

Gates of Heaven and Vernon, Florida: Bullshitting a Bullshitter

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Words mean everything and nothing to Errol Morris. His cinema is largely composed of, dependent upon, and fascinated with spoken words—hardly a scene goes by when we’re not being directly addressed—yet the value of those words is often indeterminate, if not implicitly questioned. There are many ways to approach the films of Errol Morris—by considering his interest in mortality and absurdity, or his formal and technical innovations, for starters. But it’s only through an understanding of his thoroughgoing fixation on verbal expression that all his other predilections—of style, form, subject—come to harmonize.

Language is how we explain ourselves (to ourselves and others), but it’s also how we deceive ourselves (and others). Vacillations over this line are what Morris’s films have always sought to interrogate and exploit. While that’s most evident in his tenth documentary feature, *The Unknown Known* (2013), in which he spars with legendary obfuscator Donald Rumsfeld, it’s also true of his first two, *Gates of Heaven* (1978) and *Vernon, Florida* (1981), excursions in a minor key that, in their privileging of manner over subject and the peripatetic over the pointed, stand somewhat apart from the director’s later, weightier projects but nevertheless herald a singular appreciation for language as the great hustle of humanity.

Subsequent films exhibited greater concern for what words mean—whether the ideas they convey (*A Brief History of Time*; *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*) or the

truths they reveal or conceal (*The Thin Blue Line*, *Standard Operating Procedure*)—but maintained this interest in how they’re said. The bits that other filmmakers might try to excise—the stammers, the hesitations, the sudden backtracking or sidetracking, the moments when it’s clear we’re getting a canned or self-conscious address—are often the most important moments in Morris’s films. The assumption is that everyone is playing him- or herself for the camera, and these moments are like fissures in the performance. What’s being hidden, or how much is being hidden, may be uncertain, but Morris assures us that some quantity of bullshit is being spackled into the gaps.

Rather than cause for condemnation, these are moments through which Morris threads a kind of gallows empathy. Whether it’s Robert McNamara insisting upon a moral and rational purpose behind the orchestration of mass casualties in *The Fog of War* (2003) or Joyce McKinney believing she has immortalized her deceased dog through cloning in *Tabloid* (2010), Morris shows members of our species capable not just of talking BS, and not just of believing BS, but of living off of it. “The thing that makes civilization possible,” he told *Film Comment* in 1997, “is that people lie to one another routinely.”

If there’s an extra dose of generosity in Morris’s first two films, perhaps it’s because he recognized himself in the eccentric raconteurs of Northern California and northwest Florida who became his on-camera subjects. When *Gates of Heaven* was released in 1978, the Long Island–raised director was already thirty years old and had developed a reputation both for talking himself into places he may not have belonged and for not being able to complete the tasks he ambitiously conceived for himself. He hustled his way into two different world-renowned graduate programs for which he was grossly undercredentialed—the history of science at Princeton and philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley—and from which he prematurely departed on bitter terms. It’s not that he wasn’t brilliant or knowledgeable—beyond his stuttered but nevertheless formidable formal education, he was a prodigious autodidact—it’s that he would come at knowledge indirectly and at his own pace. “I remember saying to my adviser, ‘You won’t even look through my telescope,’” he recounted in a 1988 *New*

Yorker article. “And his response was, ‘Errol, it’s not a telescope, it’s a kaleidoscope.’”

Instead of buckling down at Berkeley, Morris spent the bulk of his time at the Pacific Film Archive, where his refusal to pay admission alienated and offended the staff, until director Tom Luddy enlisted him to write program notes in trade (noir films were a specialty). Wandering among interests, ricocheting between institutions, and obsessing over and then suspending projects became an inadvertent way of life. Though it may be hard to square with his later productivity, Morris during this time was like a cat that sniffs and paws and circles before finally settling on a spot on the floor. That all these digressions—from dozens of unrealized nonfiction and fiction projects to side careers in cable TV sales and private investigation—were worth it is now obvious, but also evident is how integral the circling and the bullshitting were to his art. He wasn’t interested in lives or conversations that proceeded in a direct line; he was drawn to the drift, to lingering in places others only pass through, to “the irrelevant, the tangential, the sidebar excursion to nowhere that suddenly becomes revelatory,” as he told the *New Yorker*. “That’s what all my movies are about. That and the idea that we’re in possession of certainty, truth, infallible knowledge, when actually we’re a bunch of apes running around.”

Fittingly, even Morris’s filmography starts with an inversion, in that his second film was planned to be his first, and furthermore in that that second film was meant to cover a completely different topic—and not be a documentary. What drew him to Vernon, Florida, was its reputation as “Nub City,” ground zero for an insurance scam where enterprising residents voluntarily had limbs amputated in order to file lucrative accident claims. Morris visited Vernon in 1977 to conduct research for a narrative screenplay, but was chased out of town by the scam’s ringleader. Back on the West Coast and circling around numerous other eccentric subjects, he learned of the two inextricably linked pet cemeteries in Napa Valley that became the focus of his actual first film.

Even though *Gates of Heaven* came together relatively quickly, especially

considering the thwarted Florida expedition, there was at least one significant holdup. The first-time filmmaker fired three different cinematographers within the first few weeks of shooting, before hiring and sticking with Ned Burgess, the only one to jell with the idiosyncratic approach Morris had conceived: a static camera, highly composed frames, and a direct-address, noninterventionist interviewing strategy.

Morris has described that strategy as getting subjects to talk for as long as possible while saying very little in return, which entails appearing to listen without really listening—“because if you really start to listen, you feel you have to respond in some way,” he explained in a 1987 *Premiere* interview. While that may seem counterintuitive, if not downright rude, it nevertheless echoes the experience of watching these monologues unfold in *Gates of Heaven*. One listens while simultaneously becoming aware of not entirely listening, especially as the speaker rambles, doubles back, and contradicts. Soon you’re fixing on the face more than tracking the words, and you’re loitering within the still life of the frame, picking up the bronzed baby shoes to the right of pet cemetery owner Floyd McClure’s face, or fixing on the fact that pet mourner Florence Rasmussen spends the entirety of her epic address teetering in her front doorway. You’re picking up information in a fragmented way, as you might unconsciously do with a new acquaintance—which is precisely what these people are. Then you click back to the words and wonder what you’ve missed, and wonder if there was more sense to what was said than you thought.

That *Gates of Heaven* has enjoyed a robust afterlife as a cult film is certainly thanks to its readily apparent pleasures—an irreducible quirkiness, near-irreconcilably happened-upon humor, a singularly warm ironic tone, Burgess’s campily ripe imagery—but also to the less obvious fact that it’s almost impossible to remain attentive to every word of the film in any one sitting. As Roger Ebert, who famously championed it, said, “I have seen this film perhaps thirty times and am still not anywhere near the bottom of it.”

In the film, Morris hasn’t yet fully developed his signature visual strategy

—incorporating reenactments, stylized studio sets, the “Interrotron” direct-address-enhancing interviewing tool (in which the subject can see Morris’s face in the lens of the camera), and a multicamera, cubistic approach to sit-down portraiture—but already present is a sophisticated interplay between what we hear and what we see. It’s in his first two films that Morris introduces himself as the greatest innovator of the “talking head” in the history of the documentary arts. The shots are arranged, the subjects are posed, conspicuously, inviting you to recognize the composition and frame, to appreciate that there’s an artificiality to their talking to a camera, and implicitly to us. In *Gates of Heaven*, especially, it’s as if the interviews were conducted while a long-exposure photograph was being taken, and instead of waiting for the image to emulsify, we’re waiting for a deeper, stranger, more complex truth to arise.

There’s a story here (a successful pet cemetery absorbs the remains of a failed one), as well as a structure (we meet the players and hear firsthand accounts of the latter, and then meet the players and learn of the practices of the former), but again, it’s the digressions from what’s diagrammatic that register, and linger in the mind. As would become increasingly apparent in his work, Morris is a sucker for explications of process—the more mundane and detailed, the better. The first of these comes from the proprietor of an animal rendering plant, who’s tickled to describe everything from the inescapable foul odor to requests for discretion from the local zoo (whoops). Morris’s sweet spot is at the overlap between “I can’t believe I’m sitting through this” and “I love hearing about this.” In *Gates of Heaven*, the hero of this mode has to be Phil Harberts, the elder son of proprietor Carl Harberts, who’s recently returned to the family business after making a go of it as an insurance salesman. He doesn’t just digress, he crafts quagmires of digression—sliding from burial plot planning to paperback philosophy to secondhand psychology—until his stream of consciousness achieves a kind of doltish sublimity: blather blossomed into unintentional artistry.



Gates of Heaven clip

For his second film, the exquisitely economical *Vernon, Florida*, Morris returned to Nub City but abandoned the insurance scam idea for a peripatetic portrait of the town's eccentric characters. In terms of both image capturing and storytelling, the fifty-six-minute *Vernon, Florida* is Morris's loosest film. The visual scheme expands beyond the locked-off, carefully lit, direct-address medium shots of *Gates of Heaven* into something akin to field reporting, with returning DP Burgess panning with more frequency, capturing subjects who are either poised for or just finishing action, tracking birds in motion, and even boarding a rowboat. A polyphonic southern yarn, *Vernon, Florida* is nevertheless subtly well structured. What may seem like a random rollout of fringe characters—an understimulated police officer, a wild-animal hoarder, a worm farmer, and a congenitally uncertain village philosopher, among others—is actually a series of virtual, impeccably timed pas de deux, with Henry Shipes, a frank-talking turkey hunter, serving as the infinitely returning backbeat. The film veers even closer than *Gates of Heaven* to mocking its subjects, yet along with invitations to laughter are intimations of adoration, warmth, and even self-recognition.

Again there's a steady stream of words, of words offering explanations and

theories and justifications and assertions. It's mostly bullshit. But it's also entirely essential, with words flowing among speakers in the town like blood in an improbably enduring body, words doing what they can to make sense of an absurd world. What people say in *Vernon, Florida* is often funny, but it's what causes them to say whatever they're saying that most interests Morris, as well as what can linger in the mind of the viewer. As he told Ron Rosenbaum in 1998, he's interested in "revealing an interior world, a mental landscape, how people see themselves as revealed through how they use language. If you listen to what people say, that gives you a route into how they see themselves."



Vernon, Florida

When you listen to what people say in *Vernon, Florida*, as well as in *Gates of Heaven*—two films drunk on the vernacular of subsistence living—you discover people who are neither too high nor too low on their lives. Each tells a tale of self that necessarily fixes them in a time and place, to echo the vertices of Morris's frame. Yet his shots, for all of their precision and suggestion, are as inexact in their portraiture as his subjects are with their words—playful projections of his own sensibility. Morris may be a seeker in his films, endlessly curious about people and their solutions, the world and its systems, but he's not one to condemn his subjects for knowing what it is they know, for getting perpetually

lost in conversation with themselves.

It's this self-identification that raises his work above misanthropy and mockery—even when he's inviting us to laugh at or recognize hypocrisy in his subjects. If this empathy proves strongest in these first two films, it can be traced throughout his work, from the kindred small-bore spirits of *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* to the charismatic master manipulator Joyce McKinney in *Tabloid* to his fellow wordsmith Rumsfeld. There's an amplified tension between the filmmaker and his subjects as his work develops—as he moves from ordinary folk to famously suspicious characters—but there's no less of a sense that these are reflections of how the filmmaker might see and hear himself, and in turn of how we might see and hear ourselves. We're all just talking.

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