DOCUMENTING THE EXPERT: THE FILMS OF ERROL MORRIS

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In a society increasingly influenced by the pronouncements of experts, it is important to examine the rhetorical construction of expertise. Experts exert their power by the language they use to describe their fields of expertise. Gaining their power by the authority invested in them within their demarcated field, experts often stray outside the boundaries of their expertise. They pass judgment or offer opinions founded not on a wealth of knowledge, but from an assumed position of power and respect.

Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris focuses his films on the language of his subjects, be they worm farmers or heads of state. Morris’s desire to capture the subjective malleability of truth mirrors the expert’s verbal construction of his own expertise. Lost within the worlds they have created in their minds, Morris’s subjects offer differing examples of the expert both within the dominant power system and outside of it. Morris examines how the power of language allows his subjects to become experts in whatever field, real or imaginary, they choose.

This thesis combines modern theoretical explorations of the functions of the expert with close readings of Morris’s films. By centering his films on the language of experts, Morris documents an ever-changing, highly personal form of expertise, offering oppositional examples to the hegemonic expert figure that dominates most discussions of expertise.
This thesis is dedicated to the inspirational experts in my life: Ellie Paasche, Debbie Hellmann, and Courtney Olcott.
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INTRODUCING THE EXPERT

Peter Gammons and Stephen King are experts. Gammons is a revered baseball writer and broadcaster recently elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame, something that is most often done posthumously or after years of retirement. He is knowledgeable, honest, and does not shy away from criticizing those in baseball, no mean feat in this age of politically correct reporting. King is one of the most popular authors in the history of American literature. His command of the horror/suspense genre is unparalleled.

Gammons often concludes his on-line columns with a quick shout-out to the latest records he has been listening to. Sometimes he dedicates an entire column to his favorite songs or albums (Gammons). For the last few years, King has written a column for *Entertainment Weekly*, the American pop culture magazine par excellence. He often discusses his recent musical choices or runs lists of his top CDs of all time (King). These men are highly respected experts in their fields and enjoy the support of intensely loyal fans. However, it seems an abuse of their positions within their fields to constantly play the role of music critic. There is no doubt that they both listen to music quite often, and being good writers, they feel the need to write about subjects that bring them so much enjoyment. Nevertheless, why do they assume that they possess expertise when it comes to music? Have they studied the history of pop music? What are their credentials for espousing their views on a subject that has nothing to do with baseball or horror?

Because of their expertise in their fields, they talk from a position of power. Michel De Certeau describes the pervasive extension of expertise: “Since he cannot limit himself to talking about what he knows, the Expert pronounces on the basis of the place that his specialty has won
for him” (8). This established place of power enables Gammons and King to make pronouncements on areas outside of their expertise based on the place that their expertise has secured for them. They are not alone. Our heavily mediated society is stuffed to the brim with expertise, so much so “that the Expert is growing more common in this society, to the point of becoming its generalized figure” (De Certeau 7). The expert is no longer a special person, full of knowledge and fulfilling his “task of mediating between society and a body of knowledge” (6). Experts are everywhere, waiting for their moment in the sun, on the camera, quoted in the pages of *The New York Times*. Experts tell us what to wear, how to lose weight, when to invade countries, the best buy, the best tactic, the do’s and don’ts of everyday life. They inform us of our impending doom, the inaccuracies of our histories and the futures that await us.

The role of the expert today has been transformed by the influence of print, audio and visual media. The quickness of the spread of information and knowledge has only increased our appetites, to the point that we feel the desire to know more and to know it quicker. This “epistephilia”- or pleasure in knowing, as defined by Bill Nichols in his seminal text about documentary film, *Representing Reality* (178), is not only the driving force behind documentary film, but also the root of our obsession with and dependence on experts. They know something we do not know, so we use them to gain knowledge or to weigh in on matters that we do not possess the knowledge to understand.

Errol Morris is an expert documentary filmmaker whose filmed subjects are all experts of some kind, some acknowledged by society in official capacities, some who are experts in their own minds. His films directly address the burdens of epistephilia and expertise, as we watch experts struggle to communicate the nature of their expertise. Morris constantly questions the boundaries of expertise, knowledge, and language in a collection of films that are often labeled
as the works of an eccentric about other eccentrics. He has been called a “connoisseur of human
strangeness, whose cinematic gaze tends to linger the longest on the oddest people” (McEnteer
101). While the label of eccentric is often used pejoratively, Morris himself does not feel that his
subjects are just a group of oddballs:

I’m often annoyed by people who somehow think that what really interests me is just the
odd, the eccentric, the bizarre. I think that it’s really quite different than that. I like there
to be some underlying context, some set of issues or problems that is expressed in the
material that goes beyond the material itself…Yeah, I like eccentric stories, I like oddball
stories. But they have to be something more than just that. (114)

The films, and his subjects, are about something more than just eccentricity. Morris has
constructed a body of work that focuses on the intricacies of the communication of knowledge.
Full of experts and storytellers, both the official and vernacular kind, Morris’s films highlight
“people (who) have a need to tell their stories in their own words to someone else” (“Interview
With The Believer”).

Before examining Morris’s films in depth, it is important to establish the context for this
examination of the intersections of expertise, knowledge, and documentary film. This
introduction will proceed with a discussion of the status of knowledge in these post-modern
times. It will then examine the social construction of expertise, relying on works from different
fields, including those by cultural theorists, sociologists, and other experts who are concerned
with the place of the expert in modern society. The introduction will conclude with a brief
overview of current documentary film theory in order to establish Morris’s place in his field.

Jean-François Lyotard’s definitive theories of postmodernism postulate that we are in a
time when the grand meta-narratives that Western society has relied on (religion, history,
science, etc.) no longer suffice. Lyotard sees the fracturing of these large theories and ways of life, causing our faith in large, universal, uniting principles to wane. This has led to the atomization of individuals, as personal codes of conduct take precedence over supposedly universal values. Lyotard’s concept of the atomization of the individual is useful when considering the glut of experts that surround us. If we all are only concerned with our individual lives, then we all in essence become “experts” left to our own devices.

The problem becomes the increased individuality of expertise and knowledge. No longer concerned with collective, unifying thought, everyone becomes a specialist of his or her own life philosophies. The exalted seat of expertise becomes watered down, peculiar, individual. While the idea that we all are in control of our own thoughts and ways of life might appear to be potentially liberating, the realms of expertise and knowledge are still dominated by officially sanctioned powers. The dawning of the computer age also prophesied a time when knowledge would become universally available to all at the click of a mouse. Lyotard acknowledges that this potential for freedom of thought has not been reached: “The central question is becoming who will have access to the information these machines must have in storage to guarantee that the right decisions are made. Access to data is, and will continue to be, the prerogative of experts of all stripes” (14). The control of knowledge still belongs to those who have power and access, which is usually concentrated around those who possess wealth.

Lyotard recognizes that knowledge has become an exchange commodity in these postmodern times: “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself” (4-5). If knowledge is bought and sold, then it stands to reason that those who possess a wealth of knowledge, the experts, can be bought and sold as
well. Our ideal image of the expert, a benevolent figure who shares the wealth of his or her knowledge for the greater good of all, is shattered. The expert then becomes a figure whose reasons for acquiring knowledge become problematized; the expert in this pessimistic equation could become a mercenary of information, whose expert opinions could be bought to service the will of those in power. This also leads to a devaluing of knowledge for its own sake, which is apparent in the contempt that many hold for the educational systems and universities of the Western world. In this scenario the humanities become dehumanized and the sciences are put in service of industry.

In Lyotard’s theory, knowledge is also “a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth” (18). Possessing knowledge then is not only knowing a set of facts, but having the “know how” (18) that enables one to put those facts to use in some manner, usually through the channels of communicating that knowledge. This is a key idea in my later discussion of the experts that Morris focuses on in his films. Possessing knowledge is ultimately useless if one does not know what to do with that knowledge. Stephen Hawking, the brilliant theoretical physicist whose life is chronicled in Morris’s film adaptation of Hawking’s book A Brief History of Time, provides an excellent example to illustrate this point. Hawking’s expertise in physics is beyond that of even his closest colleagues, as evidenced by the numerous interviews in the film where his colleagues acknowledge his theoretical leadership. However, Hawking’s knowledge of black holes and time continuums would hold no relevance to anyone if he were not competent in the task of communicating this expertise. It is Hawking’s ability to communicate his complex theories in an understandable language that has led to his fame outside the world of physics.
In Hawking’s case, the ability to communicate his expertise in an effective manner is part of his persona as an expert. How can we hold all experts to this criteria? In a sense, experts are asked not only to possess knowledge in a specified field, but also to be experts in communicating that knowledge in an effective manner. This, it seems, is unfair. It is also the cause of some of the disdain felt towards experts. When I go to the mechanic and he explains to me how he knew that my timing belt had slipped, even though it is a part that is not viewable, I silently nod my head and curse. It is because I do not understand the language he is speaking, nor does he possess the communicative competence to make this language understandable to me, that his expertise remains a mystery, as mysterious as the $400 that leaves my wallet every time I visit him.

The idea of competence also informs Michel de Certeau’s theories concerning experts and their communications. He defines the expert as “an interpreter and translator of his competence for other fields” since experts must “succeed in moving from their technique – a language they have mastered and which regulates their discourse – to the more common language of another situation” (7). Since Errol Morris focuses so much of his films on the language and communicative skills of his subjects, it makes sense that his subjects sometimes stumble in communicating their knowledge. Experts are not always expert communicators.

De Certeau also views this competence as a tool of power as “competence is exchanged for authority” (7). While he does not give a concrete example of how this exchange actually works, De Certeau’s theory can help account for the power that experts have assumed in Western society. As globalization has become a social reality, the need for experts who understand foreign languages and cultures has increased. These experts, valued for their communicative skills and knowledge, exert their power in helping to dictate foreign policy and economic
maneuvering. De Certeau takes it even further when he asserts, “the more authority the Expert has, the less competence he has [since] he abandons the competence he possesses as his authority is extended further and further, drawn out of its orbit by social demands and/or political responsibilities” (7). Here the expert no longer is valued for the specialized knowledge he or she possesses but for the authority that he or she has gained from that knowledge. The Fog of War, Errol Morris’s Academy Award winning documentary about the life and career of former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, is a damning example of the crippling effects of this authority. McNamara, no longer remembered for the intelligent man he is, is hated for his authoritative mistakes concerning the Vietnam War.

De Certeau realized that the decisions of experts who assume authoritative power are not totally subject to the personal whims of the expert. Often the expert “can, on questions foreign to his technical competence but not to the power he has acquired through it, pronounce with authority a discourse which is no longer a function of knowledge, but rather a function of the socio-economic order” (8). The pressures of the economic system of capitalism often influence the decisions of these authoritative experts. Again, McNamara, and any government agent who puts a price on the lives of soldiers, is subject to these pressures.

Edward Said discusses the role of experts in light of the decreased value of intellectual life in modern Western society in his book, Representations of the Intellectual. While his focus is on the public life of the intellectual, he discusses the role of experts and the economic forces that influence them. “The world is more crowded than it ever has been with professionals, experts, consultants, in a word, with intellectuals whose main role is to provide authority with their labor while gaining great profit” (xv). Said values the intellectual as a figure who should stand outside the power structures and speak against them, someone who ideally is working “to
advance human freedom and knowledge” (17). To Said, the intellectual is a person who plays the role of a benevolent speaker for the common good, the “intellectual as exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power” (xvi). While Said must be admired for this call to arms to intellectuals to fight the good fight, his assumption that intellectuals know truth and how to speak it, seems condescending and limiting to the potential power of the people. He wants the intellectual to be an amateur, someone outside of the system, yet he values figures such as James Baldwin and Noam Chomsky, intellectuals who have made their reputations and money from their intellectual projects within the university.

Said pulls no punches in determining that the rise of the expert is ultimately damaging to his public intellectuals. “The problem for the intellectual is insiders, experts…who mold public opinion, make it comformist, encourage a reliance on a superior little band of all-knowing men in power” (xii). While it is obvious that power concentrated in the hands of a few (men) is not the ideal, it seems limiting to assume that there is only one form of expertise. Said’s theories about the concentrated power of experts will be handy in our discussion of Morris’s films that deal with the problems of power and expertise (*The Thin Blue Line*, *Mr. Death*, *The Fog of War*). However, he neglects the idea that just as there can be the amateur intellectual that he so values, there can also be amateur experts, experts who, in a sense, are experts in fields because of their personal desires for knowledge, experts who value their hearts over their wallets. According to Said, “to be an expert you have to be certified by the proper authorities; they instruct you in speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory” (77). Here he falls into the trap of assuming that all expertise follows a top-down model where those below automatically follow the power of the elite. This leaves no room for the agency of self-styled experts or those experts who work outside of the power structures of
capitalism. He wonders if there “can be anything like an independent, autonomously functioning
intellectual, one who is not beholden to, and therefore, constrained by” (67) ties to institutions
and calls for an increased “amateurism… an activity fueled by care and affection rather than
profit and selfish, narrow specialization” (77). Maybe it is a matter of semantics, but he praises
the intellectual for his ability to stand outside of power and neglects to offer that agency to
experts.

To other theorists considering the value of expertise, the increased role of the expert is
not only a matter of economic determinism. Morris Chafetz, a medical expert himself, sees that
the postmodern decline of meta-narratives leaves a space that needs filling in the lives of many.
Chafetz claims, “The pronouncements of experts fill the moral and ethical vacuum left by the
demise of the extended family and the waning of religious and political leadership” (xiv). While
he is wandering into essentialist territory here, assuming that all of Western society is led
morally and ethically by notions of religion and family, Chafetz recognizes that at this time there
are many people searching for answers that could have been found in the meta-narratives that are
in decline. Like Lyotard, De Certeau, and Said, he does agree that the expert can use the power
of his or her knowledge against a populace: “Many people believe someone does, in fact, have
answers that they do not possess. Because they want to believe in that magical “someone”, they
are defenseless against those who claim to have special knowledge” (xii). This desire for
answers is the basis of epistephilia. As we shall discuss shortly, it is also the driving force
behind documentary filmmaking.

Harald A. Mieg, a social psychologist, also views the post-modern era as a time when
“there is a specific need and demand, some sort of uncertainty, caused by limited knowledge
resulting in a demand for expertise” (34-5). The uncertainty that drives the need for expertise
can be associated with the decline of belief in the institutions that used to offer safety to the
general populace. With scandals and lying at a high point, and trust in figures of power at a low
point, the expert can fulfill the role usually filled by authority. If De Certeau is correct, the
expert then takes the place of previously established authorities, satiating the increased desire to
know.

The lack of faith in authority can also lead to feelings that society is not controlled, that
the powers that be can no longer hold things together. In the United States, the attacks of 9/11
served as a catalyst for widespread fear about the security of our country. Mieg asserts that “the
societal or personal need for control results in a demand for experts” (12). The fears serve as a
perfect context for security and terrorism experts to use their knowledge as experts to establish
authority in these areas. Therefore, we have terror alerts that tell us nothing, heightened security
measures at large public events, and merchants of fear making large sums of money selling
doomsday prophecies. In a culture that feels out of control, those who can sell a sense of control,
those who can give us answers, can profit at the expense of fear.

Experts also profit from the speed at which they access information. “The expert offers
knowledge in a shorter time than it would take us” (42), causing the use of experts to enter the
realm of rationality. If the expert already possesses knowledge that we need, it makes sense for
us to rely on the expert to speed up the process of knowledge acquisition, to enjoy the “fast
utilization of the expert’s compressed experience” (11). Again, the speed at which we exchange
knowledge has increased with the influence of media and computers. If time really is money,
then utilizing the speed of the expert’s knowledge makes sense in a society driven by the
demands of a capitalistic economy. It also gives the consumers of that knowledge the feeling
that they are using their time wisely. This sense of pride in this form of consumption informs the
egotistic feeling that “if we had the time to have the same experiences as the expert, we would come to the same conclusions” (11). So again, in a sense, we are returning to the idea that the use of the expert is not necessarily about the validity of his or her knowledge, but is closely tied to the speed at which the consumer can utilize that knowledge.

An interesting aspect of Mieg’s study of experts is that he asserts a rather simplistic truth as to why experts are trusted. “Experts – in the original literal sense – are experimentalists. They know from active, reflexive experience” (2). This assertion might seem too basic; of course, experts have experience. Nevertheless, it is his use of the quote “‘Experto Credite’ by the Roman poet Virgil – Trust the one with personal experience” (4), that indicates just how far away from the root of the word “expert” we have gone. Experts today no longer have to have the experience, as noted in many instances above; too often, the expert is speaking from the seat of power that he has assumed from his expertise in another matter. We are left with generalized experts who hold court based on their position in society, not their possession of knowledge.

It is also important to note that Mieg argues that “‘the expert’ is not a type of person, but a form of interaction involving an attribution to a person” (10), an idea that begins to get at how expertise is socially constructed. It involves both the expert and his listeners, who both mutually construct a position for the expert’s platform. If an expert discusses his expertise in the woods, does anyone listen? Is he or she still an expert? It is important to consider the role of the listener/receiver of expertise and to recognize that the act of communicating expertise depends on both sides of the language equation.

Language and control are two of the central issues at the core of documentary film studies. Bill Nichols, in his comprehensive theoretical treatise, Representing Reality, illuminates the importance of recognizing documentary as a mode of discourse: “Documentary films … are
part and parcel of the discursive formations, the language games, and rhetorical stratagems by and through which pleasure and power, ideologies and utopias, subjects and subjectivities receive tangible representation” (10). Because documentaries focus on the tangible world and have a “self-defining preoccupation with the representation of the historical world” (14), they can purport to give an accurate representation of reality. The key here is that they do not capture reality, as many early theorists imagined, but that they represent an actual reality. The argument then turns away from whether what we see is real or not to the authenticity of various representations.

Many early documentary film schools of thought, particularly the Cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema groups, argued that documentary as a mode of expression could represent reality in an objective way because of the filmmaker’s lack of control of his subjects. They also downplayed their intervention in the process of filming. They purported to be “flies on the wall,” holding cameras but not intervening in the action that was happening before them. In their eyes, this lent an objective authenticity to what they were capturing with the cameras. However, these ideas neglect the choices that a filmmaker makes at all times during the construction of the film. There are no images that are untouched by the bias of the filmmaker in the construction of a film. They also neglect to consider that the filmmakers’ mere presence changes the situation they are filming, that every subject is altered by the presence of the camera and the filmmakers.

The filmmakers of the Direct Cinema school (Richard Leacock, Robert Drew, D.A. Pennebaker, the Maysles Brothers) felt that their observational style was more objective than others, thus giving their films a heightened sense of reality. However, one of the defining features of post-modernism is “the loss of faith in the objectivity of the image (which) seems to point… to the brute and cynical disregard of ultimate truths” (Williams 10). The argument is
that the waning of ultimate truths in the post-modern era has resulted in the knowledge that no image or representation can be completely objective. Therefore the claims of objectivity made by the Direct Cinema school are met with disregard. This is not to say that the films they produced are not worthwhile, but the claims of their filmmakers to be mere observers capturing truth ring false in the post-modern era.

Errol Morris has attacked this school of thought because he believes that “style doesn’t guarantee truth…There was this idea that if you follow certain rules, if you shoot things in a certain way, then out pops the truth” (Bhabha). While he claims that “one of the central documentary issues…is truth…because you are making claims about the real world” (Murray), he acknowledges that “truth exists independent of style” (Murray). The attacks on his films for being too stylized contain the documentary bias of objectivity. Morris’s contrariness to the documentary film border police comes from his resistance to making truth claims based solely on style and mode of filmmaking.

Morris does not focus his search for truth in his method of filmmaking. He believes that “truth is something that arises out of the relationship between language and the world” (Bhabha); it is not constructed by his stylistic choices. His obsession with “how people reveal themselves through language” (Bhabha) centers his films on the language choices that people make in expressing their knowledge, often letting the speaker ramble on uncontrolled. Thus, his films serve as an ideal location for representing the language games of experts. Not burdened by the truth claims of objectivity, his films let the experts speak for themselves.

Morris’s expert subjects vary greatly in the manner and communication of their expertise. Thus, it is useful to group his films in a manner that stresses the commonalities amongst a varied group of subjects. Chapter 1, “The Vernacular Experts,” will examine Morris’s first two films,
Gates of Heaven and Vernon, Florida. These films feature experts who are not easily characterized as experts in the theoretical manner discussed above. These experts are of the homespun variety, people who are experts in their own minds without official or sanctioned acknowledgement of their expertise. They are experts of experience, many of them aged, who use their seniority as a means to pontificate about truth, their lives, and their jobs. The films have a folkloric quality to them, examining these people in their natural settings, instead of the studios that Morris relies on in his subsequent films. It is important in these films that Morris depicts experts outside of established power, demonstrating that the language of expertise can be used anywhere in any situation.

Chapter 2, “Obsession and Expertise,” will discuss A Brief History of Time and Fast, Cheap and Out of Control, two films that portray expertise in specific fields concerning science and nature. Morris focuses his attention on the obsessive nature of the work that each of these experts performs. He traces a thin line between obsession and expertise, calling into question the way that the chosen field of the expert exerts pressures on the lives of the experts. The subjects in these films perform work that defines who they are as people. Questions of identity abound in these films as the subjects display their authority within their given fields. Morris also highlights the demands of working within officially sanctioned fields for the expert who feels that he is outside of the system.

“When Experts Go Bad,” Chapter 3, will examine three films, The Thin Blue Line, Mr. Death – The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr., and The Fog of War. These are usually considered the three most prominent films of Morris’s canon, as they deal with “big” topics such as a miscarriage of justice in the U.S. legal system, Holocaust denial, and the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. These films portray the negative aspects of expertise and focus their attention on the
maneuverings of power through expertise, authority and language. The films also call to
attention the difficulties facing the expert within the dominant power system, how individuality
can hinder the authority that an expert wields.

Chapter 4, “The Subject Errol,” looks at the development of Morris’s career as an expert
filmmaker making films about expertise. It will contextualize Morris’s place in the documentary
film world and also note his work in the commercial advertising field. Here we will examine
Morris’s construction of his own expertise and how he portrays himself in his film and television
work.

Morris’s examination of the machinations of expertise, both at a personal and societal
level, questions the dissemination of the expert’s knowledge and power. While his techniques
and theories establish Morris’s work as an antidote to the traditional documentary form, his use
of documentary film as the form to examine expertise enriches the tradition of documentary
film’s attention to how power works within society. By focusing so much of his camera on the
personal and the vernacular, Morris challenges his audience to actively connect the personal with
the societal, to locate power within the words of those who speak of it.
CHAPTER 1: THE VERNACULAR EXPERTS

Trees are a symbol of knowledge and wisdom in many religions and cultures. The fall of man, according to Christianity, happened because Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, something specifically forbidden by God. One of the most sacred sites of Buddhism is the Bodhi tree in India, where Buddha stood for a week after receiving enlightenment. Perhaps it is their roots in the earth, their natural and metaphorical connection to the soil, which makes trees such a fertile symbol for knowledge. Errol Morris’s first film, *Gates of Heaven* (1978), about two pet cemeteries in Northern California, opens with a long shot of a man seated beneath a tree, the tree large and dwarfing the man. This visual symbol of knowledge, with its deep roots in history, sets the tone for the meditation on knowledge and expertise that follows.

Floyd “Mac” McClure is the man seated beneath the tree. Mac proceeds with the story of how he started a pet cemetery in Northern California. Mac had no training in animal science but, raised on a farm, he knew how to handle animals. He had to bury a pet collie once, found a beautiful plot of land behind the farm, and laid his friend to rest. Morris frames Mac from the mid-point of the chest up, with Mac looking directly at the camera, telling us his story. From this first shot of Mac talking, it is obvious that Morris does things a bit differently. In his first few films, Morris placed his head right next to the camera to get his subjects to look directly into the camera, maintaining eye contact as they spoke. The intimacy he creates between the camera and the subject is a distinctive trait of Morris’s work. With a fixed camera focused solely on the speaker, Morris privileges the act of speaking while the speaker conveys a “strong sense of personal expressivity that does not seem to be produced by or conjured for the camera” (Nichols 121). Instead, this focus on the expressivity of his subject allows the viewer to feel as if the
subjects are “producers of the obviously constructed film world they inhabit” (Dorst 279).
Disrupting the typical hierarchical relationships between filmmaker, camera, and subject, Morris gives power to the subject and his words, allowing the language and gestures of the subject to drive the action of the film.

Mac talks of how he found “the most beautiful piece of land” in Los Altos, California, a commuter city located in the corridor between San Jose and San Francisco. As Mac voices his opinion, Morris cuts to a sweeping pan of the land where the cemetery stood, a shot that contradicts Mac’s assertion of beauty, as a nearby freeway does not bode well for the peace one would usually find at a cemetery. This is the first obvious use of directorial control, as Morris’s filmic text contrasts the words of Mac. The irony that is a key feature of Morris’s work is in full bloom in this sequence. It also calls attention to the construction of truths, as competing discourses (Mac’s idea of beauty vs. the panning shot of a cramped parcel of land) “argue” over the definition of beauty. This tactic, contrasting images against words, is an oft-repeated component of Morris’s style.

As Mac recounts his life story, he refers to dates (World War II) and remembers information handed down to him by people in his past. This mixture of the personal and historical gives his anecdotal information an additional prestige as he conflates history with his story. This rhetorical device gives him cultural capital as a man with experience, an expert in pet cemeteries. Mac shares the wisdom that was shared with him. “Something the old timers used to tell me years ago, find a need and fill it.” This advice, passed down through the years, serves as an unofficial sanctioning of Mac’s pet cemetery project. His work does not fall under the supervision of cemetery officials or government regulators. He learned from experience and the experience of others. This is an example of the power of the vernacular, as common everyday
language becomes powerful through its passage through time, its usage by multiple generations. This seemingly simple bit of homespun wisdom becomes valuable words to live by.

Mac also uses the jargon of expertise to justify the importance of his work. Very early on, he realized that the pet cemetery was “going to be my project of my life.” Project has a scientific connotation, implying that Mac views his work as something more than just a simple job. By acknowledging that this is a life-long project, Mac invests his work with meaning. No regular job is approached in this manner. When the idea for the pet cemetery struck Mac, he quickly moved to include some friends as partners. When he approached them, he found that they too had been thinking of opening this kind of business. Mac says, “It was a sort of a kismet idea,” implying that this was a matter of fate, that Mac was a seer who envisioned a project that fulfilled the desires of his friends. This sort of corroboration lends another air of legitimacy to the idea. It was not some crazy notion, but an idea shared by a group of like-minded individuals who realized the potential in communal action. While it was still a business venture, it also became a labor of love.

The strength of Morris’s interviewing techniques comes from his “non-judgmental role as a non-threatening listener” (Conomos). In these early films, Morris’s voice is not heard asking questions or interrupting the subjects. He “asks as few questions as possible, and lets the truth flow along” (Singer, Friendly) because Morris is adamant about letting his subjects speak for themselves. This is not saying that he has no authorial control or influence; his films are meticulously edited and many shots are highly stylized, never letting his presence as a director be forgotten. Nevertheless, in speaking for himself, without interruption or leading by Morris, Mac gains some power in his own representation and commands the screen with words of authority.
Often, Mac invokes a higher authority in discussing his expertise. He claims “God gave us these little pets to be our fellowship,” again giving a sense of authenticity to his work by implying that his work is sanctioned by the highest official. In this situation, this sort of rhetoric does not feel hollow in the manner of someone who is trying to make himself seem more important than he really is. Even though Mac takes his work very seriously, he recognizes his calling as a mission, not a matter of ego.

However, not even Mac can escape the veneer of professionalism that is often associated with expertise. He reenacts what he might say at a burial ceremony, using hand gestures to reinforce the solemnity of his points: “Now little Toby was put on this earth for two reasons (holds up two fingers), to love and be loved.” Again, Mac invokes a higher power, but in this instance, the act that he puts on makes these words seem less heartfelt than his previous invocations. We also learn that the failure of Mac’s cemetery stems from his lack of business acumen. He could not secure the money needed to keep the cemetery in working condition, something one of his partners blames on investors “who were not interested in that beautiful Garden of Eden that Mac had in his mind.” Here the ugly side of capitalism rears its head as Mac’s calling competes against the demands of making a profit.

Morris contrasts Mac’s good-hearted attempts at business with the smooth talking Mike Koewler, a management type from a nearby rendering plant. Morris cuts between the two as they talk about their jobs. Koewler is seated behind a desk cluttered with the detritus of middle management busywork. Instead of looking directly at the camera, as Mac and his allies do, Koewler leans back in his chair and smiles as he talks about rendering, which he claims as another form of recycling. This attempt to associate the “recycling” of animals into glue and other products with recycling metal products reeks of the rhetoric of expertise, an unquestioned
assumption from a seat of power. Koewler tries in this instance to candy-coat what his company does. Again, Morris’s ability to let his subjects speak for themselves, uninterrupted, pays dividends. He is able to play Mac’s sincere feelings against the carelessness of Koewler to give this little drama the feel of a good vs. evil struggle. Koewler also uses historical allusions to authenticate his profession, claiming, “Rendering is one of the oldest industries, it dates back to the time of the Egyptians.” Morris cuts quickly to Mac telling a story about a rendering plant back in North Dakota that he could smell from miles away. The sneer in Mac’s voice betrays the sincerity of his hatred for rendering plants. Because Morris has focused the film on the goodness of Mac’s deeds, the appearance of Koewler allows us to see that Mac is human, and not the saint that he portrays himself as, going about his chosen business.

Koewler continues his sales pitch for the benefits of rendering, heeding the ease and quickness with which one could dispatch of a dead elephant, horse, or giraffe. He makes the case that if you have a horse that dies on a weekend, “You want that horse out of there now.” The capitalistic pressure of “time is money” filters down to Koewler to help him justify what his company does. He realizes that people do not want to talk about rendering because the death of animals is an emotional issue for many. According to him, this issue “is heavy. You get some real moaners on the phone.” The callousness of his words ultimately shows the nature of his character. Morris does not feel the need to “play provocative on-camera tricks to tease responses from his subjects. He just lets them talk” (McEnteer xix). In letting his subjects talk, Morris also allows them to have a hand in determining how they are represented on the screen, giving them the rope with which they can hang themselves.

The conclusion of Mac’s portion of Gates of Heaven stands as a testament to Morris’s feeling that this film is “an extended essay on hope, hopelessness” (Morris, DVD Collection).
Mac distills all of his wisdom and expertise about the business down to one choice nugget: running a pet cemetery “has to be in your heart, not in your billfold.” Morris cuts to Mac drawing a heart on a piece of paper. Mac then draws a line under the heart and adds a dollar sign beneath the line. This scene captures the essence of Mac’s problem; his decision to put his heart into his business is admirable and hopeful about the power of love for animals. Nevertheless, it also points to the economically determined fate of most attempts at a heartfelt business. Mac had to give up the cemetery. Morris filmed the exhumation, as bulldozers literally uncovered the dead. These sequences are accompanied by the sounds of the machines of capitalism destroying a dream. Morris ends Mac’s story with a shot of a different angle of the opening shot of Mac beneath the tree; this time we see him from behind and realize that he is in a wheelchair. Mac claims that he is “not only broke, but broken hearted,” an epitaph appropriate for this hopeless situation.

Morris connects Mac’s story with the subsequent story of a pet cemetery in Napa, California by using a typical cinematic device, the newspaper headline. This device usually allows the viewer to essentially fast forward in story time, skip portions not pertinent, and pick up the story with no harm done. Even in this small transitional device, Morris chooses to operate in a different manner than conventional documentary filmmaking. We see a headline from a newspaper stating: “Pet Cemetery Reburial Due,” explaining the end of Mac’s story. Instead of an easy switch from Mac’s story to the story of the Harberts family and their cemetery in Napa, Morris takes a detour with one Florence Rasmussen.

Rasmussen is an elderly woman who lives somewhere near the Harberts’ cemetery in Napa. Her long monologue goes uninterrupted for many minutes, a perfect example of what makes Morris’s interviews so interesting: “his ability to not fill a silence is unique” (Gourevitch,
“Interviewing…”). Morris allows Rasmussen to wander through her stream of consciousness monologue, which begins on point with a mention of the Harberts’ nearby business, but soon jumps to points far away from the essential topic of the interview, the loss of pets. Rasmussen mentions a pet that she misses, but it is unclear how long that pet has been gone. She starts in on her son, who she later refers to as her grandson, and it soon becomes apparent that she is living a somewhat isolated and lonely life, unable to drive or leave her home. Morris has claimed, “I like the irrelevant, the tangential, the sidebar excursion to nowhere that suddenly becomes revelatory” (McEnteer 107), and Rasmussen’s monologue certainly fits to his liking. The revelatory aspect of it is not readily apparent, as its place at the center of the transition of the story feels awkward, just another example of Morris’s supposed disdain for his subjects. It is an important piece though. As we watch a film about the humanity and inhumanity that people show towards dead pets, Rasmussen stands as a human left behind by her family, treated in an inhumane way. Initially Rasmussen appears as just another oddball that Morris happened upon, but instead she serves as a symbol of mortality in a film that portrays people trying to preserve the memory of their pets in a stab at immortality.

The Harberts (parents Calvin and Scottie, son Phil and younger son Danny) own and operate Bubbling Well Pet Memorial Park. It is located on a hill overlooking the Napa Valley, and the pets from Mac’s cemetery were transferred to Bubbling Well when Mac had to shut down business. While Mac’s half of the story concentrated on his form of personal expertise gleaned from years of experience and the righteousness of his calling, the Harberts’ half of the film deals with the differing views of the cemetery business as espoused by the expert, father Calvin Harberts, and his sons, Danny and Phil. Danny, the younger son and somewhat of a hippie idealist, returned home to the business first and successfully transitioned into a secure spot.
as Calvin’s right-hand man. Phil, the older son, has recently started working at the cemetery and is finding it difficult to marry his experience as a sales expert and motivational speaker with his new job dealing with business on a more personal level. The tension in the Harberts’ section of the film revolves around the difference between the sons and their views of the family business.

Calvin Harberts has the confident countenance of a successful businessperson down pat. He never displays the passion that Mac did earlier in the film, but a sequence in which he presides over the burying of a dog demonstrates his ability to manage people and their emotions. Morris wisely films the sequence uninterrupted, without cutting. The static lingering on this ritual gives the viewer the chance to watch an expert at work. The burial takes place under a small canopy, providing shade and comfort to the couple, a small detail, but, nevertheless, an important touch that establishes Calvin’s expertise in this business. As the couple talks about the deceased dog, Calvin asks pertinent questions about the dog’s life and remarks on his good looks in a picture he views. He notices that the dog was a mixed-breed and offers the opinion that these kinds of dogs usually make the best pets, playing to the emotions of the couple. He does not overdo it and make superfluous statements about the importance of this dog, but he manages to acknowledge the special bond between the pet owners and their dog without coming off as over-bearing or indifferent.

Calvin’s ability to maneuver between meeting the demands of these highly personal moments and maintaining good business practices is the key to his expertise. The lush setting of the cemetery, on a hill with a panoramic view of the fertile Napa Valley, speaks to the wisdom of his business decisions; this is a beautiful place for remembering a loved one. He mentions a special section of the cemetery where animals that died in service, police dogs and the like, are buried for free. For a higher fee, pet owners can also choose to have their pet buried in this area
even if the animal was not killed in the line of duty. Again, Calvin successfully straddles the line between the demands of business and empathy, making money and doing his duty as a citizen. In endearing himself to the police force, he becomes a valuable member of the community. Nevertheless, in also realizing the opportunity for profit, he uses his expertise as a businessperson to profit from those who might have a heightened view of their animal’s accomplishments. It is Calvin’s ability to straddle this line that separates him from Mac, who could not divorce himself of his emotions in running his business.

However, Calvin is subject to the same trappings of business expertise that drive our capitalistic economy. During one segment, Morris interviews Calvin at a desk with his large nameplate in front of him. An ornate and oversized piece of lumber, the nameplate announces Calvin as an important businessperson. Calvin asserts, “Large accomplishments sometimes put you at ease. We are not content…we will not stop until ours is the finest in the country.” The rhetorical construction of this statement betrays the true nature of Calvin’s project. Infused with the competitive spirit of American capitalism, Calvin also recognizes the largeness of his accomplishments, bragging in a manner fitting for an expert who wants to demonstrate his expertise.

When talking about the need for pet cemeteries, Calvin goes on a rant about the cause of the pet “explosion.” He asserts that the advent of the birth control pill has caused the huge increase in the numbers of pets, which of course leads to a need for a place to bury the little ones when they pass on. Because women are not having as many children as they used to, they need pets to fulfill their natural mothering instincts. According to Calvin, the decrease in children also means that grandparents are not getting their kiddy fix, so Calvin believes that they are turning to kitties as surrogate grandchildren. This is a perfect example of De Certeau’s idea that an expert
exchanges his competence, his expertise in a specific field, for an authority that allows him to speak on matters not entirely germane to his field. While Calvin could be onto something here, his matter-of-fact assertions come off as an example of sexist authority. His conflation of the death of pets with the increase in reproductive rights available to women denigrates the possibilities of freedom that the pill offered. This digression is not a political point, but rather an example of how authority gained in one area (pet cemeteries) often gives the expert the justification to wield that authority in another area with which he might not be so familiar.

Morris uses Calvin Harberts as the solid base from which to compare the expertise of his two sons, Phil and Danny; it is as if the two sons split Calvin’s attributes in half, with Phil focusing in on the intricacies of business while Danny is a more empathetic character. Morris wisely contrasts their opinions on the business as an attempt at suggesting the duality that is at the heart of running a business that deals with people’s emotions in times of distress. As in the earlier scene of Mac drawing the heart over the dollar sign, Morris suggests that Danny is the heart of the operation while Phil’s eyes rest squarely on the dollar sign and the ways that he must go about obtaining it.

Phil has experience in the business world and is not afraid to share the details of his expertise with the camera. It is unclear exactly what he did, but he claims to have run a business, had people under him, and taught motivational speaking. Phil rambles on about his expertise, explaining that he obtained wisdom about business by following the “R2A2” formula: “Recognize is to identify the principle, idea or technique. Relate is to connect or join together, to establish relationships. Assimilate is to make similar or alike, to incorporate, to absorb, to become a part of. Action is to denote use, follow-through, doing.” Phil uses the jargon of
expertise to portray himself as a successful person. In Phil’s eyes, it is only a matter of adopting the principles of the expert that will lead you to the success that the expert enjoys.

Each ingredient of the formula is important and has special meaning; but, when combined, they form a formula for successful living. By using the formula, you will be able to focus the spotlight on the success principles that have directed and guided Mr. Stone and other successful men in achieving their objectives. The same principles can and will help you achieve success.

This mode of thinking suggests that the business expert is valued for the “fast utilization of the expert’s compressed experience” (Mieg 11). Infomercials, seminars, and mass emails all proclaim the expertise of certain plans for success while stressing that it is simply learning the secrets of the experts that makes one successful. Phil knows the secrets, lives by the formulas, and yet, here he is back at the family business, stuck as the low man on the pole.

Morris makes extensive use of an interview that takes place in Phil’s office. Like his father, Phil has a large nameplate, a status symbol whose size is supposed to symbolize the largesse of the man behind it. The desk and the area behind it are full of trophies, get-rich success books, and a golden eagle statue. Phil says, “I specifically designed my office to display the maximum trophies,” as if his possession of the markers of success (the nameplate, trophies, books) makes him successful. The capitalistic mindset that promotes success in business also promotes the conspicuous consumption of these markers of success; Phil, obviously enthralled by the power that he feels he has gained from the formulas, nameplates, and trophies around him, plays the role of expert sans the expertise.

Phil’s reliance on the formulas and success plans of others makes his on-camera admissions ring hollow. It is obvious that no matter how much he has memorized, he has not
learned the truth about success. Phil relies on the rhetoric of expertise to gain authority in his own eyes. During one interview, he begins to elaborate on another formula that has helped him:

The next very important ingredient is something that a lot of people and a lot of businesses fail to delve into. That would be the activity knowledge. It would be the equation to a mathematical problem. It would be equal to the chemist’s ability to emulsify chemicals properly, the valences. But the knowledge of it. The whole scope, everything in detail.

Phil, while attempting to seem like he is control of his thoughts, gets lost in the murkiness of his words, never fully explaining what he means. However, by referring to the formulas, sticking to the plans, and in the above instance, comparing his knowledge to that of a scientist’s, he aligns himself with the rational and rhetorical power of expertise.

Morris contrasts Phil’s attempts at sounding as if he knows what he is talking about with the easy-going honesty of Danny, his younger brother. Morris never films Danny sitting behind a desk. Instead, Morris interviews Danny on a couch, in a hammock, and outside on a hill, settings that place him in opposition to the seats of power that his father and brother occupy behind desks. Danny has a moustache and long hair, a visual contrast to the businessman-like appearance of his brother and father. The only scene where Danny lapses into the rhetoric of expertise is when he explains the grid system that the cemetery uses to plot out the burial sites. In this scene, Danny is asked to communicate his knowledge about the system. A common trope of expertise is the over-explaining of simple, known facts. As Danny holds up the plan for the plots, he guides the audience through the basics of how a grid system works. He is obviously uncomfortable in sharing this kind of information, as he is uneasy in the role of spokesperson or figurehead, roles that his father and brother relish.
Danny, however, is not a naïve novice in the business world. “I took many business classes...marketing. You don’t retain the knowledge you learn. It’s the idea that you are applying your brain, you are exercising it. That is the part where the education comes in.” These words stand in direct contrast to the repeated formulas and mantras of Phil’s supposed business expertise. Danny understands that to be successful he has to apply his mind to the problems, not repeat verbatim the thoughts of others. Initially, as a student at a college, Danny was part of the system. Here, back at home, he is outside of the system, practicing his own brand of business in a more humanistic manner.

Morris positions Danny as the “hero” of the second half of Gates of Heaven. He constantly films Danny playing his guitar, baring the artistic soul that can balance the impersonal drive of his brother Phil. One of the more iconic scenes of any of Morris’s films comes near the end of the film, when he captures Danny taking his amplifier outside and turning it towards the gravesites and valley below him. Danny then chunks out a few standard rock riffs and smiles as his sounds travel the valley, placating the dead souls buried beneath him.

Mac and Danny stand as the most memorable subjects from this film, thus exemplifying the contrary nature of Morris’s work. Not wanting to take the official side, or any side for that matter, Morris is more interested in figuring out how people construct their own belief systems in opposition to or in concert with the dominant system. In listening to experts who are both within (Calvin and Phil) and outside (Danny and Mac) of the system, Morris reveals his “interest in how people reveal themselves through language” (Bhabha). By using the tropes of expertise, some of Morris’s subjects reveal their desires to profit from the system, to be part of the great capitalistic experiment. However, Morris also pays close attention to the language of those who stand
outside of this system, those people like Mac and Danny whose language reveals the hearts that drive their expertise.

Everyday life and the language used to describe it are the subjects of Morris’s second film, *Vernon, Florida* (1982). Morris initially ventured to Vernon to make a film about the “Nub City,” a nickname given to Vernon because a group of residents there participated in various schemes to defraud insurance agencies by hacking off limbs. Their own limbs. The “Nubbies” made it clear to Morris that his attention was not welcome. The leader of the group threatened Morris’s life, and there was an incident involving his cinematographer being run off the road. Morris realized that no one was going to speak freely on film about the fraud that he or she had committed. Morris scrapped that project and turned his attention to some of the oddballs that populated Vernon. None of the subjects of the film would appear to be experts in any official sense. However, Morris’s interviewing techniques, his ability to let his speakers ramble on, invests the words of his subjects with an authority that resembles the authority with which experts speak. In expounding on personal experience in a lengthy manner, the subjects of *Vernon, Florida*, all older, white males, offer a view of everyday life as the realm of a personal form of expertise. These are not the experts that De Certeau, Said, and Lyotard are concerned with; experts that are cogs in the modern capitalistic machinery. The experts of *Vernon, Florida* are vernacular experts, investing the everyday with the attention to specialized knowledge and language that dominates most discourses on expertise.

The film opens with the sort of epistemological question that Morris loves. Albert Bitterling, who wanders in and out of the film, sits beneath a big tree and asks, “You mean this is the real world? Huh, I never thought of that.” This line, a bit of “philosophy in the swamp” (Bhabha), demonstrates Morris’s ability to find subjects who are willing to dig deep within
themselves for the camera. One gets the feeling that the people in this film would speak this way to anyone that would listen, that they “were themselves devices that had been turned on and left running” (Dorst 275). Because Morris values the odd outsider as much as he values the powerful insider, many critics view him as a mere chronicler of the strange: “Even the “semi-normal” people appear to be alien beings when Morris records them” (qtd. in McEnteer 108). However, merely relegating Morris’s collection of characters to the weirdo bin does not account for the depth of their expertise in their chosen subject, everyday life.

The aforementioned Albert Bitterling functions as an unofficial tour guide of Vernon, even though he admits when pressed about the history of Vernon, “I can’t figure it out.” He appears sporadically throughout the film in different locations, each time displaying a penchant for self-deprecating humor and existential questioning. He does talk vagueuly of the development of Vernon, but his lack of knowledge of the history of the town fits perfectly in a film that portrays the secret histories and desires of its subjects as worlds unto themselves. Morris’s decision to forgo name titles when each person appears goes against documentary film standards, but works beautifully when he cuts between his subjects. The juxtaposition of unnamed storytellers, each stuck in their own vernacular universe, gives the film the feel of a Surrealist documentary. The Surrealists’ search for the fantastic in the everyday is very similar to Morris’s pursuit of the “mysteries of epistemology” (Rosenbaum Interview).

Morris jumps from one subject to another, not focusing the film on one central subject. The polyphonic style of the film might initially disorient the viewer, but the effect of the juxtapositions of the tellers and their stories serves to focus the attention on Morris’s epistemological concerns regarding the communication of knowledge. Much of the film includes “static soliloquies and equally static shots of landscapes and people going about their
mundane business” (Dorst 276). The almost fetishistic lingering on the words of the subjects makes obvious the authority of the subjects within their own world. Joe Payne, one of the many old-timers that populate the film, is something of a resident expert on local wildlife. He recounts the story of the time he found a dead mule carcass in some water and caught a ton of perch inside the carcass. On his property, Joe has a few cages with metal tops. In one scene, he pulls out a possum that someone brought him, exclaiming that Joe was the “only fella that knew what to do with a possum.” Certified by the words of another, Joe takes the possum out for the camera and talks about the great price he paid for the possum, acknowledging his own expertise in the matter. Joe also pulls a turtle out of a bin and quickly proclaims, “This here is a gopher, he’s not a turtle.” Joe’s playful questioning of the bounds of veracity encapsulates Morris’s focus on the meaning of self-made truths. Morris acknowledges the power of the subject’s words by moving the camera accordingly to match images with the words that accompany them. Morris uses this tactic throughout his films, whether it be through stock footage, reenactment, or in Joe’s case, a quick framing of the turtle in Joe’s hands. While sometimes Morris will juxtapose an image that does not match the words for editorial effect, in this film the words of the subjects dictates the action, yet another instance of Morris privileging the power of his subjects’ stories. Joe comments, “His motor is slow paced,” an anthropomorphic metaphor for the residents of Vernon and Morris’s film.

Howard Pettis, a worm farmer, makes the most obvious claims for the value of vernacular experience versus any sort of official expertise. Shrugging off the authenticating forces of the educational system and science, Howard declares, “I never studied no book on these wigglers. What I know about them is just self-experience. They got books on them, but them books is wrong. They don’t teach you right, they don’t teach you right on them. Teach you what kind of
feed to feed them and how to do them and all there and it’s all wrong in my book.” Howard’s unwritten book contains years of first-hand experience, something he values in the real world. In Vernon, Florida, the official forces of rationality face opposition from everyday experience. While still within the dominant power system of Western male patriarchy, Morris uses his subjects to question the power of typical knowledge institutions, making Morris’s work more political than it might seem at first.

One of the most telling sequences concerning the rhetoric of expertise centers on a carpenter who is also a preacher. From an initial interview at a construction site, Morris cuts to him sermonizing in church. At the construction site, the man talks about his relationship with God. The man needed a van for his business, and he prayed for over a year until the Lord made it happen. He praises God in an honest manner for helping his dream come true. When Morris cuts to the scene in the church, the audience would expect more of the same praise. However, once inside the officially sanctioned halls of the church, the carpenter becomes a preacher and speaks the rhetoric of expertise from his position of power. In this instance, the direct communication he had with God is put aside for his analysis of the Bible, a sanctioned document that possesses truth within the walls of his church. Instead of reading a verse from the Bible, the preacher inexplicably goes off on a long tangent involving the etymology of the word “therefore.” Apparently, “Paul used therefore one-hundred nineteen times” in his Gospel, leading the preacher to believe that there must be some secret significance to the word, making him a knowledgeable interpreter of the gospel. Paying lip service to the sanctioning power of education, the preacher remembers, “Somewhere back yonder in school an English teacher taught me something about the meaning of words. I looked up what therefore was all about.” He then proceeds to hammer home the point by going on an extended soliloquy about his search
for the meaning of the word, looking up the Greek definition and going through three different meanings of the word. He concludes his sermon with a bit of advice: “You won’t gain peace until you have a “therefore” experience,” not making abundantly clear whether the experience is the search for knowledge that he went through or just a misuse of the word “therefore.” Again, as in his portrayal of Phil Harberts, the older son in *Gates of Heaven*, Morris presents us with a subject who adopts the verbosity of the style of expertise without actually possessing the expertise itself.

Further contrasting the official versus unofficial expert, Morris juxtaposes two subjects’ stories against each other. Roscoe Collins, a police officer, is filmed inside his squad car as he waits for speeding motorists to pass through the main drag of Vernon. Henry Shipes, a wild turkey hunter, is the most loquacious subject in the film. Shipes talks and talks the viewer through the intricacies of turkey hunting, elaborating on the minutiae of his “sport.” Collins also walks the audience through his thought process as he waits. In playing these two off each other, Morris highlights the similarities between the men as they sit and wait for their prey.

Shipes offers the audience a glimpse inside the mind of the expert. While turkeys are generally acknowledged as one of the dumbest animals, Shipes, so confident in his role as the expert, disagrees: “They are a smart bird.” His own assertion justifies his obsession with the birds. If the birds are smart, then it follows that the hunter who gets them is equally smart. By trumpeting the intelligence of the turkey, Shipes blows his own horn as an expert hunter. Like Phil Harberts from *Gates of Heaven*, Shipes knows the importance of status symbols and trophies. He has a large number of turkey claws with the matching beard of each turkey mounted on a small wood panel. As Shipes recites glory stories of past hunts over beers on his
porch, Morris focuses the camera on the turkey trophies, giving the viewer a visual cue to the seriousness of this obsession.

Shipes explains the ins and outs of the hunt as he stands quietly in the forest, ears cocked for the sound of a gobble. He professes that there is a “different sound for the gobble each time,” again authenticating his skills as a hunter who can distinguish the turkey gobble from the other sounds in the forest. Shipes is an interesting expert because he often contradicts his own advice. He hints, “The most important thing is knowing your woods,” just before he tells a story where he was turned around and lost in the woods looking for help from his partner Snake. Shipes is Morris’s dream subject, an expert whose own views are self-contradicting, displaying the “malleability of truth” (Singer Predilections) that is the focus of so much of Morris’s work.

The cutting back and forth between Shipes and Collins, the police officer, serves to activate the viewer to make a connection between the two. Like Shipes, Collins sits and waits for his prey. While Shipes is an unofficial expert, Collins’s standing as an officer of the law lends official weight to his observations. His power, though, is limited by his lack of an official instrument, as he acknowledges that the speed gun he usually uses is in the process of being recertified. He also passes on the minutiae of his task, filling us in on the traffic patterns of speed violators through town, even though he admits, “I don’t know of any crime going on here.” Both Collins and Shipes wait for the action to come to them, symbolically parallel to the typical role of the documentary filmmaker who must wait around to capture the actions and words of his subjects.

Morris’s obsession with the language of knowledge communication invests Gates of Heaven and Vernon, Florida with a unique perspective. Because Morris values the tall tales of the outsiders in these films, he makes a case for a form of everyday expertise communicated
through the rhetoric of expertise. These early films distinguish Morris as someone who cares about the words of the marginalized, those who do not hold official titles or do not wish to compete in the same rat race as the rest of the experts. By focusing these films on the rhetorical power of his subjects, Morris illuminates the “dreams and delusions, the inchoate longings and bizarre beliefs that lurk in apparently normal human heads and hearts” (McEnteer 106). Morris would never make films like these again, instead choosing to center his subsequent films on the words of more sanctioned, official experts, examining how power and knowledge work together within the dominant power system. *Gates of Heaven* and *Vernon, Florida* stand as Morris’s first steps in documenting how people, real people, “reveal themselves through language” (Bhabha), the language of expertise.
Valued for their credibility, officially recognized experts often serve to establish or reinforce dominant theories of knowledge. Government agencies consult medical experts before making health policy decisions. Newspapers constantly quote named and unnamed experts about the economy, the war, any matter of importance. Lawyers rely on expert witnesses to prove points or poke holes in the cases of their opponents. The expert can be a very valuable agent in authenticating particular discourses concerning knowledge. However, portraying the expert as a mere tool in the service of power neglects the humanity of the expert and leaves no room for the expert to act in an oppositional manner. Experts are real people, and often make their own choices about how they will wield their expertise, even if they are part of or in service to official systems.

Errol Morris’s films *A Brief History of Time* (1991) and *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* (1996), portray officially recognized experts obsessed with science and the natural world. These are not the everyday experts that we have discussed previously, filled with homespun wisdom or repeating empty versions of the rhetoric of expertise. Rather, the men in these films work within established fields and command respect amongst their peers. Morris’s films give access to the minds of experts, displaying the obsessions that drive them. Again, Morris focuses on the language that these experts use to describe themselves and their pursuits. These subjects speak about how their creative use of their expertise distinguishes them within their respective fields, sometimes in a manner oppositional to the inherited tradition of their work. By focusing on subjects within sanctioned traditions, Morris allows the viewer to see how expertise, like truth, is
malleable, subject to change with the personal idiosyncrasies of those that possess it. These subjects offer a humanized version of officially sanctioned expertise.

A Brief History of Time, based on the best-selling book of the same title, concerns the theories and life of Stephen Hawking, the renowned theoretical physicist. Hawking suffers from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease), which confined him to a wheelchair and rendered him incapable of much movement. Hawking is able to communicate through a device that gives him options of words and phrases on a screen that he clicks through; the words are then “spoken” through a voice synthesizer in a somewhat robotic tone, which “foregrounds the electronic process of voice reproduction” (Dorst 274). Morris’s proclivity for technology, including his later invention of the interviewing device, The Interrotron, makes Hawking a perfect subject for him in that the act of communicating his thoughts is central to the difficulties that Hawking faces. Morris often fetishizes technology by filming the inner workings of machines, close-ups of the insides of watches, etc. Morris includes images of the device that Hawking uses, and the constant clicking sound that comes from the device makes numerous appearances in the soundscape of the film. However, Morris never lingers on the device in the manner that he does in other works: the close-ups of the portable recorder at the end of The Thin Blue Line or multiple shots of the Interrotron in First Person. Morris’s focus in this film is on the humanity of Hawking, a person reliant on technology to function as an expert.

In many ways, A Brief History of Time is the most conventional of Morris’s documentaries. It plays as a relatively standard biography picture. The film uses titles to mark the year the action talked about took place. The film unfolds chronologically, not in the cut-and-paste editing style for which Morris’s films are famous. Because it is based on the book written by Hawking, this film focuses on the interior world of one subject (Hawking) rather than the
polyphonic viewpoints in *Gates of Heaven*, *Vernon, Florida*, *The Thin Blue Line*, and *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*. This film does not shy away from large epistemological questions; in fact, the opening line from Hawking is “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” However, in a foreshadowing of Morris’s future focus on single subjects in his films (*Mr. Death*, *The Fog of War*), this film centers on “Stephen Hawking’s personal struggle with the universe” (Bhabha). Morris and Hawking make a claim for the power of the individual to question the standard or popular versions of truth, time, and our beginnings.

One of the more striking features of the film is that Morris does not feel the need to balance the arguments made. The people interviewed in the film are family, friends, or colleagues of Hawking. There are no views presented that contradict Hawking’s theories about the universe or life. It is a testament to Hawking’s wit and charm and Morris’s skillful editing that the film never feels like a biased celebration. By taking Hawking’s views and examining them in the context of his personal life at the time that he developed those views, Morris manages to get inside one of the more brilliant minds of our time for a tour of the universe, both personal and scientific.

Like many experts who feel their work is their calling, Hawking was born to be a physicist. His mother, Isobel Hawking, admits to buying an astrological atlas for him at Oxford as she was preparing to birth him. Hawking himself invites a rather prestigious comparison when he claims he was “born exactly 300 years after the death of Galileo.” Repeatedly, Morris’s subjects allude to their expertise as something they felt they were born with. Whether or not this claim has any merit does not matter. The important issue in Morris’s work is that the experts feel that their expertise, their calling, was somehow ordained or chosen at a young age. This allows the experts to invest their work with significance, as it is more than a job or paycheck; it
is a calling. Because the work is “significant,” Hawking does not appear egotistical when he
refers to Galileo. He is merely pointing out a fact on the timeline of science, not tooting his own
horn in comparison to Galileo.

Since Hawking does not celebrate his accomplishments, due to his refreshing lack of ego,
Morris elicits testimony from Hawking’s family, friends, and colleagues concerning the nature of
Hawking’s genius. A colleague from Hawking’s days at Oxford recalls that Hawking managed
to solve a number of problems that none of the others could. He remarks, “It’s not just we
weren’t on the same street. We weren’t on the same planet.” Hyperbole of this kind usually
serves to place the expert on a pedestal. Yet, Morris includes photos of Hawking and his cohort
joking around, in various states of play, demonstrating that no matter how far ahead Hawking
was intellectually, he remained a person who was able to maintain life-long friendships with
classmates.

Hawking’s mother, Isobel, certainly has reason to feel proud of her son. Yet her
interviews throughout the film never reach the level of hyperbolic bias that clouds the judgments
of many parents. Clear-headed, witty, and perceptive, Isobel does not brag. She attributes
Hawking’s accomplishments to the fact that “He does believe very intensely in the most infinite
possibility of the human mind. Somebody’s got to start sometime. He’s a searcher.” So rather
than take responsibility herself for raising the genius expert, she acknowledges that it is a job that
somebody has to do. When pressed about Stephen’s illness, Isobel does show some emotion that
reflects her maternal status. Nevertheless, she does not pity Hawking. “It’s less bad luck for him
then it would be for some people because he can so much live in his head.” This refusal to
bemoan the illness that befell her son speaks to the quality of her own character. It also gives the
audience a clue as to where Hawking got his own humility. Morris’s reliance on Isobel as the
truthful soul of the film demonstrates that his aim was to develop a more human portrait of the expert, not just relying on the testimony of fellow experts.

Morris recognizes the brilliance and clarity of Hawking’s scholarship by trying to give concrete representation to some of his more complex theories. The film begins with the chicken or the egg question; appropriately, Morris displays a chicken in outer space, demonstrating the basic and mysterious nature of Hawking’s inquiries into the beginning of time. Hawking himself notes, “I wanted to understand how the universe began.” Nevertheless, the film is not about the development of Hawking’s theories as much as it is about the development of his mind and persona. This focus is not Morris’s alone; he does not manipulate the portrait of Hawking to make it just a picture of a man’s life. Morris mixes the personal details with the theoretical science because Hawking does the same thing when talking about his life.

Again, Morris faces a subject who conflates history with his story, the personal becoming just as relevant as the public. As Hawking ponders, “Where does the difference between the past and future come from?” Morris includes dated photos of Hawking as a baby, held by his mother. This suggests that the basis for Hawking’s inquisitive nature stems from his family. His mother, when discussing Hawking’s lack of motivation in his twenties, recognizes the importance of Hawking’s meeting his first wife, Jane, who “really put him on his mettle.” Hawking also mixes personal anecdotes with discussions of his theory; when remembering his first stabs at the theories he developed about black holes, he notes that they came “shortly after the birth of my daughter, Lucy.” The personal details, so minute in comparison to the vast cosmos, distinguish themselves in Hawking’s mind and Morris’s film as definitive facts that shape Hawking’s theories and life as much as the science over which he obsesses.
Hawking’s debilitating illness does not deter him from his obsessions. Almost
completely immobile, Hawking never curses the cosmos for the fate that has befallen him.
Displaying his wit, he remembers, “I thought about black holes as I was getting into bed. My
disability makes this a rather slow process, so I had plenty of time.” While some directors might
choose to focus more on this subject, even someone as obsessed with technology as Morris does
not linger on Hawking’s illness or the technological means by which he communicates. The
illness does not define Hawking or the film. Mirroring Morris’s own inventions as a filmmaker,
Hawking proposes, “In some sense, when you lose one set of tools, you may develop other tools.
But the new tools are amenable to different kinds of problems than the old tools.” Hawking
explains that he now thinks differently because he cannot write. He now thinks in pictures and
diagrams, giving him the ability to “solve problems no one else can” because his science is now
more abstract. Hawking’s illness has contributed to his expertise; his acknowledged “new tools”
allow him to approach problems from a different perspective than others.

The illness is not the only reason Hawking stands out in the scientific community. His
accomplishments certainly place him in a lineage of greats; he holds the same Professorship of
Mathematics at Cambridge University that Isaac Newton once had. Hawking’s desire to answer
basic existential questions through complex theoretical science motivates him. Hawking states,
“All scientific theories break down at the beginning of the universe,” positioning himself as an
expert who can answer questions that no one else can. While this might appear egotistical,
Hawking does not celebrate his own significance as a thinker. His genuine curiosity about life,
not his ego, motivates his scientific work.

Hawking’s ready acknowledgement of mistakes and his humor are qualities that
distinguish him from other sanctioned experts. In describing the end of the universe, Hawking
admits, “I had made a mistake. I had been using too simple of a model of the universe. Time will not reverse when the universe collapses.” This humility also allows him to laugh at himself. A colleague remembers that Hawking did not bemoan his bad luck when he fell out of his wheelchair once. Instead, this master of gravity recognized the irony of his being overcome by gravity. Even though he takes his work seriously, Hawking does not take himself seriously, distinguishing himself from most other scientific experts who invest their findings with the weight of the world. This humility is what allows Morris to have fun with this film, using the images of the chicken at the beginning or footage from the Disney sci-fi film *The Black Hole* to illustrate Hawking’s abstract concepts. Morris would not have this option if Hawking’s tone did not allow it.

Because Hawking has questions about the Big Bang and the beginning of the universe, he treads on ground usually reserved for some form of religious theory. “An expanding universe does not preclude a creator, but it does place limits on when he might have carried out his job.” This line of questioning opens him up to attack from religious and scientific believers who do not want to answer these questions lest they find answers they did not want to know. Hawking and a group of scientists attended a cosmology conference at the Vatican in 1981 and had an audience with the Pope. While recognizing the importance of Hawking’s work for the future, the Pope admonished the group to stay away from the Big Bang because that was a moment of creation. Hawking never relents, even in the company of an authority, because he believes in the capacity of our own understanding. He ponders: “So long as the universe had a beginning we could suppose it had a creator. But if the universe is completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would neither be created or destroyed. It would simply be. What place then for a creator?” Because Hawking has “the capacity to ask amazing questions” (McEnteer 110), his
expertise does not wane in the face of pressure. He refuses to allow the opposing forces of faith and rationality to stop his pursuit of truth. His expertise is in acknowledging the place for both lines of reasoning about the origins of the universe.

The most distinctive trait of Hawking’s expertise is his desire to communicate his knowledge effectively. He does not hoard his expertise, using it as a means to create distance between him and others. He is not the expert who cashes in on his knowledge or uses it in a selfish manner. He has a more Utopian vision for how science should work:

If we discover a complete theory of the universe it should, in time, be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then, we should all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason. For then we would know the mind of God.

Morris frames this discussion around images of Hawking in his wheelchair, staring off into a screen filled with images of stars and the universe. The stars’ light reflects off Hawking’s glasses, giving an iconic image that questions whether the universe is outside of those glasses or if its secrets are contained within. The film ends with a very human moment, Hawking staring at the stars, the little boy obsessed with the stars still inside of him.

The obsessive nature of expertise is the central focus of Morris’s Fast, Cheap and Out of Control. Because “documentaries can be a subjective attempt to explore how people see the world,” (Cunningham 64) Morris is able to compare and contrast how four different subjects’ views of the world can both resemble and contradict one another. This film is the most unlike the traditional form of documentary in Morris’s oeuvre. He cuts back and forth between the stories, sometimes using audio from one of the subjects over images from a different subject.
The “narrative free fall” (Cunningham 66) allows Morris to comment on the nature of obsession and expertise in general, through four different views, rather than constructing four different films about the subjects.

The film’s subjects all have “odd” jobs; lion tamer Dave Hoover, topiary gardener George Mendonça, mole rat specialist Ray Mendez, and robot scientist Rodney Brooks all pursue their obsessions with nature and science through their work. Their “ostensibly unrelated monologues are bound together by the director’s generous curiosity” (Singer Friendly). This film, more than any other, testifies to Morris’s own expertise and his affinity for the strange. The meticulous editing of the film took many years, while the footage itself was shot in ten days. Morris’s ability to blend these seemingly disparate stories into a compact whole is remarkable. The humanity of the film comes from Morris’s skill in finding the similarities between these obsessed experts, in recognizing the common problems and joys these men share, in his “willing connections among the four men” (McEnteer 111). Trying to follow the stories in any sort of linear fashion is impossible and misses the point. In the complex overlapping of these stories, Morris defines a place for the sanctioned expert that is neither inside or outside the mainstream. Rather, he locates his study of obsession inside a world constructed by the expert, and in the film, by Morris.

Like Stephen Hawking, the men in Fast, Cheap and Out of Control attest to the beginnings of their obsessions in their childhoods. Hoover saw Clyde Beatty, a legendary animal tamer, actor, and future mentor, in person and decided then that he wanted to be a wild animal trainer. Mendez, the mole-rat specialist, remembers being in an insect club at school that piqued his interest in science. Brooks, the robotics engineer, comments, “I liked to build stuff. I sometimes ask myself why I do this and I trace it back to my childhood days…building
computers.” Again, Morris, by proxy of his subjects, traces the origin of obsession to childhood desires. By constantly referring to an early start to expertise, Morris and his subjects invest the expert’s obsession with meaning that is not readily available to the more mercenary experts that serve dominant knowledge discourses.

Dave Hoover, the lion tamer, and George Mendonça, the topiary gardener, have the most experience of the subjects in the film. Both are older men, nearing the age of retirement, who grapple with their own mortality and the coming ending of their expertise. Hoover, mentored by his hero Clyde Beatty, admits, “I learned by trial and error. I made some very serious errors, believe me.” Because he is practicing a dying craft, the experiential nature of his expertise could be lost. Hoover holds onto the fact that experience counts for something because he invested his whole life in the pursuit of this craft; it defines him. When pressed about retirement, Hoover says, “Wild animal trainers don’t retire.” He then goes on to discuss how almost all of his fellow trainers go on working until the day they die, usually from heart attacks brought on by the stress of the job. Hoover only adds to the aura of his expertise by remarking on the mortality of his fellow trainers, adding himself to a pantheon of committed experts.

Hoover is most alive when interviewed about his experience inside the cage. Stating that the lions and tigers are “all different, they are like people,” Hoover anthropomorphically asserts his connection to the animals. He gleams with pride when discussing particular instances where his experiential expertise saved his life inside the cage. Much of his excitement about animal training stems from his opinion that “it’s new every time you go in.” The world inside the cage is one where Hoover feels new and in control, where he asserts his power and place with a whip and a chair. Hoover, so close to his animals that he still helps raise the kittens, believes that his place is with the animals. He claims to know how the animals feel: “They don’t really consider
themselves caged. Outside the cage is the cage. Inside is their world.” Obviously, Hoover insinuated himself into this world and now lays claim to an expertise that allows him to function as an equal part of “their world.” Not wanting to retire, he claims the cage as the domain of his expertise, where his life’s experience is most useful.

The tension in Hoover’s portions of the film stems from the fact that he is no longer the featured animal trainer. He is an old lion fighting against the young tiger. A new, young woman has taken the spot and Hoover now acts in a management capacity for the circus. Morris devotes an extended scene to Hoover watching the young trainer work. The audience watches Hoover watching her, Morris foregrounding the act of watching in order to heighten our perception of just how bitter Hoover is. If we could not tell by the pained expressions on Hoover’s face during these scenes that he is uncomfortable in this position, then his words and gestures betray his true feelings. “She’s young and doing a really good job, but she’s got a lot to learn.” He then remarks that he hopes the animals do not learn more than her, laughing in a manner that wants to convey that he can joke about this, but the laugh is hollow. Hoover clings to the authority that his competence within the cage has brought him, not wanting to give up the power of the whip and chair. He himself admits, “It’s much easier for me to do it than watch it,” words with which every expert in Morris’s films might agree.

Animals are at the center of George Mendonça’s expertise as well. Mendonça’s garden is full of incredible, life-sized animals carved out of bushes. Morris uses slow motion, stylistic lighting, and fake rain to give the scenes of Mendonça carving his animals a sense of wonder. The slowed down time of these scenes allows the viewer to grasp the real time that it takes Mendonça to work on his creations; he claims that it took fifteen years for him to make a bear. Like Hoover, Mendonça is an old lion at this game. He too values experience as the prime
quality it takes to possess this kind of expertise. “I don’t expect anybody to come in and do what I did because they don’t have that experience. I was told by several professors at the different schools, George nobody can come in, with all the book knowledge they’ve got, nobody can come and do what you are doing.” Again, an expert devalues book expertise in favor of experience. This argument is rhetorically persuasive because nobody can really argue that experience does not matter. A novice gardener does not approach shrubbery with the same mental framework that Mendonça possesses. Nor could a completely book-learned gardener attack unexpected problems with the experiential tools of Mendonça. The totalizing argument against book knowledge does back the experienced expert into a corner. It neglects the possibility of books, usually written by an acknowledged expert, contributing any value to the craft. However, this is not the sentiment at the heart of these arguments against book knowledge. Experts make these arguments because they feel threatened and must assert the value of the manner in which they obtained their expertise.

Mendonça, like his garden of Green Animals (his name for them), is one of a kind. According to him, people have “traveled worldwide and never seen anything like your Green Animals.” The rarity of his expertise gives him a feeling of accomplishment that he is not ready to share with others. He claims to have had numerous understudies who never lasted because they did not possess the patience necessary. One wonders how open to sharing he really is, for his sense of pride would diminish if his garden were not his unique creation. Like Hoover, he is an “obsessed, deluded individual attempting to construct reasonable, efficient institutions” (McEnteer 116). If others became involved, the efficiency of the institution he created would be in doubt, calling into question whether the expert can ever really be a team player. To share, he would have to relinquish the control and knowledge he accumulated through his years of
experience. Even in a position of relatively low importance, the acknowledged expert finds himself fighting for control of the information and knowledge he possesses.

It is difficult to tell if Mendonça’s contrariness is a result of his clinging to his power as an expert or if he is just a crotchety old man. When asked about his reliance on hand-held shears versus the time saving electric shears, Mendonça rants against the new-fangled invention: “For me, they’re not just as good. This is the only way you can do it and do it right. They’re not good for detail.” Like the worm farmer of Vernon, Florida, Mendonça does not trust any way besides his own. These experts rely on their expertise as the definitive quality of their existence; Mendonça is “The Green Animals Guy.” He has no room for any other way; this is his expertise, his lifelong project.

Because Mendonça is hesitant to share his secrets, his craft will die with him. The matron of the house where the garden is located is long dead; the house closed twenty years ago, but the garden is still alive. He mentions that the matron said, “Don’t let anything happen to Green Animals. As long as I live, I will take care of it. I don’t know what will happen after that.” Yet he does know what will happen to the garden. Mendonça’s refusal to divulge the secrets of his expertise is an acknowledgement of his own mortality. If his work defines him, if he is his work, then when he dies, the work will die with him. He played God in creating this controlled environment and he will continue to exert his control when his time passes. Perhaps Morris does not include as much interview time with Mendonça as he does with the others because of his bitter desire for control. Morris includes many shots of Mendonça working on the animals because Morris appreciates the wonder and craft of his expertise, but he cannot control the words of Mendonça, so Morris lets Mendonça’s creations speak for him.
The sadder, older lions facing mortality (Mendonça and Hoover) contrast well with Ray Mendez and Rodney Brooks, two younger scientists with an eye on the future. While the nature of their projects are different, Morris’s quick cutting between the stories of all of the men demonstrates that the degrees of difference are not that large. Brooks, like Hoover and Mendonça, has a natural contrariness to his person. “I like to look at what everyone is doing, find some common thing they are all assuming implicitly but they are not even realizing they’re assuming, and then negate that thing.” Brooks refers here to his decision to negate the stability of robots he constructed in his job at MIT. He created a machine that could fall down. Brooks is also playing God in that he creates insect-like machines programmed to walk, fall down, scurry and other activities. Whereas Hoover and Mendonça craved the worlds they were part of for the control they derived from them, Brooks denies that he desires that same kind of control: “I don’t tell the robot what to do. I switch it on and it does what is in its nature.”

Brooks’s creative obsession with robotics dominates his life. He states, “If you analyze it too much, life becomes almost meaningless,” betraying his desire to focus his attention on the robot world of his creation instead of the living world he cannot control. Morris matches this dialogue with shots of a birthday party celebration inside Brooks’s laboratory, a directorial clue that sometimes the uncontrolled life is worth celebrating as well. Brooks contradicts his own theory about the meaninglessness of life when he asserts, “Many people have said to me this is something men do because men can’t have babies. This is a way of building your own baby. It’s a deeper-seated thing… (it’s) understanding life by building something that is life-like.” Here Brooks’s search for meaning displays a deeper connection to reality than Morris’s previous subjects in the film. He does not create this other world to escape from this world; his creation helps him understand this world in a more meaningful way.
Brooks’s work in robotics looks forward to the future; he is not of a dying breed. Thus, his hyperbolic rhetorical attempts to convince the viewer of a future dominated by robot intelligence do not appear to be the maniacal rants of an egotist. Rather, the rhetoric points to the main difference that distinguishes Brooks from Hoover and Mendonça; he is looking forward while they are looking back. His acceptance of the fact that the robots “may well be our legacy for the future” points to his ability to see a life for his creations beyond his own involvement and expertise.

Ray Mendez, the fourth expert featured in Fast, Cheap and Out of Control, displays an enthusiasm for his subject unmatched by any of Morris’s other experts. Mendez portrays the positive aspects of expertise as he shares his desire to display his knowledge about mole rats and help make the mole rat a popular animal. The mole rat is special because it is the only hairless mammal and is the only mammal to live underground. Mendez feels an affinity for the animal because the mole rat’s world is largely unknown. His expertise on the subject affords him the possibility of discovering how this mammal has adapted to its environment, which could prove advantageous to humans as our environment changes.

Mendez created an environment for his obsession by constructing an exhibit at the Philadelphia Zoo. He tried to approximate the mole rats’ natural living conditions in order to make them comfortable, but he also wanted to be able to watch them in their intimate moments. He solved the problem by creating an intricate system of tubes that resembles the underground tunnels through which the mole rats burrow. The tubes are clear, so the exhibit allows the viewer to share in the experience. Mendez realizes that he is “looking at other,” as he puts it, and explains the experience he wanted to convey:
That feeling that you are in the presence of life that exists irrelevant of yourself, that’s the other. And the other isn’t something to be feared…It’s something to be wondered at and looked at and explored, perhaps communicated with. See if you can get that moment where the animal is actually looking at you and you can get that moment of contact. I know you are. You know I am.

This sort of existential wonder is the key to much of Morris’s work and speaks of the place he reserves for Mendez in the film. Mendez’s desire to make contact with his obsession, to understand his obsession, is different from the other subjects’ desires to control their obsession and own it. In deciding that his research can be beneficial both scientifically and personally, Mendez exemplifies the type of expert that Morris holds as oppositional to the experts driven by control and power. Here Morris has an expert who proposes knowledge purely for knowledge’s sake:

For me, the interest with the mole rat, it is a lifelong interest. But in and of itself, the mole rat could have been a bird…It’s the intellectual part of it that is stimulating…This has nothing to do with science…I look at them strictly from the point of self-knowledge, of learning. Not only about them, but about myself in the way that they react and act towards each other.

The lifelong investment that Mendez has made in the mole rat betrays the nature of his obsession. He is not out to prove his worth through the mole rat; he is merely trying to learn about himself and the world around him.

Lest we think that Mendez is an unreal, naive character, he alludes to the dark side of nature, something he warns we must consider when studying science and nature: “The concept of stability is a whole concept of death. It’s part of my problem with the Bambi concept of history,
where everything is beautiful and cute and benign. It’s not the world. The world isn’t like that at all. You are either prey, an enemy, or you are ignored.” This epitaph is a fitting statement opposing a popular view of animals as animated friends who are just like us. Mendez understands the reality of the situation and tries to communicate his expertise in a manner that is both beneficial and truthful. Morris suggests that the expert should not coat the medicine with sugar; he should be able to speak truth without fear of reprimand.

When Mendez states that the mole rats “are looking to find a common ground…They are constantly trying to find themselves in another social animal,” he could be delivering a fitting acknowledgement of the scope of the projects that dominate A Brief History of Time and Fast, Cheap and Out of Control. Like Morris himself as a filmmaker, the subjects of these films are searching for meaning in their work, trying to find themselves in the stars, in robots, in naked mole rats. No matter where their knowledge comes from or whose interests it serves, the experts of these films display an expertise determined by their personal desire to find themselves, or lose themselves, in their obsessions.
Thus far, Errol Morris’s documentaries presented us with counter-hegemonic examples of expertise, experts far outside of dominant systems and those within the systems who use their expertise in an oppositional manner against authority and dominant knowledge systems. The films focused on the personal usages and meanings of expertise as constructed by the expert himself. Much of the early criticism of Morris within documentary studies chided Morris for his seemingly apolitical examination of the personal worlds of these experts. Documentary film has always been the province of political activism. In representing the real world, documentary filmmakers and theorists often set their sights on social issues or meaningful events to effect change through political filmmaking. Morris’s focus on the personal opened him to criticism that his films were not political enough; the issues of identity were not “big” enough politically to warrant the amount of attention that Morris received as a documentary filmmaker. While some of the criticisms could be attributed to professional jealousy or disputes with Morris’s non-traditional style, they also serve to locate Morris himself as an expert filmmaker outside of the dominant hegemonic ideals of the documentary film world, a subject I will examine more in Chapter 4.

Those criticisms of Morris that point to his apolitical focus on the individual do not hold water when we consider The Thin Blue Line (1988), Mr. Death – The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr. (1999), and The Fog of War (2004). These films, while still concerned with the individual’s construction of self through words, open up to examine bigger issues and institutions. Examining the role of the expert within dominant power systems such as the judicial system, law enforcement, and government, these films move beyond the examination of
the personal. They depict the expert as an agent of a system that the expert cannot control with his language or knowledge. The experts in these films are cogs in the machine of hegemonic power. Accordingly, Morris has “evolved from spotlighting human oddity for its own sake to illuminating intersections of personal and national delusions, exploring the ways in which human failings translate into political follies” (McEnteer 117). By casting a wider net into larger political realms, Morris answered his critics while also keeping his eye fixed on the personal and epistemological questions that he asked throughout all of his documentaries. It is no mistake that these three films have been the most critically successful of his career; Morris won the Academy Award for Best Documentary for *The Fog of War*. However, Morris has not forgone his own obsession with the way that language defines the person, that the teller subjectively defines his or her own version of truth.

If “documentaries visualize power as an abstraction,” (Arthur 116) then the opening scenes of *The Thin Blue Line* locate that power in the skyscrapers and radio towers that dominate the skyline of Dallas, Texas and extend the abstraction to a close-up of the revolving red lights of a police siren. These abstracted signs help to assert the control that the power of the police and judicial system wield throughout the film. The plot of the film centers on Randall Adams, a death row inmate who claims that he is innocent of the murder of a Dallas police officer. Morris interviews many of the key players in the capture and trial of Adams, including the man who really committed the murders, David Harris. Harris had met Adams earlier in the day in question, and their tangled relationship is the nexus for the confusion of truth and falsity that is the core of *The Thin Blue Line*. This film brought Morris a huge amount of attention for numerous reasons. First, Morris’s investigation/film was the primary evidence in court in getting Adams cleared of the charges and released from prison. The film also attracted the eye and
criticism of many in the documentary film world because of the highly stylized reenactments that Morris used in the film. He recreated the shooting scene repeatedly in the film, with slight variations pertaining to the vision of each witness. By recreating these differing versions, Morris stakes a strong claim for the subjectivity of truth; that every account, every witness, every version is subject to the bias of the teller of that version. By staging these scenes in a highly stylized manner, full of slow motion and film noir-ish lighting, Morris makes tangible his disdain for the limitations of cinema verite’s reliance on natural realism to portray an objective truth. Morris claims, “I don’t believe truth is handed over by stylistic choice. It’s a pursuit” (Curtis). So, while this film is concerned with the machinations of truth within the justice system and police department of Dallas, Morris distinguishes himself from most other documentary filmmakers who rely on the tactics of the documentary tradition. In effect, Morris becomes more of an outsider by invading the insider’s control of truth.

Randall Adams met David Harris while Adams was walking along a road with an empty gas can. Harris asked if he needed help and they ended up spending the entire day together, drinking, smoking marijuana, and going to a drive-in movie. Harris went to drop Adams off at a hotel room and asked if he could stay. Adams refused him and this seemingly inconsequential decision changed his life, as Harris later fingered Adams for a murder that he did not commit. The early portion of the film concentrates on the case the police made against Adams. Morris interviews a series of police officers who help construct the official version of what occurred. While it may be overly wishful to call all police officers experts, nonetheless, in their own eyes, they are experts of the criminal mind. Morris does not mock the police officers and their wild stabs at constructing the details of the night. Instead, he relies on their own words to highlight the discrepancies in their testimonies. Often, the official experts stick to the official party line,
which means using the rhetoric of expertise to convey the authority they possess. One of the officers, an interrogation expert, gives his version of the night he talked to Adams. “I had what I called a casual, friendly conversation with him. He almost overacted his innocence. He showed no expression whatsoever. Didn’t bite.” Morris contradicts this version of the truth by giving us Adams’s account. “I kept telling them the same thing and they didn’t want to believe me.” Morris uses a reenactment of the scene, full of the intimate details that Adams provided in his version, to underscore the malleability of truth. The officer’s claim that it was a “casual, friendly conversation” plays against images of an ashtray full of cigarettes, a pistol on the table, and the attempt to force Adams to sign a confession that he refused.

Part of the lure of the film derives from Morris’s “ability to win the confidence of so many prone to self-incrimination” (Singer Predilections). This ability comes from his desire to let people reveal themselves by talking without interruption. It is a technique that requires patience and the sublimation of ego. Letting go of the desire to steer the speaker to the questions that he wants answered, Morris allows the speaker to lead him down the convoluted paths of truth. Another police officer admits, “When we started putting the facts together on how much info we actually had…the leads we had…we found out we didn’t have anything.” Much of the inability in accurately reconstructing the events of the evening stems from the fact that the partner of the murdered police officer did not follow procedure that night. She neglected to get out of the police car and stand directly behind the suspect’s vehicle. She did not get the license plate number and she remembered the wrong make of car. She said it was a Vega; in fact, the car was a Comet. Another officer reveals there was “no telling the man hours we wasted looking for a Vega.” The truly startling aspect is that admitted errors by supposed experts have no real effect on changing their minds regarding the case.
The total disregard for the possibility of another “truth” opposed to the official version, even when the official version is admittedly full of errors, demonstrates the power of the sanctioned expert. David Harris had a long criminal past, even then at the age of sixteen. He bragged to friends that he committed the crime, had the stolen car, and possessed the fired gun. Nonetheless, because he “seemed like a friendly kid,” the police officers honed in on the quiet loner, Randall Adams. When the police officers questioned Harris, he was ready to finger Adams and corroborate anything the officers wanted. “We didn’t want him to tell us something he thought. We wanted him to tell us what we knew…It wasn’t very long until I realized what he knew was the facts of the case. It matched perfectly with what we needed. It had to be right.” Because Harris was willing to say whatever the police wanted, Adams became the only suspect. When Adams could not remember details of what he was doing at a certain time, when in actuality he was asleep in bed, the interrogation officer remarked, “That part of his mind went conveniently blank.” Conjured and cajoled together, the official, expert version of that night had little to do with truth. It became a matter of the power of the official version of truth, brought to light by expert officers. This version, come hell or high water, helped convict Adams on the murder charge. It appears that nothing, not even inconsistencies in the official version or even the real truth, can stop the power of the expert’s version.

The film would not be as effective a criticism of the justice system if Morris had not also examined the legal experts who handled the case. Although not interviewed in the film, the figure of the prosecutor, District Attorney Douglas Mulder, looms large. Mulder possessed a perfect win record; Edith James, one of Adams’s defense attorneys, acknowledges his status in Dallas by proclaiming, “He resigned from the DA’s office without any defeats. That’s why he is legendary.” Here is yet another example of how the expert’s authority commands respect and
awe. The truth of the matter does not really matter; the power of the expert’s authority usurps the “truth.” Adams was frightened of Mulder: “You got a DA…He’s talking about how he’s going to kill you.” James, Adam’s attorney, offers the most condemning portrait of the power of this great prosecutor. “Prosecutors in Dallas say, “Any prosecutor can convict a guilty man. It takes a great prosecutor to convict an innocent man.”” Mulder’s authority as a law expert actually means more within the court system than the truth of this murder. His ability to prosecute outweighs the obvious case he should have made against David Harris. Because Harris was underage at the time of the murder, there was no chance for the death penalty, no chance for Mulder to get the kind of justice for which Texas is famous. Therefore, he settled in on Adams, who, as so cleverly remarked by Edith James, was “a convenient age.”

Mulder’s expertise as a prosecutor even impressed the judge in the initial case, Don Metcalfe, who admitted that Mulder’s closing argument moved him. The title of the film comes from Mulder’s argument where he described, “The thin blue line of police separating the public from anarchy.” Obviously, in Randall Adams’s case, neither the police nor the judicial system spared him from the anarchy of being sent to death row for a crime that he did not commit. Metcalfe, whose father, an FBI man, inspired his son to fight for justice, rationalizes his position on the case after a number of appeals: “I see where the Court of Criminal Appeals gave me an A. In Austin, I was 9-0 correct, in Washington I was 1-8 incorrect. If you tally all those votes, I come out 10-8.” This rational reliance on scores and numbers to prove who was right is a prime example of the bureaucracy that controls the justice system. Metcalfe, empowered by his narrow victory in his mind, feels authorized by the tally, the expert enhanced by the support of a bureaucratic system whose only concern is the continuance of the system. This is hegemony; when the meaningless tally appears to assuage any doubt that Metcalfe might have. The power
of the system wins and the expert within the system is swept up in the wave of victory. Dennis
White, the lead defense attorney for Adams, summarizes the whole case succinctly: “Some cop
made a decision that set the wheels of justice in motion in the wrong direction. And they got
going so fast no one could stop them.”

One of the prime witnesses for the prosecution was Dr. James Grigson, a psychiatrist
nicknamed “Dr. Death.” Grigson is the expert who led Morris to Texas. Morris found Grigson
interesting because he was an expert witness for the prosecution in many death penalty cases in
Texas. Grigson would testify, after a brief interview with the defendant, that he was one-
hundred percent certain that the person would kill again. Morris was interested in someone who
claimed to know anything one-hundred percent of the time. Grigson testified, after spending
fifteen minutes with him, that Adams would most assuredly kill again if released. Of course, this
proclamation looks silly considering Adams’s innocence, but it is important to include Grigson
in the film because his presence speaks to just how far-reaching the power of “the wheels of
justice” can be when they are moving. The wheels need greasing, and “experts,” such as
Grigson, supply the appropriate findings to make sure the system works fast and easy. Morris’s
interest in Grigson led him to look at some of the cases in which Grigson testified. This in turn
led Morris to Adams’s case, and in Morris’s words, “the movie found itself” (Cunningham 51).
Grigson, in testifying with one-hundred percent certainty, gives us a useful picture of the expert
at his worst. Empowered by his authority, Grigson felt justified to wield his expertise in the
service of a system that relied on him to continue to perpetuate itself.

The power of the system even extends to those who are not a sanctioned part of it. The
defense team felt the prosecution’s case was weak until a day in court when three “expert”
witnesses entered the room. These three witnesses provided testimony that corresponded with
the prosecution’s case, helping to condemn Adams. Morris wastes no time calling into question the supposed expertise of each of the witnesses. They all attest to seeing Adams in the driver’s seat of the car on the night in question. Because the “on-screen speakers come to seem like the generators of the cinematic text,” (Dorst 276) Morris interviews them and uses reenactments, with their own words over the images, to prove just how much they did not witness. All three agree that it was nearly impossible to see into the car. All three had ulterior motives for their testimony, including reward money and relief in another court case. In a sense, the power of the system deputizes those who do not possess any credibility as long as they agree with the official version of the truth. The system manufactures experts when it needs them.

The system also disposes of experts when their views no longer fit the needs of the system. Fred A. Leuchter Jr., the star of Mr. Death – The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr., begins his rise working for the prison system. He is a “death row technologist” (Conomos) obsessed with how inhumane the execution devices in various states are. “I came into the execution field from a backdoor standpoint. I was very concerned with the humanitarian aspects of death by torture.” Leuchter claims that his childhood spent accompanying his father, who worked as a guard with death row prisoners, inspired him to pursue this occupation. As an expert in a field of one, Leuchter embodies the misplaced ideals of many experts. His language is full of jargon, he obsesses over facts, charts and other ephemera of rationalistic proof, and he takes himself and his work so seriously that he does not see the “irony of a technician of death, who believes that somehow their work will improve the human condition” (McEnteer 113).

The first portion of Mr. Death consists of Leuchter’s rise to an acknowledged position of expertise within the execution industry. Possessing some engineering skill and knowledge of the history of execution devices, Leuchter soon finds that some states, such as Tennessee and New
Jersey, need help with the devices they use. Leuchter explains how easy it is to gain acceptance as an expert: “What really makes you competent is the fact that you have the necessary background. You do the investigation. You find out what the problem is and you solve it.” This seemingly self-effacing statement, coupled with Leuchter’s insistence that “we must never forget that the person being executed is a human being,” distinguishes Leuchter as someone who is “declaring his expertise as a moral issue” (Singer Friendly). Leuchter’s position as an expert is unquestioned because he belongs to a field that suffers from a dearth of specialists. However, it is his moral claim that justifies his work, lends it an air of authenticity, and makes him a somewhat likable character in the initial portion of the film.

Leuchter is the perfect subject for Morris. He is willing to talk about himself and his obsessive form of expertise for hours on end. Leuchter does not tire easily, thanks to the alleged forty cups of coffee he consumes daily. Leuchter walks Morris and the film through a brief history of failed executions and his own experience repairing and building devices. Because he was able to change the electric chair design for the state of Tennessee, other states approached Leuchter to look at their gallows or lethal injection devices. He acknowledges that the wave of work was a bit of surprise, considering the fact that all of these devices were very different. However, once he established competence in one area, the servicing of the electric chair, he was able to exchange that competence for an authority on all matters concerning execution devices. He is the perfect example of the expert described by Lyotard and De Certeau, an expert who exchanges competence for authority, eventually weakening the competence of his expertise as he gains more recognition as an authority.

The second portion of Mr. Death follows Leuchter as his authority rises to its greatest height. “Because of my expertise in the construction of execution equipment, I was asked to
testify by the defense team of Mr. Ernst Zundel, a German national living in Canada.” Leuchter, proud of the notoriety his work brought him, does not temper his exuberance with an acknowledgement of the facts surrounding the case. It does not matter to Leuchter who calls upon him to use his expertise; he is excited just to be called upon. Ernst Zundel is a proud revisionist historian on trial in Canada for publishing pamphlets that deny the Holocaust occurred. Zundel justifies his need for Leuchter with some twisted form of logic, the rationality of his thoughts appearing to make all the connections transparent, easy to understand. “We can solve the mysteries of the gas chambers in Auschwitz…if we find an American expert because America is the only country that dispatches people with gas.” To Zundel and his revisionist cronies, Leuchter is special. “You can’t open up the telephone book and say “Gas” and then “Chambers” and then “Experts” and out come ten Fred Leuchters. No, there is nobody. Fred Leuchter was our only hope.” If it is necessary that “all experts meet the minimum criterion of expertise, namely they all have a constituency that perceives them to be experts,” (Mieg 8) then Leuchter found his constituency in the Revisionist movement.

Leuchter, at the behest of Zundel and his defense team, traveled with a camera crew and his new wife, Carol, to Auschwitz. Out to prove that there were no gas chambers at the site, Leuchter commences his “testing,” which includes chiseling samples of brick and rock out of the walls and collecting samples of water in the sites. The supposed expertise of Leuchter’s scientific methods leaves much to be desired; he cups water with his bare hand into a plastic sandwich bag and chisels at random points in the wall. He then draws extensive diagrams detailing his exploits. Obviously joyful that he has found such important work, the Leuchter on camera during the Auschwitz segments resembles Jacques Cousteau in his attention to the details of narrating his exploits. He relishes the attention that his work has brought him, trying to
appear in control and sure of himself in front of the camera while he explains his methods. Leuchter also proudly details his imagined need to escape the area in case officials became aware of his work. The chutzpah he displays firmly cements him as an “absolutely clueless narrator” (Rosenbaum Interview). Leuchter revels in this display of his expertise while neglecting to consider that he is trespassing on a sacred ground where so many died. Lost in the world he has created inside his head, “totally absorbed in his bizarre occupation,” (Conomos) Leuchter’s competency and authority are now in danger.

So far in the film, Morris had not presented any opinions that would contradict Leuchter’s methods. Fearing that viewers might start to side with Leuchter and accept his claims, Morris brings in the true experts to contradict Leuchter’s assertions, to question his authority. Robert Jan Van Pelt, one of the foremost Holocaust historians, believes that Leuchter is a “fool…who trespassed in the holiest of holies.” Not able to mask his contempt for Leuchter, he reviews the footage of Leuchter chiseling away at Auschwitz and determines that the man was an idiot. By discounting Leuchter’s methods so thoroughly, Van Pelt foreshadows the trouble that Leuchter is about to face. Morris uses Van Pelt, and the testimony of other Holocaust historians, to cement the doubt about Leuchter the film (and the viewer) has suppressed just below the surface throughout the proceedings. In giving Van Pelt an opportunity to refute Leuchter, Morris enables us to discount the self-proclaimed expert. It is important when considering Leuchter to remember that no one contradicted his views in this manner during the earlier portion of the film. Morris is not toying with us here, but making the point that once the expert becomes drunk on authority, it is probable that the expert will be questioned by other experts for getting out of line, for overstepping the boundaries of his competence. In a sense, Leuchter, in doing this work and finding that he did not believe Auschwitz could have been a gas
chamber site, is the ultimate outsider expert, one who goes against thousands of documents, testimonies, and visual and tactile proof.

Returning to Canada with his findings, Leuchter delivered “The Leuchter Report,” his now infamous scientific claim that there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz. His testimony occurred on April 20, 1988, a serendipitous “Birthday present to the Fuhrer,” claimed Zundel. The defense team attempted to use The Leuchter Report as evidence that Zundel was not publishing intentionally false and harmful statements in his denial propaganda. The judge would have none of it. Here, the legal expert put an official end to Leuchter by not allowing the report as evidence; in a telling move, the judge allowed the report to be entered as an informational exhibit, therefore officially marking Leuchter for his attempts at helping Zundel while denying him the power of his expertise. Leuchter did not learn a lesson from the legal dressing down he received; in fact, still empowered by the whole escapade, he claims, “I, unfortunately, was the only expert in the world who could provide that defense.” Still clinging to his expertise, Leuchter must now pay the price for his challenging of accepted historical fact.

In an early test-screening version of the film, there were no experts to contradict what Leuchter said. Realizing that his film might appear to be siding with Leuchter, Morris felt a responsibility to use experts to disprove Leuchter’s findings. Van Pelt reappears often, disgusted with Leuchter and his lack of scientific knowledge and humility: in turning Auschwitz into his own personal laboratory, Leuchter “chose not to consider the evidence of his own foolishness.” Another of the experts, Shelley Shapiro, Director of the Holocaust Survivors and Friends Education Center, makes short work of Leuchter: “There is no slippery slope for Mr. Fred Leuchter. The man is an anti-Semite. He handed over his entire life and reputation to the cause of spreading hate.” Suzanne Tabasky, a Holocaust educator and activist, similarly dismisses
Leuchter, claiming, “He’s under his own spell.” These sanctioned experts are enough to convince the audience of Leuchter’s duplicity; however, the experts are not done weighing in on the issue. Leuchter learns that the Massachusetts Board of Engineering is pursuing a case against him for practicing engineering without certification. He finds that none of the states he previously worked with wants anything to do with him. Leuchter finds himself a pariah amongst the expert community, his credentials in question and his personal character attacked for callousness and carelessness. This is what happens when the expert challenges the hegemonic system. While Leuchter’s claims are clearly false, it is worth noting that the authority he spoke from early in the film is now lost because of his later findings.

Leuchter did find acceptance within the Revisionist community. He appeared as a guest speaker at conferences around the world and received a hero’s welcome. He finally found someone who bought what he was selling. It did not matter to him that he was associating himself with the wrong crowd; he only needed a constituency that believed in his expertise. Leuchter realizes the trouble that his views brought him, even proclaiming himself a “reluctant Revisionist.” At the end of the film, Morris films Leuchter walking the highways of California, his wife having left him and his career in shambles. Morris, his voice now part of the interview process, asks him “Have you ever thought that you might be wrong? Or do you think you made a mistake?” Leuchter, still playing the role of the official expert in his mind, answers, “No, I’m past that…It cleared my mind.” The final montage, composed of shots of Leuchter within a huge sci-fi electrical device and other shots of him hammering away at a wall, still maniacally collecting samples to prove himself, poetically echoes the world that Leuchter created inside his head, where he is the mad scientist working towards the truth. He is no longer the officially
recognized expert, but just another expert in his own mind, defeated by the system that once sustained his expertise.

Morris’s next expert subject is Robert S. McNamara, the United States Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In Morris’s canon, McNamara is the expert who is most inside the system of power. While Leuchter laid claim to his expertise on moral grounds, McNamara is a “technocrat who uses rationality as an evasion of morality” (Rosenbaum New Morris Film…). The Fog of War, like Morris’s other films, questions the construction of truth and expertise within the expert’s mind. The stakes are higher though, as this expert played a large part in the United States’ involvement in the Cold War and Vietnam. The questions in this film also deal with the language of the expert, exploring how the code of official expertise is a euphemism to cover up or subvert the cold, hard truth.

Morris interviewed only McNamara, and claims that the film is truly a collaboration between himself and McNamara. Morris constructs the text of the film with historical footage, interviews with McNamara, and stylized symbolic sequences, such as a close-up of dominoes falling on a map of Southeast Asia, that serve to communicate the story in a visual manner while McNamara’s words construct his version of the events. Morris also uses audio from tapes of conversations between Kennedy, Johnson and McNamara, an inside glimpse at how the official version of events can be manipulated by the officials who construct that official version.

The key component to McNamara’s expertise is his rational mindset. The film begins with stock footage of McNamara from the 1960s, as he sets up a chart and graph display for a press conference. He asks the assembled press corps, “Are you ready?” Morris then shows footage of McNamara telling Morris how he should edit in McNamara’s forthcoming speech. These sequences establish McNamara as an expert communicator who feels he must control the
flow of information, a job that the film portrays as his greatest strength. Even in these few opening seconds, McNamara displays that he is “always in control, asserting his intelligence and the perfect command of memory” (Dunn). With a montage of words highlighted in newspaper headlines and articles, Morris constructs an assemblage of opinions calling McNamara “an IBM machine with legs...efficient.” The huge desk he sits behind and his reliance on charts, graphs, reports, and other official documents, all signify the authority that McNamara wielded.

McNamara, the efficiency expert par excellence, relies on his rational mindset to help him overcome any misgivings he might have concerning his official duties. To justify his actions, he constantly refers to the fact that he was listening to orders. During World War II, McNamara worked closely with General Curtis LeMay on the firebombing of Japan. “I was part of a mechanism, that in a sense, recommended it.” McNamara’s great ability to solve problems rationally led him to the conclusion that the bombers would be more efficient, and thus create more damage, if they were to fly at a lower altitude. In one of the more striking sequences in Morris’s filmic career, he superimposes numbers falling out of the bomber rather than bombs, thus approximating the rational dream of McNamara while criticizing the fantasy world he constructed inside his own head in order to stomach the fact that he helped create so much destruction.

Morris structures the film around eleven lessons that we can learn from the life of McNamara. The lessons derive from topics McNamara talks about during the film, such as “Empathize with your enemy” and “Maximize efficiency.” McNamara hopes “You can learn from experience. Others can profit from you life lessons” (Bhabha). These dictums resemble the cold language of expertise, as if the lessons should be taken as wise bon mots that do not need contextualizing. However, Morris does not let McNamara off the hook that easily.
McNamara’s theory that “we must try to put ourselves in their skins” rings hollow when compared with his later assessment of the failure of the Vietnam War: “We didn’t know them well enough to empathize with them.” The expert explains his expertise in a pedagogical fashion, with the pointers, charts and graphs, but he does not seem to have learned from the lessons himself.

Since this film so narrowly focuses on the expertise of one man, McNamara asserts control throughout the film with his command of the language. Morris asks McNamara to clear up a point about the Cuban Missile Crisis, bringing up the fact that the United States invaded Cuba. McNamara responds, “Well, yeah. But more importantly, I want to say, and this is very important, we lucked out.” The result, McNamara admitting our luck, does not matter in this exchange. The filler in between facts distinguishes McNamara as a true expert. He diverts attention to the facts that he finds important, the opinion of any others be damned. By investing his own words with so much import, McNamara legitimizes his own verbal expertise.

Morris uses stock footage from the past to suggest that the widespread hatred of McNamara stemmed in large part from his appearance as an official expert who is smarter than everybody else is. Walter Cronkite asks McNamara whether he has ever been wrong, to which McNamara answers, “Oh yes, but I’m never going to tell you.” One Congressman calls him “Mr. I Have All the Answers McNamara.” Like many experts, McNamara has a strong aversion to admitting his fallibility. When pressed about his responsibility for the mess in Vietnam, he states, “I just felt I was serving at the request of the President.” When the buildup to war in Vietnam involved a false report of an attack caused by freak weather and over-eager sonar men, McNamara admits, “We were wrong. But we had in our mind a mindset.” He can never admit to being culpable; there is always a reason or justification for the failure of his expertise.
Most of the problems that McNamara faced in the court of public opinion stem from this taciturn refusal to answer a question directly. He himself states, “Never answer the question asked of you. Answer the question that you wished had been asked of you.” This trait of the expert is perhaps the most damaging. By rhetorically controlling communication, the expert asserts power not automatically given to him. This often gives the impression that the expert perceives the listener as not smart enough to understand just how complex the expert’s mind is. We have seen this throughout our examination of expertise, as those who purport to know everything imply that others do not know anything and thus must rely on the testimony of the expert. McNamara brings up the term “the fog of war,” asserting “It’s so complex…it’s beyond the capability of the human mind.” However, McNamara himself is an admitted war expert promoting his own intelligence in understanding the complexities of war. When he left the position of Secretary of Defense, President Johnson presented him with a Medal of Freedom, a high honor for such a controversial figure. McNamara, choked with emotion, was unable to say much. This public ceremony, a chance for him to show the true man beneath the façade of the expert, was wasted as McNamara refused to give a speech, saying he would save his response for a later time. McNamara would not let down the expert appearance, thus paying lip service to the claims regarding his inhumanity.

Morris concludes the film with an epilogue that cuts to the bone of McNamara’s public persona and that of the expert in general. Over footage of McNamara driving a car, his eyes visible in the rear view mirror, an apt metaphor for all of the looking back that McNamara has done throughout the course of the film, Morris presses him about his responsibilities. “After you left the Johnson Administration, why didn’t you speak out against the Vietnam War?” McNamara’s response is typical of the rhetoric of expertise: “I’m not going to say any more than
I have. These are the kinds of questions that get me in trouble. You don’t know what I know about how inflammatory my words can appear.” This assertion that “you don’t know what I know” can stand as the mantra of most official experts. It is a condescending way to present one’s expertise. It does not allow for the possibility or validity of anyone’s knowledge within the expert’s domain that departs from the expert’s official versions of truth.

McNamara, like DA Doug Mulder in The Thin Blue Line or Leuchter in Mr. Death, is drunk on the authority his expertise afforded him. Morris’s ability to capture the expert in this moment, when the power and authority his expertise bestowed upon him becomes subsumed in his personal mindset, demonstrates both the dominance of the system and the power of the expert within the system. The system can destroy the expert, like Leuchter, or can celebrate the expert’s allegiance to the system he is part of, such as the cases of Mulder and McNamara. In concentrating in these films on experts within the system, Morris takes account of the more recognized expert and demonstrates how the traps of expertise affect those within the system in a manner similar to those experts outside of it. The rhetorical pitfalls of expertise know no boundaries; a worm farmer, a District Attorney, a lion tamer, and a Secretary of Defense all struggle with communicating their expertise.
As the generalized figure of the expert gains more power in a world dominated by information communication, it is important to question the role of the expert in both determining and supplying power to dominant knowledge systems. If Bill Nichols’ definition of epistephilia, “the pleasure in knowing” (Representing 178), drives the documentary film form, then it could also drive much of modern Western life. As the world becomes more connected, as we all become virtual neighbors, the importance of knowledge and its communication becomes paramount to the increasingly mediated versions of life. The expert’s ability to deliver information in a compressed amount of time gains importance and value in the capitalistic system.

Errol Morris’s examination of experts throughout his documentaries focuses on the personal construction of expertise. Because Morris attends to the language of his subjects as the most important aspect of his films, Morris’s experts excel at explaining how their minds work and how they view themselves. Morris’s own words, through interviews, articles, and pieces he has written, combine with his innovative documentary techniques to position Morris as an expert himself. In concluding this work, it will be instructive to examine how Morris has constructed his own expertise and consider his place within the documentary film world as an expert filmmaker.

Morris’s education at the University of Wisconsin and University of California-Berkeley focused on history and philosophy, obvious influences on his filmic concerns. His own obsessions with human oddities, including a predilection for serial killer stories, informed his desire to focus his camera on the oddballs and eccentrics that populate his films. However, if his
goal had been merely to display the odd, a filmic freak show, his career could not have reached the audiences nor warranted the critical attention it has. The question becomes whether Morris’s taste for the odd informs his subject choices, or rather, whether the interviewing techniques he uses highlight the eccentricities of his subjects. The truth, as always in Morris’s films, lies somewhere in the murky area between those poles. Morris’s search for the truth recognizes that “films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths” (Williams 13). Therefore, Morris trains his eyes and ears on the language that people use to reveal their own truths. While some critics might accuse Morris of a post-modern bent for the death of ultimate truths, Morris himself, rightly called an “anti-post-modern post-modernist” (Bhabha), does not look for the answers, but rather how people convince themselves and others of their own answers through their rhetorical prowess, no matter how odd their processes appear.

If “all of Morris’s films are about the process through which truth is manufactured,” (Dorst 280) then his attention to direct eye contact between the subject and the camera qualifies as his attempt to remove his own bias from the equation and let the subjects manufacture their truth directly for the audience. This obsession with eye contact manifested itself in his early works when Morris would put his head next to the camera, approximating for the camera the eye contact between himself and the subject, thus giving the viewer the feeling that the subject is speaking directly to the viewer. Later, Morris circumvented this tactic with the invention of the Interrotron. The Interrotron could stand as Morris’s greatest contribution to documentary film, besides the strength of his films themselves. The Interrotron is two Teleprompters connected together. The subject looks directly at Morris, his visage displayed over the lens, while Morris looks directly at the subject, whose face is displayed over Morris’s lens. Thus, Morris and the
subject feel and appear as if they are talking directly to each other, when in fact they are staring into the camera directly. It allows Morris to stay away from the standard documentary procedure of standing to the side of the camera or angling the subject’s eyes away from the camera. In some sense, it removes the interview process from the equation, as it appears, especially when the questions asked are cut out of the on-screen interview, that the camera is interviewing the subjects as they speak directly into the camera. Given Morris’s well-documented ability to let his subjects wander through long monologues without interruption, the Interrotron heightens the feeling that the “subject (is) the producer of the text” (Dorst 279).

In giving the power in the relationship to the subjects to produce themselves through their use of language, Morris is the perfect director to examine questions concerning experts and expertise. So much of the expert’s power stems from his or her ability to communicate expertise. This could lead some to consider that all documentary film subjects, especially Morris’s subjects, tell themselves, making them experts in their own self-constructed worlds. However, this does not account for the true difference in Morris’s interviewing techniques, in which he excises the questions asked and gives the viewers the impression that the subject is talking directly to them, unprompted.

Morris’s directorial presence in the early films consisted mostly of odd editing juxtapositions between subjects and his non-intervention in the interviews. His voice did not appear in any film until The Thin Blue Line, when he ended the film with a close-up of a handheld tape recorder. The contents of the recorder, a conversation between Morris and David Harris wherein Harris admits his guilt in the murder of the Dallas police officer, played while Morris cut to closer shots of the device, mirroring the detective story cliché in that we are literally getting closer to the truth. Morris pushes Harris in the interview, all but asking him if he
did it. Morris uses this tactic, ending the film with his own voice finally interjecting a question, in subsequent films when he used the Interrotron, beginning with *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*. Because of the heightened sense that the subject is directing the action of the film, when Morris used the Interrotron he interjected his voice to clarify his presence and assert some semblance of authorial control. While he relied on an “element of caprice, of chance, of happenstance,” (Bhabha) Morris grew increasingly concerned throughout his documentary career with foregrounding the apparatus and process of making documentary films. Thus, his verbal interjections near the ends of his films do not displace his willingness to “contest a hegemonic organization of reality that rationalizes or accounts for differences of interpretation within a single, controlling frame” (Nichols *Getting 180*). His verbal interjections do not attempt to assert some control, but rather, function to reinforce to the viewer that the interview process is a two-way street, that Morris is involved. Given Morris’s known childhood “passion for the forty-odd *Oz* books,” (Singer *Predilections*), the verbal interjections at the ends of the films feel similar to the *Wizard of Oz*’s unveiling at the end of that film. Dorothy and her companions have finally completed their trip when the Wizard reveals himself, acknowledging that it was their drive that helped them reach their destination, not the Wizard's power. Morris, like the Wizard, stuck behind a machine, reveals himself at the end to the audience, giving them a glimpse into the process of construction.

Morris’s role as an expert also comes from his forays into different filmmaking formats. *First Person*, a television series directed and produced by Morris, ran for two years on various cable channels. Each episode usually consisted of one subject, who explained his or her work/realm of expertise. Originally entitled “Interrotron Stories” (Rosenheim 220), Morris’s glee with his newfound toy, the Interrotron, is apparent throughout the series. Morris often
includes multiple shots of the interviewing device, going so far as to use extra cameras to shoot
from behind the subject so that the viewer can see the view the subject has, which is the little
blue screen that Morris’s disembodied head appears on, yet another Wizard of Oz-like moment.
First Person deserves its own theorizing, as it truly is unlike anything seen on television. While
it bears a strong resemblance to Morris’s documentary films, its presentation as a television
series changes many of the questions one must ask about the form of a work. One interesting
aside concerning the series is that the openings of each episode were originally supposed to
consist of a short segment where Morris would introduce the subject of that episode, similar to
the prologues of The Twilight Zone or Alfred Hitchcock Presents. Morris decided against this
and the series aired with a short, montage credit sequence consisting of typewriters, eyeballs, and
other investigative ephemera. Perhaps he felt his presence would distract the viewer from the
first-person nature of the series, as his subjects tell their lives to the Interrotron.

One of the more interesting aspects of Morris’s work is that he literally has two careers:
one as the documentary filmmaker and one as the director of hundreds of television
commercials. His standing in the ad world is legendary; he has won many awards and is
consistently sought after for his creative ad campaigns. His commercial work allows Morris to
make a good living, so his film work does not become tainted by the need to make money. By
journeying into these other fields, Morris resembles the theorized expert of De Certeau and
Lyotard who uses his competence in one area (documentary filmmaking) to strike out into other
areas. However, Morris is different in that the two fields never mix, nor does he wield the
authority he has gained to influence his work in either domain. Like his filmic work, the
campaigns he created are “different” from conventional advertising. His most famous campaign,
the Miller High Life “anti-beer” ads, centered on the everyday aspects of life of a Miller drinker,
like frying an egg. The ads did not go the typical route of using sex or fantasy to sell the beer; instead, they focused, like Morris’s films, on the subjects who might actually drink the beer. Morris was responsible for the Move-On “Switch” Campaign, where Morris filmed Republicans who were going to switch over and vote for Democratic candidate John Kerry in 2004. Morris also created short pieces used as introductions to two Academy Awards ceremonies. In the pieces, Morris asks various subjects, including stars, stagehands, and regular people, about their movie experiences. They all testify to their favorite scenes or memorable lines, thus giving the most star-studded mediated affair of the entertainment world a bit of humanity, a reminder that film is about the audience as much as the star.

All of these forays into different fields may appear to be distractions to Morris’s documentary career. However, they can also be seen as busywork that pays him to continually film, to discover techniques that can enhance projects on either side of his career. His next film, tentatively titled Standard Operating Procedure, concerns the Abu Ghraib prison atrocities. Based on his other films, one can imagine that Morris will focus on the construction of truth, how experts explain themselves and their actions. In this time when the expert often functions to bestow an expedited form of knowledge, to keep the wheels of the economy rolling, Morris fulfills a need in examining the rhetoric of expertise, the art of persuasion and telling. His commitment to letting his subjects speak for themselves speaks worlds about his own process.


M. Mr. Death – The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr. Dir. Errol Morris. 1999. DVD. Lion’s Gate.


