

Reality often turns out to be stranger and more entertaining than fiction. Just ask Errol Morris. For three decades the American filmmaker has probed the **DEPTHS OF REALITY** with the mighty skill of his investigative camera. Ranging from funny to bizarre to downright nightmarish, his films stand as a powerful, yet not too flattering testament to the pros and cons of humankind.

THE INVESTIGATOR...



WORDS Rasmus Folehave Hansen
PHOTOGRAPHY Frame from Fog of War

lways on the lookout for the peculiar, Errol Morris is a connoisseur of weirdness. He works outside the boundaries of conventional journalism, all the while bringing novel approaches to the craft of documentary filmmaking. Who is Errol Morris? Watching *Standard Operating Procedure* and *Fog of War* might make you think that he is depressing and almost apocalyptic in his vision. Spending a night with *Gates of Heaven* or *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* could make him seem funny, but kind of weird. The truth about the man rests firmly in the middle. With his latest film *Tabloid* and its elements of dog cloning and female on male rape, he has returned to his quirky signature style, exploring once again new territories of human oddity.

WHAT INITIALLY ATTRACTED YOU TO DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING?

*Ultimately I'm interested in the investigative element. By that I mean something really simple that can turn out to be very complex. With documentaries, you don't know how the story is going to develop or which characters you need to tell it. You just decide there is something worth exploring. In the case of *Tabloid*, it was a story that appeared in the Boston Globe about Joyce McKinney, an ex-beauty queen, who had fallen in love with a Mormon boy from Utah. She thought they were to be married, but then he disappeared. It turned out he had become a missionary for the church in England. So she pursued him. He claimed that she kidnapped and raped him. The story involves a lot of finger pointing and accusations, like a modern version of Rashomon. The Globe article also mentioned the fact that she had cloned her dogs.*

SHE CLONED HER DOGS?

*Yes. Particularly this one dog named Booger. Aside from that, I knew very little about the story, save for the fact that the combination of these facts made it particularly bizarre. I would not have made the movie based solely on either story; I needed them both. I like to think of myself as a funny person, an absurdist even. This is the return to what I think I do best. It's absurd, crazy and romantic, just like other stories I have been interested in over the years. Fred Leuchter in *Mr. Death* is a good example: He's an electric chair designer who also happens to be a Holocaust denier. It just comes from a hunch – that this will make a good story, that strangeness will appear.*

WAS THAT ATTITUDE WHY YOU CHOSE TO WORK WITH DOCUMENTARIES IN THE FIRST PLACE – THAT IT MAKES FICTION SUPERFLUOUS?

Indeed. In fiction, you know where you're going. The story has been mapped out for you in advance. With documentary, you don't know what will happen next. I think that's what makes my films good. I don't have an outline for the story. I just bring people to my studio. I had only had a brief phone conversation with Joyce before we met. I don't want to hear someone repeating a story they already told me. I want to hear it for the first time.

HOW DO YOU DEVELOP THAT DEGREE OF INTIMACY?

I think on some level people understand that I'm not a 'gotcha' journalist, that I'm not trying to trick them. I prefer to just explore people as people.

YOU HAVE ALWAYS BROKEN THE STYLISTIC CONVENTIONS OF JOURNALISM.

I always felt that conventions don't make much sense. They don't have anything to do with the truth. I'm an okay filmmaker, but a really good investigator. In fact, I worked as a private Wall Street detective in New York for two years.

WHEN YOU STUDY HISTORY, IT'S EVIDENT THAT IT REPEATS IN A SPIRAL PATTERN.

*My take on the famous quote is that people who aren't familiar with history are condemned to repeat it – without a sense of ironic futility. History is like the weather: It never exactly repeats itself. But human craziness and stupidity are constants. All kinds of weird things appear again in some form or another. When McNamara talked about Vietnam in *Fog of War*, what he said was so close to what has been happening in Iraq.*

SO YOU CAN'T CHANGE HUMAN NATURE?

That was McNamara's quote, but I wholly subscribe to it.

IN THE LIGHT OF ALL THIS, DO YOU FIND IT DIFFICULT TO BE OPTIMISTIC?

I wouldn't say that I am terribly optimistic. Then again, do I have to be? My job is not to be a cheerleader for humanity. I like the fact that the world is crazy. If it were not, I would be out of work.

Errol Morris is currently working on a Hollywood feature called *Freezing People*, a collection of essays to be published by Penguin entitled *Believing is Seeing*, and a wealth of TV commercials for clients like IBM, Chevrolet and ATT.

Visit his excellent website at www.errolmorris.com.

