

Transcript for Errol Morris – History as a Crime Scene – excerpt

[AUDIO PLAYBACK] -In that single night, we burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo, men, women, and children.

-Were you aware this was going to happen?

[END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

-Errol, would you, maybe, tell us a little bit about how your time in Madison as a student has influenced the kind of work you do now?

-Someone asked me either today or yesterday how I became a history major at the University of Wisconsin. Why history? Was that in the plan at the outset? In fact, it was not. I became a history major because the History Department was where it was all happening.

-Some things never change.

-After the fact, people have told me that the History program here was the best in the country. And having been to a lot of different schools over the years, I can attest to the fact that that is really -- it's not hyperbolic -- it's really a true claim about this place. It has had an enormous effect on my life and what I do as a filmmaker.

If you're about to be executed for a crime you didn't commit, and you tell people that you're innocent, that you didn't do it, you don't want to hear people temporizing with you about how it really makes no difference. And a man who is sentenced to death for this crime which he did not commit. He was innocent. And what motivated me through all of this is just some very simple idea that there's a fact of the matter. Either this guy shot the cop or he didn't. It's not something that is in any way subjective. It's objective.

-First of all, how someone with a History degree who is interested in film should go about doing that. Whether film school is the way to do that or not. And then second, how one should think about the moral philosophy in history and a career path in general, right?

-Yes.

-Is that fair?

-Well, I've always been puzzled by people saying that they want to make films. Films about what? As if somehow the act of making a film is an occupation. I'm not really sure that it is. I think that you should have -- I'm sorry to moralize about this, but -- I think you should have films that you want to make. I started making films because I had ideas that I wanted to express and that was a vehicle available to me. So I had to do something to earn a living.

The only way to learn how to make films -- well, I'm not going to say it's the only way, but at least it's the way I learned -- is through making horrendous mistakes in an effort to make a film. That's how you learn. Of course, the hope is that they will be seen, seen by a lot of people, and that will make people think.

Also, this idea that I could do the flip side of *The Fog of War*, I could interview somebody who was at the very apex of power, arguably, during the Johnson Administration, the second most powerful person in the world, and that I could make a movie about people who had absolutely no power, who are at the very bottom of that pyramid, Lyndie England, Sabrina Harman.

You sit in the theater, if you can bear sitting in the theater, and essentially your eyes are glued to the exit signs to see if people are leaving during the screening. And this horrible feeling of failure. It's like you could have a clicker. Every single person that approaches the exit. Are they going to the bathroom? Are they going to come back? Or is this it for them?

-Now you see, as a professor, I can offer you one piece of advice. If you could grade them, they wouldn't leave the room.

-We took this film to the International World Court in The Hague. And I went with Samantha Power, who has written a Pulitzer Prize-winning book on genocide, and McNamara. We showed the movie to the International Criminal Court, with McNamara, which is sort of surreal. And we're downstairs talking to one of the judges, talking about laws now on the books with respect to genocide and war crimes, and McNamara is saying to the guy, you know, I wish we had laws like that on the books in the 1960's. And the guy looks at him and says, sir, we did.

I don't like to think of myself as being a moral person, because it sounds so pretentious, self-serving, grandiloquent, but I think you do have -- at least, I feel I have -- a duty to seek the truth, to try to understand the world, to try to figure things out to the best of my ability. It seems to be a very deep and important enterprise. But can you make a difference? Yes, of course you can make a difference. History is one of the truly noble enterprises, because it's one of the ways in which we try to figure out who we are and the nature of the world we live in. What higher goal could there be?

-Well, I think on that note we should all thank Errol Morris for a fascinating [INAUDIBLE]