Transcript for Errol Morris – History as a Crime Scene - full version

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

-In that single night, we burned to death a hundred thousand Japanese civilians in Tokyo. Men, women, and children.

[MUSIC]

-Were you aware this was going to happen?

[MUSIC]

[END VIDEO 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. To the best of my ability to remember any of this, 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 not hyperbolic. It's really a true claim about this place. There were extraordinary historians.

It's interesting, we were just having a conversation moments ago about history as a branch of moral philosophy, and how the professors, who were incredibly influential on me when I was here in the late '60s, were thinly disguised moral philosophers, with very strong ideas about the meaning of history and what you could learn from history, what history was about. There's always a meta level to all of it. And 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. I spent three years of my life investigating a murder, the murder of a Dallas police officer in the 1970s, and a man who was sentenced to death for this crime, a 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.

- How does that connect to your film work? Is that one of the main philosophical wellsprings for your work as a documentary maker? Are you uncovering facts that have been obscured?

- Well, it has to be at least part of it. Because *The Thin Blue Line* is an attempt to show that this man is innocent. And the 16 year old kid who was the chief prosecution witness-- who, by the way, later confessed to me that he had been responsible for the murder, that he was the culprit.

Here's the example I often give. If there was a lockbox with all of the evidence for the Battle of Hastings, and it's destroyed, well you're in trouble. And so part of what we do as historians, or perhaps even as a filmmaker interested in history, is to try to preserve some aspect of the past before it's utterly lost. It doesn't necessarily have to be there forever. History is indeed perishable.

- So with someone like Robert McNamara.

- Yes.

- Is that what you were doing with McNamara? Were you trying to preserve something before it was lost?

- Absolutely. That, and the fact I had been obsessed with him for many, many, many years. I told McNamara that I demonstrated against him a couple yards from here in 1968, 1969. He was already-- truth be known he was already out of the Pentagon. But for all intents and purposes it was against him. It was certainly against the Vietnam War and the escalation of the war. I think it's a very proud moment in this campus's history. Something that I'm still very proud to have been part of. I think of the Cheneys over in faculty or graduate student housing on the other side of campus. And then the people who were actually out on Bascom Hill and in the Commerce Building objecting to our policies in Southeast Asia. It's a very important thing. And a thing that did have an enormous influence, I believe.

So, yeah, I have been fascinated with McNamara all my adult life. And it was an amazing opportunity. And I continued interviewing him after I finished the movie. I have about 40, 50 hours of interviews with him that I just sit on like a big chicken with an egg.

- I assume you'll put those in our archive at some point soon, right? I think we should turn to some questions from the audience, particularly from students. This is a great opportunity all you have to ask your questions. Yes. Please identify yourself, also.

- My name-- Should I stand up?

- Whatever you wish. Go ahead.

- Hi, my name is Brendan. I am an undergraduate in history. And I'm thinking, I had so many friends that all decided the wanted to be filmmakers too. So they went on to the different film schools or whatnot.

- Don't do that.

- I was curious if you had any input about not doing film school.

- Yeah. Don't do it. How's that for input?

- [INAUDIBLE] how the study of something like history, which doesn't have a direct career path, how it affects people that-- studying something that you called moral philosophy [INAUDIBLE]

-So, let me just repeat the question. So Brendan's really two part question is, first of all, how someone with a history degree who's 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 of history in a career path in general. Right?

- 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. Filmmaking is a really interesting way to do history, among other things.

But I don't think that I started making films because I wanted to be a filmmaker per se. I started making films because I had ideas that I wanted to express and that was a vehicle available to me. I'd been thrown out of a number graduate schools. And it was clear I was not going to have an academic career. So I had to do something to earn a living. And so filmmaking became-- by the way I was mistaken. It's a terrible way to earn a living. But I didn't know that at the time. Making commercials is a good way to make a living.

- So how did you make that transition? How did you go from being a historian, someone who realized you didn't want to become a professor or--

- Oh, I always did want to become a professor, actually. Which is one of the odd things about, at least my career path. I was spared. In fact maybe I lucked out. Who the hell knows? Because it was clear that I was never going to finish my doctorate, that I was never going to get to be a professor anywhere. And I had that sneaking suspicion that if I were to become a professor, I would have a really hard time getting tenure. So maybe I lucked out. I don't know.

And so I've had the opportunity to do a lot of things that really are academic in nature, even though I haven't ever been part explicitly of an academic institution. I've been very fortunate that way.

- How did you learn to make films if you didn't go to film school? You don't just pick up a camera and start making films.

- Yes, you do actually. I beg to differ. 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.

And, of course, there's the other major university for filmmaking, and that's the movie theater. Sitting and watching movies, which I started here at the University of Wisconsin. At the Wisconsin State Historical Society Library, which was the recipient of these thousands of Warner RKO prints.

- [INAUDIBLE]

- Right, so great question. Who do you make your films for? How do you conceptualize your audience? And how do you reach your audience is part of the your question, too.

- Well part of it is, I think, delusional thinking. It's thinking not too clearly about whether people are going to even see them at all. Because if you were scrupulous, you probably would never start making a film in the first place. Of course the hope is that they will be seen, seen by a lot of people. And they will make people think. Maybe they will think about the same things I've been thinking about, or will be animated by the same concerns that I've had.

The Abu Ghraib film, *Standard Operating Procedure*, was motivated by a whole number of different interests that I had. Interests about photography. 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 were at the very bottom of the pyramid. Lynndie England, Sabrina Harman. People who were manipulated by policy, not people who made policy.

The hope is that people will find what you find interesting without any guarantee that that's going to be the case. I'm not so much in the popular entertainment business. For good or for bad.

- But do you do anything differently when you're making a film, like the Abu Ghraib film, or the McNamara film, or *The Thin Blue Line,* as you're thinking about your audience? Maybe about presumptions they'll have, about prejudices they might have?

- I just want it to work as a movie. I want it to be interesting. I want it to be engaging. I want people not to leave the theater during a screening.

One of the horrible things-- I just finished another movie. And you premier these movies, wherever you premier them-- whether it's an initial screening in a theater, or as a film festival, or wherever-- 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 can have a clicker. Every single person approaches the exit, and are they going to the bathroom? Are they going to come back? Is this it for them?

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

- Yes.

- You need to have the right to give them grades. That will keep them in the room.

- By the way, I do give them grades.

[LAUGHTER]

- We should take another question. Yes, sir.

- [INAUDIBLE] and get them to apologize.

- *Frost/Nixon*

- Well, *Frost/Nixon* is bullshit. Because first of all, Nixon never apologized to Frost, and the whole movie is a charade. Ron Howard and Brian Grazer should be ashamed of themselves. [INAUDIBLE]

What I'd like to point out is that I'm a Jewish boy from Long Island. I'm not a priest. I don't hear confessions. It's not part of my job description. And I used to think OK, I forced McNamara to apologize to me. And I would think, who the fuck am I? What? I'm

going to stand in for the 3 million Vietnamese dead, or the 58,000 American lives lost in Vietnam? Yeah, sir, I'd like you to apologize to me for all of this.

And I started to think-- I had no interest in hearing McNamara's apology. It seemed beside the point. It seemed irrelevant. It still seems to me irrelevant. To people who say that McNamara is not dealing with or grappling with the fact of that incredible carnage in Southeast Asia, the whole movie is about his attempt to deal with it. "I can admit to war crimes with respect to Japan, but I can't quite admit to them with respect to Vietnam." You can stop me at any time, by the way, if I'm going on in too much length.

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 was sort of surreal. And we're downstairs talking to one of the judges, talking about laws now on the books with respect the 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 1960s. And the guy looks at him and says, sir, we did.

- That's wonderful. John?

- [INAUDIBLE]

- Well, Speer is amazing. Did he meet him? See I didn't even know this. This is fabulous. This is really interesting.

- Everyone knows who Albert Speer was? The great Nazi architect. The one who was going to design--

- If you were really, really, really unkind, you could call him the Robert S. McNamara of the Third Reich.

- I was going to say the Robert Moses of the Third Reich

- [INAUDIBLE]

- There's a very strange book-- actually it's apropos of what we're talking about here-- by Gitta Sereny, which is her attempt-- I mean it's a really interesting question-- her attempt to get Albert Speer to fess up. It's this idea of the purpose of an interview, purpose of a documentary, whatever. Her attempt to say, Al come on now, you knew about the Holocaust. Speer says, no.

So then you truck out the various documents. So you were present at this meeting? It seems to me, here, that Hitler was going on at some length about the liquidation of European Jewry. So what do you take this stuff to mean, sir? So it goes on and on and

on in this vein. And Albert Speer, in my view, never budges. And so the entire Gitta Sereny book, for me-- maybe this is my odd reading of it-- but for me becomes an exercise in self-deception. Her self-deception and Speer's self-deception. Her self-deception in thinking that she's gotten anywhere with this guy when she, in fact, has not. And Speer's self-deception that he has no knowledge of what was transpiring in the Third Reich.

- John?

- Well my question, first of all I'd like to say that I think that your career is the career of an historian achieved through other means.

- History by other means.

[INAUDIBLE]

- Without tenure. Thank God.

[INAUDIBLE]

- So, John has asked Errol to reflect on the glory years of Madison, and the [? foment ?] in Madison.

- And I believe they were glory years for this university. People ask, why isn't there that same level of social protest, say in the years of the Bush administration against the war in Iraq? And there are all kinds of theories. Certainly one of the central theories is that there is no longer a draft. And so parents and kids don't have the same investment as they had in the '60s and the '70s.

And I've talked to certainly a lot of people about this. And I myself have always felt that there should be a draft, even though I have a young son. Because I feel that war shouldn't be separated from our democracy, as though it's something that just occurs over there, and really has no meaning for us here.

These two history professors that we talk about, Harvey Goldberg and George Mosse-- Goldberg's lectures were given at Ag Hall. I don't know if that's used for history anymore, but it was the largest lecture hall on campus. It may still be the largest lecture hall on campus. Held over a thousand people, I believe. There was standing room only. It was absolutely packed. And Goldberg was lecturing on-- people would jokingly refer to it-- it was called European Social History, and they would call it Socialist European History. It was really impassioned and quite extraordinary.

He held over a thousand people in rapt attention. Unforgettable. Lectures that really had this enormous moral force. The feeling that you had coming out of a Goldberg

lecture was that history could be changed. That bad things had happened in history, but they were forces for good. They were forces for evil. And you could become, actually, a force for good. You actually could have an effect on the course of history. It's a very, very powerful lesson to be given.

Just talking about these two professors the last couple of days, realizing that they-- 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. It's not so much the job of condemning or finger pointing, but the job of trying to understand things, which is a different kind of job altogether.

Mosse, we were talking about also earlier today-- perverse, ironic, dark, sarcastic. There was an element, I would say, of the sarcastic and the nasty in his version of history. And yet he too, actually, was a moral philosopher about the importance of ideas in history, and how ideas really defined and transformed history. These two people-- I had a lot of other history professors. Other names come to mind of people who I studied with here. Gargon, Herlihy. There were a lot of really fabulous people here.

- What about the student community? Because it's extraordinary the number of students, in your field and in other fields, who came out of here. And I'm always struck by the number who call themselves moral philosophers, having come out of here at that time.

- Just a lot of bright people. Lot of energetic, gifted, bright people. I've silenced everybody?

- Not for long. John?

- [INAUDIBLE]

- I'm not sure I answered your question.

- [INAUDIBLE]

- Please.

- [INAUDIBLE]

- Well, his son, Craig, told me that his father really, really like the movie. But when his father told Craig that he really liked the movie, his father also told him, don't tell that to Errol. McNamara's a kind of withholding guy. I was always scared that he was going to

send me to 'Nam. I felt I had to be careful. You know, it's years after the fact, but perhaps it's still not too late.

- What Errol described is quite unique, but McNamara spent the last five to ten years of his life going around and trying to win a lot of people over. He would show up at historians conferences.

- Bizarre. Bizarre.

- He'd go to Vietnam with historians. He took a whole group. There's a couple of these books about it his trips to Vietnam I think part of that was his appealing to a [UNINTELIGIBLE]

- One of my very favorite stories does not particularly reflect well on McNamara. He's over in Hanoi at this conference where he's meeting all this counterparts. He claims that it's at this meeting that he finally discovers that the second attack in the Gulf of Tonkin never occurred.

Well, Johnson, in his tape recorded telephone conversations, knew this within a couple of days. Did McNamara really take 30 plus years to come to this conclusion? I got into it with him. I remember someone told me that the job of a psychiatrist when you were in therapy was to ensure that you kept coming to therapy. To never say anything that was so alienating-- the alienist who alienates-- that you would just say, "Fuck it. I'm not coming to this anymore." I had a similar problem with McNamara, to be honest. I mean, I couldn't just simply confront him with stuff and have him just walk off. And, believe me, he would walk off. He's a volatile, difficult, ornery cuss.

After I finished the movie, I went after him about the Gulf of Tonkin stuff. Because yes, OK, you got it out of me. I have a guilty conscience about the whole god damn thing. And it's interesting what happened when I tried to press him on this issue. Come on! Come on, Bob! You must have known. It's the must have known thing. Come on, Al! You knew they were killing Jews! It's a question, ultimately, about psychology and about our ability to compartmentalize our thinking, to deceive ourselves, to efface the reality of who we are and what we've done.

McNamara had on his desk at the Pentagon a piece of shrapnel from the first attack. And he would always say, well you know the first attack occurred. But what about the second attack, sir? I don't know if it can ever be answered. And I tried. It's interesting when you're a historian and you want to beat your head against a wall, which I'm a real fan of. I, as much as the next guy, like beating my head against the wall.

Here's another detail you might find interesting. I always think that I am babbling, so forgive me. The beginning of *The Fog of War* shows all of these battleships. And we found this material in the National Archives-- which is, by the way, one of the truly

amazing libraries in the world. You find all of this stuff in the National Archives. The credits of *Fog of War.* What was this material? Within a month of the attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin, the Defense Department paid for film crews to reenact the attacks. And it was never edited. These were raw dailies. You see the clappers and everything.

And I asked McNamara of course, what the hell is this stuff? What's this reenactment stuff? You know, your mind immediately goes to a kind of sinister conclusion. Was it that they were trying to create a visual record of something that never happened in order to sell it to the American public? He knew nothing of it. I actually believed he knew nothing of it. I can't--

- That wouldn't make its way up to the Secretary.

- Yeah, he's just too much of a big shot. Then we found the name of the director, the guy who's name was on the clapper. He had just died; I just missed him. And I could never, ever for the life of me get any information on this. And I tried. I embark on these crazy quixotic quests.

I tried to locate the man who's under the hood in the most famous photograph from the Iraq War. The iconic photograph, the hooded man with wires. I tried to locate that guy. Spent a year and a half and a lot of money trying to track him down unsuccessfully. Sometimes all you can do-- there's a phrase that comes to mind. It's in Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Waves.* A phrase that probably I read for the first time somewhere in this vicinity. And she talks about netting a fin in a waste of water. Maybe it's searching for the ineffable, or searching for the unresolvable, the undefinable, the unreachable, for a kind of elusive certainty that you can never lay your hands on.

- It's a great way to describe what an historian does. That's what we do.

- It's a pursuit. I mean truth, of course, properly considered. No one's going to hand you truth on a platter.

- Except in our lectures.

- I haven't attended your lectures, but I assume you offer truth on a platter.

- Absolutely.

- It's a pursuit of some sort. People would've loved if I'd been able to sort of arm wrestle him to the ground. You know, you fucker. You killed all these people, and you're not even sorry are you?

- That's the sequel.

- You should be ashamed of yourself. You're very, very bad. McNamara came over to our house several times for dinner. The last time he was over, he fell on his way the bathroom. And he opened a cut in his forehead. He was bleeding horribly. He's bleeding.

We're semi-hysterical, my wife and myself. We'd better get them to the hospital immediately. He's 87 years old. No spring chicken. And of course he refuses to go to the hospital. He refuses everything. He just wants a cold compress to put against his head. And, you know, he soldiers on. And my wife looked at me she said, like 40 years ago we would be heroes. We killed McNamara. And now we're horrified! He's our dinner guest!

And I do like-- what can I say? I would joke. I'd say he's my favorite war criminal. I don't know that many war criminals. He was by far my favorite war criminal. I love the guy.

My wife would call him the Flying Dutchman. Which I think is a really great description of McNamara. Of a guy who was just destined to roam the world forever, looking for salvation, for redemption, for forgiveness.

Oh, I forgot. This story. He goes to this conference in Hanoi. And he gets into an argument. Because why? They published *In Retrospect* in Vietnam, without giving him royalties. So I think, you know Bob, let that one go. You know, probably best not to press that one. I think it's-- No, no, no, no, no. They shouldn't have published it illegally. You should, of course, get royalties for it. But let that one go. Just a small piece of advice from a friend.

- How do you negotiate, Errol, as a historian, as a moral philosopher, the fact that you like, are clearly fascinated, and perhaps even enjoy people, and maybe even respect them as individuals, who did horrible things?

- Kind of tricky. I interviewed Dan Ellsberg, because I thought maybe I'll do a Dan Ellsberg movie. And someone did do it. They got nominated for an Oscar, blah, blah, blah. I did this interview with Ellsberg. It was horrible. It was a horrible interview. I hated it. A whole number of reasons. But it occurred to me while I was doing the interview, that here on one hand, you had Robert McNamara-- and Dan Ellsberg, make no mistake, was McNamara wanna be. On one hand you have McNamara, who I believe with the best intentions in the world did incalculable evil. And on the other hand, you have Dan Ellsberg who, with the worst intentions in the world, did incalculable good. What are we to make of this? Yes?

- Can I ask another question?

- Yeah. You can even do two. We'll make this as a two-fer.

- OK. I read a book recently called *Eating the Dinosaur.*

- Yeah, yeah, yeah.

- I guess it's familiar to you.

- I interviewed two people from an organization called the Mega Society, which is people who have IQs of I don't know how many standard deviations above the mean. Maybe five? Mensa is one in 30. The Mega Society is maybe one in 10,000, or maybe more. So they can't even really give a numerical figure to their IQ. 190, 195, 200, 205. Your guess is as good as mine. What they do is they devise IQ tests for themselves so they can measure their own IQ.

Well this stuff has always fascinated me. Because I was the recipient of an 87 on an IQ test in ninth grade. So I have more than a passing interest in this whole phenomenon of IQ. The guidance counselor at the time looked at me and said, in giving me the results of my test, you know, Errol you seem to be a lot brighter than you really are.

[LAUGHTER]

I said well, you know, I just kind of make that extra effort. I try to use big vocabulary words and things like that. There are tricks when you're really, really, really stupid, there are tricks that you can learn to looking a lot smarter than you really are.

- Like making films.

- These guys with the 200 IQ were-- I mean, it becomes a kind of joke, but they were retarded. I don't know how else to describe it. They were really just retarded.

[INAUDIBLE]

-Well, I'd be very curious what you think of the most recent film, *Tabloid.* Because *Tabloid* is a return. Although Werner Herzog said something very nice about the film. He said a number of very nice things about the film. One of the things he said, it was kind compilation of all of my concerns rolled into one. Which I think--

-What's *Tabloid* about?

-*Tabloid* is a story-- it's mining, I guess, an even deeper vein than the story of Robert S. McNamara. It's about a former beauty queen who kidnaps a Mormon priest and rapes him in chains in a love cottage in Devon, England. Is arrested, incarcerated in the UK. It's my sex in chains story. I hope the first among many.

Here's another thing that I hate about documentary. About plying the trade of documentary filmmaking. It's this idea that somehow the importance of the movie derives from the importance of the underlying subject matter. The idea of going back to

doing things that really are, more properly speaking, about nothing-- and, hence, I think, more profound-- is appealing.

Can't win with McNamara Can I tell one McNamara story fast? It's a very fast story. My favorite McNamara story, which was told to me by someone who worked with him at the Pentagon. He was absolutely on time. Absolutely on time, within seconds, for every meeting. So as a joke, some of his closest associates moved his clock forward 10 minutes. He walks into the room, without looking at the clock, he says I'm not late, and it's not funny.

[LAUGHTER]

-Says a great deal--

-Does say a lot about--

--about the man.

-As maybe a closing question, Errol. This has been wonderful. Thank you for your time.

-It's OK, I hope.

-What would you say to young people today as they're thinking about their career paths? It's a different era we live in, but people are similarly struggling with a lot of issues you've talked about. At least I hear, as a professor I hear students uncertain how they should go about making a career and keeping a social consciousness. Being a historian, but not necessarily just being a librarian. Every era struggles with that. What advice, if any, do you have for them?

-Well, you can make a difference. An investigation, say, of a crime, a murder, what have you, it's a form of history. It really is history, powerfully considered. You're dealing with the same kinds of historical questions. You're trying to take evidence from the past and to try to figure out actually what happened. History is a crime scene. And part of our job is to untangle that crime scene and make sense out of it.

Can you make a difference? Yeah, of course you can make difference. History is it's 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?

-Well, I think on that note, we should all thank Errol Morris.

[APPLAUSE]