process. It's like what George the gardener says in the film: "Cut and wait." *Fast, Cheap* took about four years to edit, including a chunk of time after shooting to let the material gestate. I needed time to think about what I was going to do with the footage. It wasn't easy editing the movie because there were no models or principles to fall back on as examples. It was the same with *Gates of Heaven* when I brought in several co-called "professional editors" to give advice. They all said, "It can't be done. There's no way to put this together."

For a time I really did wonder if what I had was editable. It's not like it was made up of regular talking heads that could be stitched together thanks to some kind of pre-imposed narrative, plus the odd piece of visual detritus. At times I felt the same about *Fast, Cheap*, not least because my mother and stepfather died during editing and I really lost faith in my craft. I took some time off and when I did finally come back to it the movie somehow came together relatively quickly. Maybe it was because I was fascinated with the way mortality interferes with our plans, whether we like it or not. But at first I had a terrible time in the editing room because I was trying to interweave the overlapping but still quite discrete stories of these four men into one. My general approach was to create some kind of preamble to the whole story, almost to fool audiences into a false sense of security, then play out the four characters one by one. We started cutting each character up and shuffling the order, interweaving dialogue and images, until about two-thirds of the way through the film the story is in free fall. Everything is all mixed up and the audience doesn't really know where they're going.

Technically it was a complex film. The cameraman Robert Richardson had wanted to make a film as a kind of collage. I wanted to create a whole palette of textures and colors, so we used a variety of film stock: fine grain 35mm, grainy 35mm, 16mm, Super 16, High 8, Super 8, video transfer to film, infrared, black and white, color reversal, color negative. Anything goes. For some shots, like the one at the end with George Mendonça, we spent a whole day inventing the look we wanted. We shot at a hundred and twenty frames a second, five times the speed of sound, which means we need five times as much light. We brought in fog machines, water towers, camera cranes and lights. We're talking about something that is a really substantial deal with a crew of forty people. After that scene a friend told me, "If you're a fly on the wall, it's a 500-ton fly."

We talked earlier about the Avid. It would have been very difficult to cut *Fast, Cheap* – or something like *The Fog of War* – on a flatbed because we were using so many different formats. We would have had to blow up everything to 35mm, which for financial reasons alone just isn't feasible. Editing *The Thin Blue Line* wasn't easy for the same reason. The reenactments were all shot on 35mm and the interviews on Super 16, and as I had so very little money, I chose to do reduction prints to 16mm of all the 35mm material. So we edited everything in 16mm, but the 16mm reduction prints of the 35mm footage looked awful. While editing we could hardly see anything, and when we printed the finished film and actually saw the 35mm as 35mm, it was shocking how good it looked.

It seems that the structure of almost all of your films, commercials and TV programs is found in the editing room. You shoot and shoot, then piece the story together afterward.

I've struggled for months, sometimes years, finding the structure of a film. It's got me into trouble sometimes, as the final result can be very different from the place where I started out. The process of discovery is something I always look forward to in the editing room. And yes, it's exactly the same thing with many of the commercials I've done, especially because so many of them have not been scripted in any real detail.

You cited Hannah Arendt's book Eichmann in Jerusalem *more than once when talking about* Mr. Death. *But Fred Leuchter doesn't seem to conform to her description of the paper-pushing bureaucrat.*

No. Fred is no dispassionate bureaucrat. He's genuinely passionate about what he's doing. An entrepreneur. A self-made man. Arendt's phrase "the banality of evil" has been endlessly bandied about, interpreted and reinterpreted. But she herself describes the banality of evil as a kind of thoughtlessness. To me that speaks to the absence, not the presence, of thought. I believe this applies to Fred, a man who seems to be suffering from a massive lack of self-awareness. You can see this in the film, not least when I ask him if he ever thinks he might be wrong. He just says, "I'm long since past that. I made a decision that I wasn't wrong." Curious. It's like he made a decision to stop thinking. I'll give him credit for that. Most people stop thinking without ever having to make such a decision.

How do we read something like this? Throughout the movie he portrays himself as a humanitarian, a scientist, a concerned citizen, someone who wants "painless executions" – my second favourite oxymoron – and a champion of the First Amendment. He's the good guy who wants to take the sting out of capital punishment, the Florence Nightingale of death row, the champion of the underdog.

Fred rushes in to defend Ernst Zündel – a Holocaust denier – because Fred is a self-proclaimed civil libertarian and lover of free speech. For Fred it would be

remiss for him not to offer his services. But is this just a ploy on his part to sell his services to various people, or does he really believe it? The answer is probably both: he's a salesman who does such a good job that he has started to convince himself. Though he sees himself as a hero, most of us see him, at best, as a deeply misguided and creepy guy.

What's your favourite oxymoron?

It changes from day to day. Right now it's a "nice person." And we're always hearing about this thing called "regime change." What we really need is species change.

Did Leuchter see the film before you screened it publicly?

Yes. I wanted to show the film to Fred before it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. I was apprehensive, but nothing Fred saw caused him to change his views in any way and he went away believing the same things that he believed going in. Eventually, I realised it wasn't my problem. It was his.

Mr. Death is a little morality play. It's a study in hubris and vanity that tells the story of one man's downfall. Fred shows us that if you want to believe something, you can believe it no matter what evidence there is to the contrary. Human credulity is unfettered and unlimited. It's kind of frightening that people are able to believe absolutely anything. This is what I love about Fred's story, this radical disjunction between his image of himself and what he's actually doing. His is the opposite of the examined life. You couldn't invent a character like Fred.

So the film is an examination of his state of mind, of how Fred fell into error, and because of this I don't think his response to the film is that important. He does actually like it, but given that *Mr. Death* is about someone so clueless, is it so surprising he would see the film differently from how I see it? I suppose the question is: just how clueless can Fred really be? Do we all live with the same kind of self-invented fables? There's no mystery about whether his claims are right or wrong. Of course they're wrong, all wrong. The mystery is about why he's making them and about whether he really believes them.

The Holocaust has been used in so many movies to push an idea about the triumph of the human spirit. Are they kidding? Whatever the Holocaust is about, it is not about the triumph of the human spirit. By trying to enter the world and mindset of the Holocaust deniers, *Mr. Death* captures the very nature of false belief – of not just what made Fred Leuchter possible, but what made the Nazis possible. If the uncontroversial and unsurprising thesis of *Schindler's List* is "Anyone can be a hero," then my film has what I believe to be a far more disturbing thesis: "Anyone can think he's a hero."

Would it be fair to say that your interest in Leuchter mirrors your earlier interest in murderers?

Sure. It comes back to the same question: "Am I capable of doing something like this?" I couldn't say that Fred's crimes are on a par with those of Ed Gein, but it's this kind of aberrant behaviour that interests me. I think we can learn a lot by studying it. And here's one more irony: Leuchter never killed anyone. None of his execution machines have ever been used. McNamara, on the other hand, has been linked with the deaths of millions.

It would have been easy to represent Leuchter as a lunatic psychopath foaming at the mouth.

Yes, and I think *Mr. Death* is more disturbing and interesting precisely because I chose not to do this. It's much easier to condemn Fred Leuchter than to try and understand him. Personally, I find the idea of Fred as a misguided and bumbling idiot more frightening than the view of him as some kind of Iago-like figure sitting in the wings rubbing his hands, evil grin on his face, conniving, calculating and plotting. The world would be an easier place to live in if there was an easy way of identifying the malefactors in our society. What seems to disturb people about Fred is that they don't come out hating him. They see him as a vain and confused human being. They wonder if he really is that monstrous. Or is he this kind of accidental Nazi, a loveable idiot? Might I be capable of this kind of grand folly too? I suppose at the end of the film the audience is left with two questions: do I know who Fred really is? And do I know who I really am? I think it's a good film because it throws so many questions back at the audience.

I'm not terribly enthusiastic about films that just tell you "War is bad." I need more than that. History without detail is worthless. History is built with detail, and when it becomes bowdlerised so that it becomes about everything, it in turn becomes about nothing.

How do you respond to the suggestion that you weren't hard enough on Leuchter, or that you don't handle the historical facts of the Holocaust as profoundly as you should have?

I was criticised by some people for not plumbing the depths of Leuchter's past, for not trying to find some event that would identify the evil within him and make everything else clear. But I can't even say for sure that Fred is anti-Semitic. There's no smoking gun, like the young Leuchter found desecrating Jewish graves. To me the fact that he probably wasn't propelled into this thing because of anti-Semitism is what makes his story all the more horrifying. Often what we see as evil perpetrated by someone is construed by themselves as some form of doing good.

As for the Holocaust question, this isn't a movie about the Holocaust. It's a far more interesting story about not only the denial of the Holocaust but also of reality. It's about Fred Leuchter trying to avoid the world, about his attempts to come to terms with who he is. Need I add that the film doesn't make light of the Holocaust? My mother's family came from the area around Krakow and I lost members of my family in the Holocaust. Hopefully what the film does is open this historical subject to examination. Personally, I don't learn anything from tedious documentaries about how horrible the Holocaust was. I know it was bad, I've known it all my life. There is already overwhelming evidence about what happened in the death camps and I certainly don't need to prove the world is round. I'm comfortable with the fact that the film makes it absolutely clear that Fred's ideas are pernicious and false.

The story moves away from a "first-person" approach when you bring in experts like Robert-Jan Van Pelt and James Roth.

Most documentaries purport to give you an objective point of view. My films are explorations of subjective elements, how someone sees himself. I made this film to explore why Fred did what he did, and his views are presented in the most objective way I could get away with. *Fast, Cheap* is four characters saying an awful lot of stuff about what they do with no one commenting on whether they're right or wrong. Originally *Mr. Death* was going to be only Fred talking, but it became clear that this was untenable.

What happened was that I screened an early cut of the film, one that featured interviews only with Fred, at Harvard University. What amazed me was that there were students who thought he was right and who seriously started to wonder if the Holocaust ever happened. I thought it was so obvious and clear that what I was presenting in the film was wrong, but they still asked me why I believed what Leuchter was saying. Some students even called me a Jewish Nazi. Obviously this was all very disconcerting to me – and remains so – and I realised I had to go back and rethink the movie. Pretty soon I decided I would have to open the story out beyond just Fred. I had to put in other voices, though even today I still feel I shouldn't have. The problem was that I don't want to be seen as being irresponsible, or, actually be irresponsible. Though I didn't want to get trapped into some long recitation of why Fred is wrong, it would have been irresponsible not to make clear that *The Leuchter Report* is worthless. Bringing scholars like Van Pelt and Roth into the movie was a simple necessity. I wanted to avoid people coming up to me and saying, "You made a movie about a Holocaust denier but you don't say whether he's right or wrong." I can come back and say, "Well, it's obvious he's wrong – just listen to him." But once again, there's nothing so obvious that it's obvious.

I love irony, but to have only Fred talking – and to assume that the audience would understand that my point was to have this man indict himself – just didn't play. If I didn't add all these other interviews the film would have been morally

compromised, though doing so compromised the film artistically, because it spoiled that splendid insanity of Leuchter babbling away.

I gather you never liked the title Mr. Death.

It's terrible, really. My wife wanted to call the film *What Fred Said*. I liked *Honeymoon in Auschwitz*, but I was scared of calling it that, even though Fred did actually spend his honeymoon there.

Can we talk about composer Philip Glass, with whom you have worked on several of your films?

I remember complaining to him while we were working on *The Thin Blue Line*, "You know, this music just isn't repetitive enough." He gave me this very strange look and said, "That's a new one." It was certainly due to Philip's music that *The Thin Blue Line* started coming together as a movie. I edited the film with scratch music assembled from a variety of Glass records and it worked really well. I was worried about what I was ultimately going to replace this music with. Who would I find to write Philip Glass–type music? Pretty soon the obvious answer surfaced. He does existential dread very well. There's a certain gravitas to his work.

I've always been careful about using music in my films. The main issue for me is that the music is playing underneath a monologue so it can't drown out the words, but at the same time it has to enhance what's being said. I never really know what music I want to use in a film until I actually have the images up there on the screen, because music combines with images in ways that can't always be anticipated.

Are you able to see any connecting threads through the First Person *interviews?*

They don't really cohere, if one were to be scrupulously honest, because they were produced over such a long period of time. To me the characters of *First Person* are simply a group of obsessives. Each episode is a portrait of someone truly committed to what they do, even if some of them would fit perfectly on a tabloid-style TV show. But it's not oddity for the sake of oddity. If there isn't some emotional depth to the story, I'm not interested. There is always something deeper and more interesting going on. Take Saul Kent, who decapitated his mother and froze her head for future resuscitation. Where his story gets really interesting is when he talks about devoting his life to becoming immortal, and only then deciding what he really wants to do. I love this kind of stuff. I have always had more ideas than time, and half-hour TV episodes are the perfect outlet for me.

Of course, the other connection between the films can be found in the title. They all capture what these people are saying, nothing more. It's one person, and only that person. I'm not interested in whether they are right or wrong, credible or

not credible. It's not about balance, about providing the audience with all sides of the story. That's not the point. In fact, I'm doing the exact opposite.

What are your thoughts about film schools?

I'm quoting Godard here, I think, but the real university of film is the movie theater. If you want to learn about film, go to see movies. Lots and lots of movies. As a graduate student at Berkeley, I got my real education at the Pacific Film Archive, where I must have seen two or three movies a day.

Werner Herzog says that he doesn't understand irony at all, while you say that irony is a kind of religion for you.

Herzog would tell me one of his Nazi *Übermensch* stories, how he single-handedly battled four hundred man-eating pygmies in the Amazon jungle or hopped across Mongolia. In turn I would counter with a Jew-boy story, how I cried myself to sleep every night because I lived at home with my mother, had no friends and wet the bed. I'm pleased to say that these stories never failed to irritate him.

Okay, but can you give me some examples of irony in your films?

Sure. Although explaining an irony is probably like explaining a joke. McNamara is a control freak, yet he explains to us that the world is, essentially, out of control. That's ironic, but my favourite example is in *Mr. Death*. For me there are three ironies in the final scene of the movie. It's a layer-cake kind of deal. Fred is sitting in his own electric chair and comes out with a truly absurd line. He's talking about prison guards: "They came to realise that their children shouldn't sit in the electric chair." Why? Because one of these kids later went on to commit capital murder, was sentenced to death, and executed in the same chair that he sat in as a child. You sit in the chair – the legend goes – you die in the chair. That's irony number one. Fred then goes on to tell us that he sat in that same chair, and went on not to die in the chair but to design and repair electric chairs. That's irony number two: I outwitted death. Those are the two intended ironies, but he comes up with a third, unintended irony with the final line in the movie. Fred is wistful, contemplative, and says, "Maybe I created a new legend and some good has come of this after all." Good?! What's interesting about the scene is our knowledge that Fred, without knowing it, has been destroyed by his own execution device. In some metaphorical sense it's as if he did sit in that damn thing and was executed. And that's irony number three. Isn't he, when all is said and done, an example of the walking dead?

To go back to the reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line*, there are strong elements of irony in all of them because they are visual representations of things that people claimed they saw and never what actually happened. They are dramatic reenactments of unreality. There is also a very ironic line at the end of the film that

no one ever seems to notice, much to my disappointment, though when I see the film it still strikes me as being absurdly ironic. It's David Harris' epiphany at the end of the movie – this moment that seems to combine self-knowledge and self-deception at the same time – when he's talking about the death of his younger brother, about his life of crime and violence: "I came to realise that I was only hurting myself," he says. Well, I look at this and there's a part of me that wants to stand up and raise my hand and say, "Not exactly, David. There were other people involved as well."

Do your films tell us as much about you as they do about the people you are talking to?

What is the hallmark of a really good documentary? Is it film that somehow captures the complexity of the relationship of the filmmaker to his subjects? It's not necessary to hear my questions or see me on screen, but I like to think I'm still very much part of the interviews and the film as a whole. One of the things I find so fascinating about documentary filmmaking, and why I would like to continue making documentaries no matter what else I might do, is that they seem to be a form of almost pure movie-making, offering almost unlimited possibilities for self-expression.

How have the ideas you must have tackled as a philosophy of science student impacted your work as a filmmaker?

I think they have affected pretty much every aspect of my life. I got an awful lot out of studying philosophy. At Princeton, at a time when Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke were writing about realism and reference, I ended up with Thomas Kuhn as my advisor. One of my great nightmares. Kuhn was basking in the glory of his "shifting paradigms." There were students who lapped up every word. I'm sorry, but I found his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* deeply confused. Hey, if meanings are incommensurable, then how is history of science possible? To make a long story short, he physically assaulted me and shortly after that threw me out of Princeton. I ended up at Berkeley. The philosophy department was really bad. If I thought Princeton was bad, this was unimaginably worse. Paul Grice, their *éminence grise* from Oxford, as far as I could tell, spent most of his time picking his nose, hitting on women and chain-smoking Player cigarettes. I guess that made him an expert on intentions. I couldn't take it. They were driving me crazy, and so I started going to a lot of movies at the Pacific Film Archive. At least it was dark in there.

Have those various philosophical concerns of yours become part of your films?

I guess so. Karl Popper, for example, is one of my heroes. Going back to *Mr. Death*, it's interesting to consider what the Popperian account of Holocaust denial would be. From Popper's point of view I don't think we have anything to fear from Holocaust denial. In fact it might even be a good thing. Isn't the starting point of Popper's idea to propose a theory, one that is potentially falsifiable? Then you see whether you can falsify it. In this particular incidence, our theory is eminently falsifiable. It's "conjecture and refutation" *par excellence*. The Holocaust deniers, just by being out there, have encouraged people to do so much important Holocaust research. They have been invaluable. Or a better way of putting it is that they have been valuable in establishing the existence of the Holocaust. That, too, is ironic.

That's why it is so important to examine and refute *The Leuchter Report*. Look at the Spielberg technique of recording thousands and thousands of eyewitness testimonies, of just going on and on uncritically, as if somehow the answers will emerge from the accretion of one eyewitness account after another. It's a Quantity over Quality approach. Compare this to the historian Robert-Jan van Pelt, who helped formulate a new way of looking at the Holocaust, of exploring and understanding history. In the seventies there was a famous trial in Vienna of the architects of Auschwitz crematoria. They were acquitted. Why? Because no one knew how to read the files. No one knew how to read the drawings and blueprints in the archives. Van Pelt – who was trained as an architect – came in and started to study this material and discovered how the original plans for the crematoria had been modified to include homicidal gas chambers. If what he discovered had been known at the time of the Vienna trial, these people would have hung. The one thing we know about architecture is that it's premeditated.

There are always difficulties in discovering that truth. Whether we like it or not, scientific theories are only an approximation of how the world works. I like to call the brain a "virtual reality generator," a lump of protoplasm that processes the things we see and hear and feel. In this sense, truth is nothing but an unending quest, something that's constantly eluding us. Searching for the truth is our attempt to get beyond our brains, our selfish protoplasm. It is never just handed over to us on a plate. One of my favourite lines in *A Brief History of Time* is when Hawking's mother calls him a "searcher." It's not as if he has possession of absolute knowledge or truth, but he is involved in trying to uncover the truth about what the world might really be like. For someone to insist that a particular line of inquiry is closed, that everything about a certain idea is resolved, is to me quite unhealthy. There's never a cow so sacred it can't be examined. Maybe it turns out to be neither sacred nor a cow.

I certainly do believe in scientific progress and that we are approaching greater truth. To what end I can't say, but we are learning more about the world every year. There's a ridiculous postmodernist idea that there is no such thing as "the truth." Truth doesn't exist. I see myself as the ultimate anti-postmodernist. Even with all the obstacles to truth-seeking that exist – self-deception, self-interest, things like that – there are very few things we can't at least try to look beyond in

order to clarify the truth of a situation. To me, truth is never subjective. It's not up for grabs, it's not subject to a vote, even if it might sometimes be difficult to determine absolutely.

People think that ambiguity is somehow wonderful in its own right, an excuse for failing to ask questions. I find this view reprehensible. If the world is a mystery, then there is nothing nobler than trying to solve that mystery or at least exploring it in an attempt to find out more about the world and about ourselves. The bottom line: there is a real world out there where real and knowable things actually happen, and this is what my films are about. If you look at what took place in Dallas in November 1976, it is clear that someone was most definitely sitting in the driver's seat of that car and shot Robert Wood. That person, it seems quite safe to say, was David Harris.

There is a very big difference between saying there's no such thing as truth – that truth is subjective, that we all see the world in different way, that just thinking something makes it true, that there's no way in adjudicating between all those different "truths," and saying that truth exists but we all have a vested interest in not seeing it. There *is* such a thing as truth. It's not that we find truth with a big "T." We investigate, and sometimes we find things out and sometimes not. There's no way to know in advance. It's just that we have to proceed as though there are answers to questions. The alternative is unacceptable.

The Thin Blue Line was compared by some people to *Rashomon*, a film I hadn't seen in many years. I went back and looked at Kurosawa's film, wondering if I had missed something. I always thought it was about the subjectivity of truth, but as I understand it *Rashomon* is a very different film. It's about that fact that we all see the world differently and all have our own reasons for burying the truth. The greatness of *Rashomon* is that at the end you have the feeling that out of all of these divergent stories, you still know what really happened. Through these various self-centred subjective accounts, we gradually glean the information that allows us to determine the underlying truth.

As should be clear by now, self-deception interests me a great deal. It's part of the human condition and is a theme that runs through much of my work. We're basically a bunch of weird monkeys doing weird monkey things that are only dimly apparent to us. It's the "Fog of Everything." I'm acutely aware that I'm no different from the people in my films, that I don't have any special access to the truth, that I'm as self-deceived as anyone I've ever interviewed. It's the old Garden of Eden story. As God was kicking Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, He began to feel guilty and decided to come up with a way to make the whole experience a little easier for them, so He gave mankind self-deception. "Things will still be really, truly horrible out there for them," says God, "but they'll never notice."

And of course there is a strong element of self-deception in Robert McNamara's story.

Like Fred Leuchter, McNamara is tortured by his past. But while Fred is tortured in a clueless way and feels completely misunderstood, McNamara is not entirely oblivious to the reasons why people dislike him and are angry at him, although I'm sure that to a certain extent he also feels somewhat misunderstood.

A good example of how self-deception might play a part in McNamara's story is what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, which for me is something of a microcosm of his whole story. You have these two incidents in the Gulf, one on 2 August and 4 August, followed by the Senate ratification of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that Johnson and subsequent administrations used as justification for escalating the war. In *The Fog of War*, McNamara tells us something that many people know, that the 2 August incident did happen but that the 4 August incident did not happen. What he doesn't tell us in the movie is that the 2 August incident was provoked by us. Johnson and McNamara stood before the American public and repeatedly talked about "unprovoked attacks" in the Gulf of Tonkin.

I have talked in detail about this with McNamara, and his justification for what happened is, "Well, they weren't really provoked. We were blowing up radar installations, but those were just pinpricks." From this arise questions of exactly what a pinprick is and what a provocation might be if it isn't the result of having your radar installations blown up. For example, if the North Vietnamese blew up a radar installation in South Carolina would that be considered a provocation or a pinprick? What about if they blew up a radar installation in New Jersey? The other question that emerges is: does McNamara really believe it's a pinprick? Is he being sincere about this or just giving excuses for what happened? Maybe he does believe it and maybe in this equation of great power politics and international affairs there's a kind of language that I personally don't adequately understand, which equates in some way to people like McNamara believing that the military's actions weren't really provocative.

On the other hand, it could all be about lying. Daniel Ellsberg, of *Pentagon Papers* fame, once told me that you could say anything about McNamara. Call him a war criminal, a monster, whatever. No problem. The one thing he won't tolerate? You can't call him a liar.

How did you get McNamara to agree to being interviewed at such length?

I had wanted to interview him for years, but once I asked him it actually took very little convincing. We were all set up shooting *First Person* and had the studio booked, so I thought, "What the hell, I'll just call him and see if he's willing to come up to Cambridge." He had just written a book, *In Retrospect*, and had been traveling around the country on a book tour. I think – I don't know this for sure – that he saw me as part of his book tour. He called me two days before we were due to shoot the interview. I guess someone must have told him that he shouldn't talk to me. He said, "I've been speaking to people about you and they say it's a very bad idea for me to talk to you. Actually, it makes no sense at all. There's no reason why I should

do it. You're the wrong person." He went on and on giving me all these reasons why he shouldn't talk with me, and then said, "But I said I'd do it, so I'll come up and do it." A friend of mind pointed out to me that this is also the story of the Vietnam War.

At first he was going to talk for a very limited amount of time – such conditions are very characteristic of McNamara – but we convinced him to extend it from one day to two. We ended up with six hours, and most of the film actually comes from that first set of interviews. They were just amazing interviews. Before he agreed to come back for more I had to put together a forty-minute cut of the film, which he liked. I truly feel that McNamara was quite courageous in sitting for these interviews. I have often wondered what motivated a man of his age to agree to make this film. He exposed himself to someone he didn't know, while knowing there's a public out there who really don't like him. There have been violent demonstrations against him. People have even tried to kill him. He's been accosted by Vietnam veterans. But even with this litany of reasons why he shouldn't work with me, he agreed to come to Cambridge.

The first interview was done pre-9/11, in May of 2001. He came soon after *The New York Times* had published an article on Bob Kerrey, his Congressional Medal of Honor and his possible war crimes in Southeast Asia. It had also been the subject of a recent report on *60 Minutes.* McNamara came into the studio and we started talking about that article because it was on both of our minds. He vigorously defended Bob Kerrey, saying, "How can you hold him responsible for those things that his superiors did?" Then I mentioned to him I had read an article by Richard Rhodes about Curtis LeMay in *The New Yorker* years before in which LeMay had been quoted as saying that if the United States hadn't won the war, he would have been tried as a war criminal. He was referring to World War II, the firebombing of Japan and the use of the two atomic weapons.

Early in the interview I asked McNamara about this, and within the first twenty minutes of our conversation he said that he too considered himself a possible war criminal. He wasn't talking about the sixties in Vietnam but rather in the forties in Japan. I remember thinking at the time that this was quite extraordinary. It's the kind of thing you maybe expect to hear after twenty hours of interviews, not twenty minutes. What's even more interesting is that I knew nothing about McNamara's involvement with the firebombing of Tokyo and his service under LeMay in the Marianas, and as far as I know nothing substantial has been written about it. It's not in any of the books about McNamara or any of the autobiographical material McNamara has written. Yet all of a sudden he starts talking to me on camera about the firebombing of Tokyo, and mentions that he had written memos for General Norstad – the chief of staff of the 20th Air Force – about the height of bombing, or more specifically about the relationship of the altitude of the B-29s to the accuracy of the bombing. One of his lessons is: maximise efficiency. McNamara pointed out that it's not an arithmetic relationship. Above 20,000 feet, the B-29s lacked any real accuracy. His suggestion: bring the bombers much lower, at the time an almost

heretical suggestion. The B-29s had been designed to fly higher and further than previous bombers in an effort to minimise the terrible losses that the B-17s had suffered over Europe. Anyway, after this first interview my researchers went down to the National Archives and found a folder of material filled with McNamara's memos from 1945. I don't think anybody had looked at it since then.

People feel you were far too easy on McNamara when interviewing him.

Yes, but when critics write that I'm McNamara's "lapdog" or that I allowed him to "call the shots," it's obvious they have failed to take into the account the very nature of the movie they are watching. Critics have written that some of the things McNamara says are self-serving, that he focuses on certain details and omits others, that he is rewriting history in his own interest. Well yes, they're right on all counts. If I'm too easy on McNamara by not including other voices that explicitly criticise him, then I admit it: I'm guilty. I did it deliberately. I wanted to do away with the traditional formulas of historical storytelling on film with the endless yin and yang of experts conceptualising and explaining.

The Fog of War is part history, part self-analysis, part mystery, part self-justification. By interviewing McNamara and no one else, he reveals to us many of the contradictions that have fascinated me about him for years. Something emerges that is otherwise lost. The way he responds to certain questions, his refusal to answer certain questions, his silences – this is what the film is really about. I like the idea that actually there are two people in the film, two McNamaras talking to each. One is forty-five years old, the other is eighty-five.

Of course there will be people who look at the film and judge it on the basis of what they think it *should* be about or what it *should* look like. Some of these criticisms are formulated on the notion that there should be at least one other voice in the film – perhaps a narrator – telling you what to think about McNamara, explaining whether or not he's to be believed, pointing out which things he's saying are true and which are not, exclaiming when he's being sincere or otherwise. Part of what I was doing in the film was eschewing all of those ancillary voices in the belief that by examining this one voice – alone on the screen talking about his life – the audience would be able to enter into his mental landscape. It's pretty clear to me that what voice-over narration does is not give us information about what we're looking at, but rather information about the speaker and, in turn, the filmmaker. Language is the ultimate tool of concealment. Sometimes I think it was invented to facilitate lying, so that we can lie more effectively, not only to other people but to ourselves as well. But McNamara isn't trying to justify the Vietnam War – that's not his mission. He may say things to try to convince us that what he did wasn't evil or irrational or ill-considered, but he himself has admitted all kinds of error.

In his book Explaining Hitler*, Ron Rosenbaum alludes to the idea of "evil incarnate." Do you think such a thing exists? Is McNamara "evil"?*

I believe in evil acts, not evil persons. I have never really believed in evil people and I'm not sure I even understand the concept of good and evil people for the simple reason that people are just too complex to be summed up that way. Much to my surprise I came to really like and respect McNamara. He's someone wrestling with his demons, a man involved in a real attempt to understand his place in history even if, like most of us, he's willing to go only so far. I believe the world is a better place for having someone like Robert McNamara around. He's a man who evokes very strong feelings in some people. There are people who hate him and will continue to hate him no matter what. They consider *The Fog of War* as one big excuse, an attempt to make himself look better or even to whitewash himself. But when he suggests that he and LeMay were probably war criminals, he's telling a very different story. To me, this kind of self-analysis is hardly an attempt to whitewash the past, rather a sincere attempt to think about history. Has he gone far enough? Who has?

How many other public figures from the Vietnam era have shared their agony with the public in the way McNamara has? I really respect the fact that in this crazy spirit of enquiry he travelled to Vietnam to talk with his former counterparts, an experience detailed in his book *Argument Without End*. *In Retrospect* – and to a certain extent his participation in the film – shows that this is a man who is trying, perhaps struggling, to understand and analyse his past motivations and action. I feel he should be applauded for asking himself, "How did this happen?" I never felt that what McNamara did with *In Retrospect* was born out of self-interest or malice, rather a desire to do good, and therein lies the essential tragedy of his story.

To my mind McNamara is in many ways a very ethical man. This is not someone who denies everything and takes responsibility for nothing. Or let me put it this way: he's certainly not oblivious to the ethical dimension of life. I find it very moving to see him wrestle with the question, "Am I a good man or a bad man?"

Why do you think McNamara was fired? Was he playing an adversarial role within the Johnson administration? In In Retrospect*, McNamara writes about talking to Katherine Graham of the* Washington Post *and wondering if he actually had been fired or if he quit of his own volition. He doesn't even seem to know if he was playing an adversarial role.*

It's quite possible he didn't know precisely what kind of role he was playing within the administration just before he was fired. The usual question arises: how much are we really in control of our own behaviour? This is not to excuse him, by the way. I think people are wrong when they imagine that with his books and this film, McNamara is involved in some simple attempt at an apology. It's really much more complex than that. I think he's involved in a complex attempt to understand who he is and what he did. Maybe part of it has to do with denial too. In fact, I would be surprised if it didn't. But it's never as simple as that.

So you think the book is more of an explanation than an apology or an excuse?

When you listen to these kinds of things, if you're kindly disposed to McNamara then you'll seen him as being full of explanations. If not, what he comes out with are just excuses. A friend of mind said to me that the definition of an excuse is "an explanation for something that turned out badly." I think that's right. Part of it is that something really bad happened: the deaths of millions of Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans. We can all agree that this was a bad thing. It certainly horribly affected me as a young man and still affects me to a certain extent. What explanation could McNamara offer that wouldn't sound like an excuse, at least to some people? I suppose something like "I'm a maniac who always had to be the best in my class, and my attempts to excel were so unfettered that I would stop at nothing in trying to advance myself" would suffice for some. But if that's true, why the hell is he telling Kennedy to get out of Vietnam when the President is extremely reluctant to do so?

There is a recording of a Security Council meeting on 2 October 1963, a few weeks before Kennedy's death. We hear McNamara, who has recently returned from Vietnam, telling the President we need to get out of Vietnam, arguing for the removal of a thousand American advisors by Christmas and of the remaining fifteen thousand by 1965. Kennedy isn't entirely convinced by this. In fact, McNamara told me there was terrible disagreement at the meeting, something confirmed when I made a transcript of the meeting. McNamara even urged the President to publicly announce withdrawal of American advisors from Vietnam to prevent "backsliding" – people going back on this policy. That night Pierre Salinger, the President's press secretary, announces this and there are news reports about it that show American servicemen boarding planes in Vietnam about to fly home. A few weeks later Kennedy is killed and we then hear, on the Johnson tapes, the new President chastising McNamara during a phone conversation and making explicit reference to the Security Council meeting. He says, "I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the President thought otherwise, and I just sat silent."

Perhaps the recording I heard of this conversation is unique. Maybe there are hundreds of others that I haven't heard that contradict it, which means my understanding of what happened back then is completely skewed. But this recording does exist and I find McNamara's line about needing to find a way of getting out of Vietnam very powerful. He is seeking a non-military way out of the crisis. The question is: was he willing to find a non-military way out at the risk of losing the war? I just don't buy the various simplistic conclusions about McNamara. It's much more complex than that. In fact, to the extent that I understand everything in this movie, I feel I've done a poor job of telling the story.

When people say, "In the film McNamara didn't go as far as I would have liked. He didn't really apologise," I ask myself, "What exactly is it that these people

want to hear? What are they looking for?" Do I myself want to hear McNamara apologise for the war? Not really. Maybe I just don't believe in redemption, but I think there would be something obscene about saying sorry for all those deaths. How do you redeem the Vietnam War? Isn't the point that it's unredeemable? What could bring back everyone who died? I have my own theory of apologies, that we love them because they empower us. You say, "I'm sorry, will you forgive me?" and then the ball is in their court. I think that what McNamara has done is far more interesting than apologising. What he has tried to do is analyse how the country – and he – ended up in Vietnam. Don't forget this is the man who ordered the creation of the Pentagon Papers. It's that same instinct to go back over the past, to go back and try to understand it. He's a man looking for redemption and trying to revise the past in his own mind. But he's also very interested in exploring why certain things happened in his life, things that affected many of us, and how we can learn from history.

Was there a certain view of McNamara – and, by extension, of what we might call "human nature" – that you were trying to put across in The Fog of War*? The historical incidents he talks about in the film to a certain extent take a backseat to timeless questions of self-knowledge, of how we see the world.*

I often think that if my movies are any good it's because they are full of unresolved questions you can keep thinking about.

What was your own stand on the Vietnam War at the time?

As I told McNamara at the start, I demonstrated against the war when I was at the University of Wisconsin and as a graduate student at Princeton. All of those demonstrations were after he had left office, but they were very much against the Vietnam War. It's been interesting making *The Fog of War* because the responses to the film have been so generational. Those people who came of age during the Vietnam War know about McNamara and have strong opinions about him, but younger people know little or nothing about him.

In your office there is an entire bookshelf of background material on McNamara. Clearly you felt the need to prepare for your interviews with him.

I like buying books. But notwithstanding, I did make a real effort to prepare for the interviews by reading a lot and talking with historians. Even though I have never believed in having a formal list of questions to ask someone, I do believe in preparing for interviews. I was, of course, aware of McNamara's brilliance. I wanted to show him respect on a very basic level. Before we met I read and thought about his books very carefully. He told me that most of the people who interviewed him had never read his books.

McNamara himself is very persnickety. He told me that when he was writing his books he tried not to put in anything that couldn't be corroborated by independent evidence. For example, he remembers telling Kennedy to pull the American military advisors out of Vietnam, but couldn't remember exactly when. So he went to the Kennedy Library and found the tape recording of his conversation with the President. Part of that conversation can be heard in *The Fog of War*.

What about the newly released tapes from the Johnson Library? What new light do they throw on McNamara's role in the war?

I call it the Halberstam Thesis because it appears in *The Best and the Brightest*, his book about the Kennedy-Johnson whiz kids who dragged us into a loathsome, disastrous war in Southeast Asia. The thesis is that McNamara was a number cruncher, a man devoid of ethical sensibility who, through his obsessions with statistics, blundered into the Vietnam War. That he was the bellicose Secretary of Defence egging on a vacillating LBJ. That he was the hawk who belatedly became a dove, and a dove very late in the game, too late for him to ever engage our sympathies. The David Levine cartoon from *The New Yorker* probably sums it up, the image of McNamara crying alligator tears when the damage had already been done. Halberstam's version of the story is that the war was a bad war conceived of by bad people. It's perhaps inarguable that the war was wrong, but was it really conceived by evil or shallow people? The Halberstam book just made me more curious about McNamara.

The newly released Presidential tapes from Johnson's administration tell a different story – to me at least. The tapes tell us that the Halberstam Thesis is wrong. McNamara was probably a dove all along. Not that this lets him off the hook. Rather, it opens up a different story. Not a better story, just a different one. If he opposed the war, then why did he go along with it? How did he allow himself to be pushed into such a position?

The Fog of War tries to outline these questions. When you hear McNamara saying to Kennedy that they need to find a way to get out of Vietnam and that pulling out advisors is a way to do it, to me that's not a hawk speaking. I suppose if you are completely convinced that McNamara is a hawk is a hawk is a hawk then you can find some way to provide an alternative explanation of these remarks. But there they are, to be reckoned with one way or the other.

Johnson then becomes President by accident and in the early months of his administration we hear McNamara repeatedly telling the President to limit involvement, to curb the various troop levels and bombing sorties advocated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We repeatedly see McNamara trying to mitigate and ameliorate, diminish the level of conflict rather than expand it. But then we hear Johnson telling McNamara he basically wants to escalate the war, saying things like, "How the hell does McNamara think he's going to win a war by pulling advisors out?" Perhaps this is my own simplification, but I have a very hard time reconciling

that with the picture of McNamara as being the chief architect and instigator of the war in Vietnam. To me it doesn't tell a story of McNamara pushing Johnson into war, but rather the other way around. Vietnam has been seen as "McNamara's War," but maybe it was actually Johnson's war. So the questions change: who was McNamara in all of this?

How did the structure of the film come about, the "Eleven Lessons"?

I struggled to find a workable structure for the film until just before Cannes, when I put in the lessons that were extracted from things he says in the film. McNamara's main complaint to me was that they weren't his lessons and that if he had picked eleven lessons they would be different. What's odd to me is that people talk about the lessons without pointing out that there might be intended ironies with each and every one. Take "Maximise efficiency." Well, that seems like a good lesson, but what if that ends up killing a hundred thousand people in a single day? Or "Get the data." But what if the data's all wrong? One thing I really like is the set of ironies that are set up at the start of the film and that hopefully pay off at the end. The final lesson is "You can't change human nature." It's saying that this is the way we are – confused, bellicose, crazy – which is basically saying that you can't put an end to war. Or that the other ten lessons are meaningless. One of McNamara's most powerful lines in the film is when he says, "Rationality isn't enough." Sure, man is rational, but rationality may not be sufficient to save us from our own inherent need to destroy each other. And this from a man known for being hyperrational, the efficiency expert, the data cruncher. I even have Harry Reasoner, in a McNamara profile from CBS, describing him as an IBM computer with legs. There's something ironic about basing your entire life on rationality, then deciding that rationality can't save us from ourselves. And if rationality can't save us, what can?

So what is the difference between your lessons and McNamara's?

He's an optimist and I'm not. McNamara believes that by examining our conduct, and through his examination of his own conduct, we can make the world a better place and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. What's my take on this? Max Brod, Kafka's close friend, asked him, "Franz, surely there is some hope?" "Yes," said Kafka, "but not for us." Look at Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1946. The speech is remembered for the phrase "Man shall not merely endure, he shall prevail." But it contains a far more interesting and pessimistic line: "Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" Indeed. Beastliness is the norm and not the exception. I've always wanted to make a movie that would make people wish they had never been born. But alas, reality beats me to it.

Why did you bring in McNamara's first memory, that of Armistice Day in 1918?

It's related to the lines he quotes from Eliot's "Four Quartets," about going back to where you began: "We shall not cease from exploring/And at the end of our exploration/We will return to where we started/And know the place for the first time." Namely, you can learn from experience. You can review the circumstances of your life and derive lessons, and perhaps others can profit from these lessons as well. There is something to be gained, something to be learned. Life has some benefit. I have a slightly different gloss on all of this. What was Armistice Day? It was a celebration of a great self-deception, of a delusion, of a great irony. We might well call it Woodrow Wilson's self-deception about the Great War as the war to end all wars, about 1914–18 having taught mankind that it shouldn't engage in something like that again. Ha! "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Santayana's quote. But I wonder whether we can learn from what we did five minutes ago. We keep on making the same mistakes, and it's unreasonable to expect we can do better regardless of whether we remember anything or not. I prefer this version: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it without a sense of ironic futility." Or even: "Those who cannot condemn the past repeat it in order to remember it." And don't forget, in the light of the recently released Presidential recordings, the far more interesting quote from Santayana: "All history is wrong and has to be rewritten." As more archives are opened up for us to study, the full picture becomes clearer. In a sense, history is about the struggle between what actually happened and what we imagine happened.

You have written about "preventive war."

If the notion of a war to end all wars is oxymoronic, the notion of "preventive war" is too. We are told that "this is a preventative war, an antiwar war." But all wars produce more wars. Every war in history has produced unresolved tensions that in the end produce future conflict. It's like McNamara's view of antiballistic missiles: it's still a missile. If you build an antimissile to protect yourself from missiles, then they build a bigger missile to destroy your antimissile missile, and in turn you have to respond by building a bigger antimissile missile. And so on. So there's McNamara saying he is come back to where he started. It has this kind of circularity, an element of tragedy to it that I like. It's horrific, but artistically satisfying.

Did you go out of your way to link McNamara's story with the current political situation?

Not directly, but it was certainly in the back of my mind. As our interviews progressed, the events of forty or fifty years ago that McNamara was describing became more and more relevant to what had happened only five or six days ago. The Gulf of Tonkin story seems to be a WMD story of forty years ago. History was

catching up with the movie, not the other way around. Perhaps the most obvious example is when he explains that during Vietnam, none of the United States' allies gave any direct support. America went into it alone, regardless. It's a line we actually put in very late in the day, just before we finished the film. He asks, "What makes us omniscient? If we can't persuade nations with comparable values of the merit of our cause, we'd better reexamine our reasoning." The issues of *The Fog of War* are inevitably related to things happening in the world today simply because they're about the most basic and universal problems: self-deception and conflict. When considering how relevant the eleven lessons are to the current situation, the question of whether we're doomed to repeat our mistakes of the past over and over again comes up.

Are you saying that Vietnam equals Iraq?

Although my feelings about Iraq aren't so different from my feelings about Vietnam, I don't think that Vietnam equals Iraq. History is like the weather, and all historical situations are different. But although history never exactly repeats itself, there is one thing that remains the same in history: human idiocy. Our capacity for self-deception, our historical amnesia, ignoring history, ignoring evidence if it's unpalatable to us, even if it means accepting untruth – all this remains constant. It's part of my job with this film to contribute to the debate about what's happening in the world today. As McNamara said to the audience when we spoke in Berkeley a few months ago, "You make the connections."

McNamara described you as having a high IQ, being an extraordinarily interesting conversationalist who is very well read, and someone who works hard to try and understand his subjects. Is this the trick to your success as a filmmaker?

Having a high IQ? I guess I forgot to tell McNamara that I was tested with an IQ of 87 when I was in grade school.

That's retarded.

Exactly. My guidance counsellor told me, "You know, you appear to be a lot smarter than you really are." I guess I like to make that extra effort. I remember reading an article in the *National Inquirer* on "How to look smart when you're really very stupid." I tried to follow several of their recommendations: drink a lot of coffee, carry around a book with you wherever you go, and smile and nod as often as possible. Invaluable suggestions.

You have a strong contrarian streak.

Sceptical too. I believe that we should always entertain the possibility that everything we know is wrong. We observe at best one percent of ourselves, maybe zero percent. I have always wanted to recast the Cartesian *cogito.* How about, "I think therefore I think I am." One of my favourite quotations comes from the last living member of Zoar, a failed utopian community in South Central Ohio. The Zoars really fascinate me. Unlike the Shakers they really had very little going for them. The architecture was execrable, the food was bad, and not too surprisingly their community became extinct. But in an archive in Ohio I found a record of the last words of the last inhabitant of Zoar. In her nineties and on her deathbed, she said, "Think of it. All those religions. They can't all be right. But they could all be wrong."

There's one last thing I would like to say about this notion of self-deception. Not too long ago I was giving a lecture at Brandeis University and showed various clips from my films, including the one from *Vernon, Florida* about the sand that grows. Mr. and Mrs. Martin appear with their bottle of sand. They had collected the sand at White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico and brought it back with them to Florida. They talk about how they had put very little sand in the jar and how the sand now almost filled up the jar. They are both absolutely convinced that the sand is growing. I said, "One thing we know about the sand is that it isn't growing. But clearly they think it is. How could that possibly be the case? Can our desire to have the world accord with our fantasies be so great that it influences how we actually see the world?" And I went on and on about this, until someone raised their hand and said, "You know, the sand at White Sands Proving Ground is not beach sand. It's gypsum, which is very sensitive to changes in humidity. It absorbs water. So perhaps when they brought the sand back from the low humidity of New Mexico to the high humidity of Florida, the sand actually did expand." And I thought, that's great! Just when I think I have an absolutely perfect example of self-deception, it turns out that the only one who's deceiving himself is me.

A version of this interview appears in
Livia Bloom's edited collection *Errol Morris: Interviews*
(University Press of Mississippi, 2010)