

# “We See What We Want to Believe”

## *Archival Logic and Database Aesthetics in the War Films of Errol Morris*

*Nothing is more frightening than a labyrinth that has no center.*

—G. K. CHESTERTON

### INTRODUCTION

In May of 2000, in connection with the premiere of his television series *First Person* on the Bravo network, documentary filmmaker Errol Morris launched his first home page on the World Wide Web at [www.errolmorris.com](http://www.errolmorris.com). Initially the site greeted visitors with the Chesterton quote above—a wry commentary on the rhizomatic, decentralized structure of the web. But beyond this, it offered little more than the standard webpage info (biography, filmography, interviews, etc.—what the site would later link to as the “BORING stuff”). After a few months, however, Morris published a black-and-white image of a horse’s skull with crosses over the eyes next to the following list:

#### Why It Makes Sense to Beat a Dead Horse

1. Sets an example for other horses
2. Aerobic workout
3. Horse might not be dead yet
4. Tenderizes the meat
5. Horse is unable to fight back
6. Makes you feel good<sup>1</sup>

This list was one of several the site would feature over the coming months and years. (Others include “Why It Makes Sense to Bite the Hand That Feeds You” and “Why It Makes Sense to Wear an Albatross around Your Neck”). It represents

Morris's first attempt at creating original content for his newly adopted medium and foreshadows something of the random, ironic tone that he would develop further on the site over the next decade. As it stands today, the site is a teeming labyrinth all its own, with content drawn randomly and in connection with his many film projects, commercials, books, blogs, tweets, and other media that the director now uses to explore his selected topics of interest. Far from a simple website promoting his moving-image work, the site is a full-fledged creative production of its own, and one of the more interesting utilizations of the Internet by a filmmaker to connect and expand upon a multimedia body of work.

As the website and its collection of content demonstrate, Morris occupies a unique position in the field of documentary film. On one hand, he ranks among the more prominent American documentary filmmakers, standing alongside other mainstream directors like Michael Moore and Ken Burns. On the other hand, Morris has embraced digital technology head-on, incorporating it formally and thematically into his cinematic work and as a new medium in its own right through his website, blog, and social media accounts. Given his reputation as a director willing to take on such abstract topics as truth and human perception, Morris's work also became increasingly relevant (and controversial) in a period marked by extreme political polarization and overt ideological confrontation in the United States. Throughout his career, Morris's films have always been structured around a basic tension between subjective fallibility and objective truth, or, put differently, between individual delusion and social history.<sup>2</sup> He has a well-established body of work dealing with both the intersection between eccentric personalities with unique perspectives (*Vernon, Florida* [1981], *A Brief History of Time* [1991], *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* [1997]) and human access to the past via memory and evidence (*The Thin Blue Line* [1988], *Mr. Death* [1999]). After 9/11, Morris's projects expanded this focus to include a more direct interrogation of the role of specific forms of media in altering or enabling our access to events in the world. In this category we could include *Tabloid* (2010), *The Unknown Known* (2013), and both *The Fog of War* (2003) and *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008).

Morris's first two film projects after 9/11, *The Fog of War* and *Standard Operating Procedure*, demonstrate an acute concern with the impact of digital technology on politics and warfare and a deep integration of technology into the text of the film. Beyond simply incorporating CGI and other digital effects into their production, these two films demonstrate a willingness to interrogate the widespread influence of such technologies on individuals and their perception of the world around them. The dense collage of archival material that confronts us in *The Fog of War*, for example, inherently encapsulates and interrogates the archival logic that surrounds much of the drive behind the Internet today.<sup>3</sup> In *Standard Operating Procedure* the focus turns to a specific form of media—digital photography—directly addressing the plasticity of meaning that a database of digital imagery affords. This combination of factors makes Morris's output (both online and on-screen) the

ideal object for charting the convergence of these forms in the period after 9/11. These films are *about* digital media as much as they are products *of* digital media.

As the political controversies of the twenty-first century succeeded one another with astonishing rapidity (the 2000 US presidential election, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the open-ended "war on terror," the Patriot Act, and the Guantánamo Bay prison camp, to name a few), such issues were increasingly presented and debated in a newly fragmented media landscape divided between old and new media. Like the web, American politics increasingly *became* a confusing labyrinth of information and obfuscation, a maze without a center. Thus, the principles that had long structured Morris's films increasingly seemed to structure American political discourse as well. Dealing with former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and with the controversial Abu Ghraib photographs, respectively, *The Fog of War* and *Standard Operating Procedure* are Morris's most overtly political works to date. Unlike his previous works, which uncovered the more obscure corners of the world, both films address people and events that had widespread social impact, and both focus on war and the technological media used to wage and represent it. In doing so, these films and their multimedia offshoots enter the labyrinth of images that shape our collective view into past and present, thereby offering an entry point into the evolution of technology, politics, and aesthetics during the decade after 9/11.

#### THE FOG OF WAR'S TWIN LOGICS

*The Fog of War* is structured loosely around eleven lessons drawn from the life of Robert McNamara. As James Blight and Janet Lang make clear in the eponymous book that accompanied the film, these lessons are themselves the product of a series of conversations and conferences that McNamara participated in along with other leaders via the Wilson Institute's Critical Oral History conference series. Initiated by Blight, the project brought together former policymakers and academic experts to debate the events and records that make up our collective understanding of the past. Many of these reflections had previously been collected in a volume called *Wilson's Ghost*, coauthored by McNamara and Blight.<sup>4</sup> In the books, these reflections take the form of a series of aphorisms drawn from McNamara's direct participation in key historical events like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and to a lesser extent World War II. In essence, they are positioned as history lessons, not in the sense that they hope to teach us facts about the past, but rather that the past itself is offering us insight into how to do things differently in the future.

Thus, much of the film's formal structure and the conclusions it draws regarding its subject existed well before McNamara ever stepped in front of Morris's Intertron.<sup>5</sup> But of course, the film itself is much more than a moving-image inter-

pretation of thoughts put together elsewhere. That is, in the process of translating this material to the screen, Morris adds his own interpretation of the lessons these events can teach us and his own view on the perspectives of his subject. Among these lessons are two that form the core of the film’s critique: “Lesson 2: Rationality Will Not Save Us,” which the film uses to critique the use of computer-driven logic and statistical control in warfare; and “Lesson 7: Belief and Seeing,” through which the film interrogates the relationship between images and the events they document and communicate.<sup>6</sup> Both lessons perform the double function of depicting McNamara’s recollections on-screen while at the same time setting up the film’s larger conclusions about our own computational and photographic approaches to the past and, indeed, to reality itself.

McNamara is in many ways an ideal figure to explore the connections between media, the rise of computational logic and control, and politics and warfare. He is most associated with being the early architect of the Vietnam War, an ambitious bureaucrat who was appointed by President John F. Kennedy to oversee and overhaul the sprawling Department of Defense. He eventually led it down the path of its most disastrous military endeavor. In a sense, he was neither a media figure nor a computer scientist, but his time in politics arrived when computation and media were becoming essential elements of both. His tenure as the head of the Pentagon witnessed one of the most ambitious integrations of warfare and computation to date, and his Department of Defense was one of the biggest investors in the early stages of computer networking and remote command and control.<sup>7</sup> As the United States launched its war on Afghanistan in 2001 and word of the first drones and other technologized weaponry began to dominate the news cycle, these issues were back in the headlines. It is worth recalling that these were connections that began when McNamara was at the head of the Department of Defense. These are connections that Morris was certainly aware of, and they are themes that permeate the film.

To get a sense of these larger conclusions, we need look no further than the opening of the film. The first footage we see is a grainy, black-and-white television recording of a young McNamara standing behind a podium adjusting the height of a chart and asking his audience if this is “a reasonable height for people to see.” The camera then cuts to McNamara at the podium, where he states: “Earlier tonight . . . let me first ask the TV ‘Are you ready? . . . all set?’” Just as he is about to begin again, the film cuts to the opening credits. Intercut with the credits and set to Phillip Glass’s score are more grainy, archival shots of soldiers on a ship looking out at the horizon using various devices (binoculars, sonar equipment, maps, and charts) and apparently preparing for a battle of some sort.

Taken together, these two brief moments hint at the primary themes in the film. We are introduced, via the news footage, to McNamara not just as the film’s main subject and sole interviewee but further as someone who is media savvy and thoroughly controls the message he is about to send. This is a message, moreover,

that will be delivered with the aid of charts and graphs, delivered in a manner that's "reasonable" to the audience. Reducing the impact of what he wants to say for those assembled in the room with him at the time matters less than making sure that the "TV" is ready. The film's opening, an ironic "behind the scenes" beginning from the past, also serves as an indicator and a reminder of the manipulated nature of the media through which such messages are transmitted. Lest we miss it, the closing of the opening credits gives way to the following exchange between McNamara and Morris:

*McNamara:* Let me hear your voice level so I can know if it's the same.

*Morris:* [off-screen]. How's my voice level?

*McNamara:* Fine. Now I remember exactly the sentence that I left off on. I remember how it started, and I was cut off in the middle, but you can go back and fix it up somehow. I don't want to go back and introduce the sentence because I know exactly what I want to say.

*Morris:* Go ahead.

*McNamara:* Okay. Any military commander . . .<sup>8</sup>

As in his archival appearance before the cameras, McNamara is once again fully in control of his message, to the extent that he suggests how Morris should eventually edit the film by "fixing it up somehow." Rather than take this advice, Morris instead chooses to include it, reminding us once again that such messages are shaped and framed not just by those who send them but also by the media that transmit them.

The footage in between these two clips is no less significant. As described, it consists of various soldiers on a battleship studying their environment and preparing to act on their observations. Although presented only in brief segments lasting no more than a few seconds each, they all depict what must be a very routine set of events in a hostile environment. A situation is observed via optical, infrared, and topographic means (binoculars, sonar, and maps, respectively) in order to determine the proper response. Once a decision has been made, the information is communicated and a course of action is set. This, of course, is no different than what most of us do in every waking moment as we observe and respond to our environments, but in this case the stakes are far higher; given the presence of massive cannons and the assembly of bombs and other munitions, these actions and perceptions become a matter of life and death.

Taken together, these reminders of the mediated nature of media and the archival footage of preparing for battle offer the viewer a stern warning about the information we use to reach our own conclusions and determine our actions as we take in the flow of information from the media that surround us. We should be on guard, it seems, not just against the potentially flawed and mediated messages we receive, but also against the conclusions we make and the actions we

take based on those messages. This point is further reiterated and explored in the two “core” lessons from the film.

“LESSON 2: RATIONALITY WILL NOT SAVE US”

Throughout the book version of *The Fog of War*, as well as in the other written material by McNamara and Blight, the aphorism that “rationality will not save us” forms the backbone of their reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>9</sup> This is the point that McNamara puts forth in the film as well. Throughout the documents collected in the text, some of which are excerpted in the film, the authors paint a picture of a world standing at the brink of a nuclear war that is narrowly averted at the last minute by one factor: luck. As McNamara puts it in the film:

I want to say, and this is very important: at the end we lucked out! It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end. [*Gestures by bringing thumb and forefinger together until they almost touch.*] Rational individuals: Kennedy was rational; Khrushchev was rational; Castro was rational. Rational individuals came that close to the total destruction of their societies. And that danger exists today. The major lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is this: the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for McNamara and Blight, the danger posed by nuclear weapons lies in the irreversibility of a single bad decision in the face of a conflict like the one in which Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro found themselves in October 1962. Even rational leaders such as these can make a reasonable choice based on faulty information and incorrect assumptions that will lead to disastrous consequences. Surely this seems accurate, and nothing in the film works to contradict it.

In their dismissal of the ability of rationality to solve such problems, both Blight and McNamara leave oddly unexplored the role that rationality plays in creating them. That is, by pointing to rationality’s failure at a key historical moment, they miss the extent to which it was responsible for producing this moment in the first place. This lesson is not lost on the film. *The Fog of War* spends a good deal of time visually exploring the role that instrumental rationality played in creating McNamara’s own perspective. This critique arises subtly from the structure of the film’s visual materials. Shortly after the opening sequences examined above, the film introduces this theme through archival footage from a *CBS Reports* segment entitled “McNamara and the Pentagon.”<sup>11</sup> As observational footage rolls of McNamara scribbling down graphs and percentages for a group, a voice-of-God narrator introduces him with the following description:

This is the secretary of defense of the United States, Robert McNamara. His department absorbs 10 percent of the national income of this country, and over half of every tax dollar. His job has been called the toughest in Washington, and McNamara is the most controversial figure to ever hold that job. Walter Lippmann



FIGURE 2.1. A soldier scans the horizon in *The Fog of War*.

calls him not only the best secretary of defense but the first one who ever asserted civilian control over the military. His critics call him a con man. An IBM machine with legs. An arrogant dictator.<sup>12</sup>

The nomination of McNamara as an “IBM machine with legs” is one the film underscores throughout via other archival materials and reenactments. For example, when he discusses his biography and the events that led to his involvement in World War II, McNamara describes his role in creating the “US Army Air Corps Statistical Control School” in 1942, a post that led directly to his commission in 1943 as a lieutenant colonel in the Air Corps, overseeing logistics and success rates in the air campaigns over Europe and Japan. McNamara hints here that one of his great achievements was the insistence that the school take the punch cards on which the military had collected data on every soldier and run them through the IBM sorting machine for criteria like “age, education, accomplishments, etc.” “We were looking for the best and the brightest. The best brains, the best capacity to lead, the best judgment.”<sup>13</sup> McNamara thus positions his ability to act in a rational manner using logic and statistics as among the key factors in his success both at Harvard and in the military afterward.

But the film’s image track throughout this segment is telling. In addition to the interview footage of McNamara, the film oscillates between archival footage of animated charts with titles such as “Analysis of Striking Power in Heavy Bombers in ETO” and reenacted footage of punch cards sliding through an IBM Hollerith tabulating machine—the very same IBM machine to which McNamara’s critics compared him. The footage of the Hollerith foregrounds this earlier criticism and initiates a chain of associations that that film directly connects back to its subject. Developed for the 1890 census, such machines have long been synonymous with statistical information and population control.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, during the period of the film’s production, a minor controversy erupted regarding the role of IBM’s complicity with the Nazis and the role of the Hollerith in the German war machine.<sup>15</sup> By invoking the comparison between McNamara’s own thought process and the mechanized efficiency of this early computer, the film establishes a visual metaphor that unites computational logic and human rationality with inhuman

aggression and destruction—a theme reiterated each time this same footage reappears. Even as McNamara points to the importance of rational decision-making, the film pairs this form of rationality with acts of violence and aggression. Most damningly, as McNamara states that he wanted people with “the best judgment,” the image track cuts to footage of bombs falling from a plane.

McNamara, of course, was not alone in introducing rationality, computers, and statistics into the perfection of warfare. The historical role of other academics such as Alan Turing and Norbert Wiener in the creation of encryption and targeting systems for the military has been well established.<sup>16</sup> Nor is he the only one to paint these activities in a positive, patriotic light—as having had a beneficial impact both on the war effort and on society in general. After heading the military’s Office of Scientific Research and Development, Vannevar Bush famously lamented the loss of a common research goal that the end of the war would bring and called on scientists to collaborate in creating tools that would enable them to share and communicate more effectively during peacetime. One such solution was a tool called the Memex, based on a technology that many see as an early model for hypertext and the Internet.<sup>17</sup> Others, however, rethought the ethics of applying science to warfare. Wiener, for example, even went so far as to forgo any type of military funding for his postwar research.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike his academic counterparts who took part in the war effort, McNamara declined to return to academia and opted instead to put his newly perfected optimization and rationalization procedures to bear on production and design in private industry for the Ford Motor Company. Here, McNamara describes once again the importance of personality testing (accompanied again by shots of the Hollerith) and explains how he set up a marketing office to “get the data” about who was purchasing cars. He also describes commissioning research on accident statistics to understand how to manufacture safer vehicles. The image track cuts between various charts and graphs, again visualizing McNamara’s approach to solving problems. The problem, he states, was “packaging,” or the materials that surround and secure the driver in the car. This determination led him, with the help of scientists at Cornell, to research how the human body could be better protected by dropping human skulls wrapped in various materials down the stairwells of the school’s dormitories.

Here, the film cuts to what Morris describes in an interview as his favorite shot of the film.<sup>19</sup> As he tells Terry Gross on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, “Whenever I hear a story, particularly if it’s a good story, an image comes immediately to mind and it becomes very hard to resist the temptation to shoot those images. . . . [P]art of *The Fog of War* is a story of dropping things from the sky, bombing if you like. . . . But this is an instance where dropping things actually produces good rather than evil.”<sup>20</sup> The slow-motion shot Morris produced to illustrate McNamara’s anecdote is thus in part one of the redemptory moments in the film for McNamara and the rational approach that he expounds throughout.

As with all of Morris’s reenactments, there is something here that exceeds the image’s purported meaning. The image of a human skull falling in slow motion through space and eventually smashing into pieces at the bottom of a stairwell opens itself to any number of readings beyond simply illustrating McNamara’s story of dropping things for “good rather than evil.” On one hand, the skull has long been the symbol of death and mortality, a reading compounded by the frailty it demonstrates in coming apart as it hits the stone surface below. Thus, we are reminded of the true cost of calamities like auto accidents and high-tech warfare. On the other hand, the skull is itself the “packaging” for the human brain, the seat of the thought and rationality that the film reminds us again and again will not save us. Its destruction in this sense speaks to its fragility in the face of “dropping things.” Regardless of which reading we choose, the image nonetheless presents a damning indictment of the application of rationality to human aggression that McNamara celebrates throughout the film. Again, this broad critique of rationality—indeed, that it “will not save us”—not only comes from McNamara and the supplemental textual materials but also grows discursively from the image track of the film itself.

“LESSON 7: BELIEF AND SEEING ARE BOTH  
OFTEN WRONG”

Shortly after recounting his invitation to Washington by John Kennedy to serve as Secretary of Defense, McNamara (or the film; we’re never sure which is structuring the chronological narration of the events) turns to his account of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the discussion of which makes up the core of the second key lesson in the film: “Lesson 7: Belief and Seeing Are Both Often Wrong.” Here, the film thematically and formally points back to the two segments analyzed previously by including the same archival shots of soldiers on a ship preparing for battle that accompanied the opening credits.

As McNamara recounts the miscommunication that led to the misperception that Vietnam had attacked the USS *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin, the film cuts to an audio recording of a conversation between the Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp Jr. and General David Burchinal, who determine that the error was the result of a “mistaken sonar reading.” Here, an archival image appears of three sonar men staring into a screen. As the error is revealed, the film cuts back to McNamara briefly as he recounts the chain of events that led from this event to the escalation of the war, which Morris pairs with original footage of a chain of dominoes falling across a map of Southeast Asia. McNamara reflects on the experience:

*McNamara:* It was just confusion, and events afterwards showed that our judgment that we’d been attacked that day was wrong. It didn’t happen. And the judgment that we’d been attacked on August 2nd was right. We had been, although that was disputed at the time.

Ultimately President Johnson authorized bombing in response to what he thought had been the second attack—it hadn’t occurred but that’s irrelevant to the point I’m making here. He authorized the attack on the assumption it had occurred and his belief that it was a conscious decision on the part of the North Vietnamese political and military leaders to escalate the conflict and an indication that they would not stop short of winning. We were wrong, but we had in our minds a mind-set that led to that action. And it carried such heavy costs. We see incorrectly or we see only half the story at times.

*Morris:* [off-screen]. We see what we want to believe.

*McNamara:* You’re absolutely right. And belief and seeing, they’re both often wrong.<sup>21</sup>

Here we have a chorus of voices: the voices of the two men on the phone, the voice of McNamara, the voice of Morris, and, of course, the visual “voice” of the images we see. The film rhetorically pairs the image of the sonar men staring into the screen with the image of McNamara staring into the camera, implicitly connecting their faulty observations with his own subjective point of view. The slow-motion shot of dominoes falling both alludes to the “domino theory” behind the escalation of the war and provides a visual metaphor of historical causality.<sup>22</sup> This connection between an ideological framework and series of errors suggests a causal chain between faulty observations and the unintended consequences that result from acting on such observations. Thus, while giving McNamara the final “word” (at least in the spoken sense) on one of the most debated events in the Vietnam War, the film simultaneously demonstrates that any individual interpretation is open to flaw and failure—a point that undercuts not just McNamara’s perspective but also our own.

If the prior lesson demonstrated that “rationality will not save us,” then its combination with these thoughts on “belief and seeing” becomes all the more alarming. The film’s skepticism toward rational decision-making is expanded here to include skepticism about human perception and its ability to gather the proper information in the first place. This indeed is the point that McNamara and Blight, as well as Blight and Lang in the book, want to make about the event. As the text states: “How ironical and tragic—how absolutely surreal—that the August 4, 1964 watershed leading to a war in which three million people were killed was the result of a double misunderstanding.”<sup>23</sup> The double misunderstanding in this case refers to both the error of the “overeager sonar men” and the misperception by the leaders of the two countries that this event and its response indicated a shared commitment to go to full-scale war.<sup>24</sup>

But as with “Lesson #2,” the film expands the scope of the critique that McNamara offers to include its own larger claims. Rather than provoke a broad suspicion of



FIGURE 2.2. “Overeager” sonar men.



FIGURE 2.3. The domino theory in action.

observation, the film scrutinizes the specific forms of mediated “seeing” that we engage in via media technology. The segment therefore includes archival material of not just the sonar men but also the subsequent footage of Johnson announcing the attack on television and committing the nation to a justified response. Misperception thus occurs not only at the level of the individual and their given ideological mindset but also in the tools and technologies that we use to extend, record and transmit these perceptions to others.

This same theme reappears as McNamara narrates the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis in another of the crucial reenactments that structure the film. As McNamara discusses the inability of the US to determine definitively the presence or absence of Soviet missiles inside of Cuba, the film cuts to footage of large photographic transparencies of the aerial surveillance photos from the Cuban missile crisis illuminated by a series of light boxes. As the camera inspects the photographs alongside an unseen human observer, various lenses and magnifying devices pass over and in front of them, distorting and manipulating their contents. At one point, we see an image of a human eye peering through a photographic loupe, the magnification from which gives the eye a bulbous, distorted appearance. Considered alongside the discussion of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, this sequence reveals that the view from above can be just as faulty as the view from the ground. Placed in the context of McNamara’s revelation that the Kennedy administration had wrongly assessed the presence of missiles in the photos, the images illustrate that looking closer does not always mean seeing more clearly.

The reflexive nature of their content gives these moments in the film a special charge. As the film invites us via the cinematic apparatus to explore the perspective of a man who played a key role in history, it foregrounds the subjective nature



FIGURE 2.4. The observed and the observer in *The Fog of War*.

of human vision and questions the reliability of the technology we rely on to help us extend and improve this vision. While these sequences demonstrate that intelligence gathering in a hostile environment rests precariously on the limits of technology and the distortion of framing ideology, I would argue that the film extends this critique even further. That is, McNamara’s reflections on the failure of “belief and seeing” in hostile environments give way to a larger critique of the relationship between reality and its media representations—a point I’ll turn to now in considering the film’s digital manipulation of its archival materials.

#### ANIMATING THE ARCHIVE

As the above demonstrates, one of *The Fog of War*’s primary concerns is the formal nature of the media we use to transmit information—often the same forms of media that Morris relies upon for much of the core visual material in the film. However, as I have also argued, these materials are not included simply to “illustrate” the content of McNamara’s narration. Instead, these archival images form a visual voice that challenges, amplifies, and expands upon the claims of its subject. But their formal presentation also undermines their own claims. Even as Morris relies heavily on the archive to create the film, these historical records often communicate meanings that are decidedly different from those they originally expressed.

Consider, by way of contrast, the work of another documentary filmmaker credited with “bringing history to life” in his films: Ken Burns. Similarly laden with archival material, Burns’s films earnestly attempt to collect and coordinate a wealth of historical material by pairing elements that will expand upon and

reinforce one another. Archival photographs, panned and scanned in what has famously become known as the "Ken Burns effect," are accompanied by period music and the narration of letters, diaries, speeches, and newspaper articles from the time. This archival unity implies that a variety of media perspectives provide a sufficient representation of the past to comprehend its enormity.

In *The Fog of War*, however, the archival representations from the past are revealed to be not only fallible but fallible to a degree that undermines the evidence they provided in the past as well as the present. Thus, Morris's inclusion of this archival material seeks critically to unpack its pretensions and misperceptions to discover the sort of hidden truths that may lie beneath. This skepticism regarding access to the past is, of course, the thrust of the film. As McNamara states at the outset, "In my life I've made mistakes, but my rule has always been to try and learn, and pass these lessons on to the future." The film's contribution to this project is to question not just past events themselves but also the material residue they leave in their wake.

In part, this aim is achieved through the sort of selection and recontextualization that Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, and Pierce Rafferty mastered so artfully in films like *The Atomic Café* (1982). *The Fog of War* similarly takes footage from any number of sources and recontextualizes it to illustrate the film's larger points. Whatever its original purpose, it seems unlikely that the footage of battle preparation from the opening credits was ever intended to question the ability of the military to gather proper intelligence, as I've suggested here. The film's inclusion of the outtakes from the press conference that open the film suggests a similar, subversive rereading of the footage's original intended meaning. In this sense, the industrial and propaganda materials that form the backdrop for the film all play unwitting roles in testifying to their own limitations and reveal their latent potentiality for remediation and reinterpretation. Such a move marks the film's unique utilization of the archive and sets its approach off from the earnest, good-faith quotation of a Ken Burns film.

At other points, however, the film goes beyond simply recontextualizing its source material to overtly manipulating it. Again, Bruce Conner, Craig Baldwin, and others have long utilized and manipulated archival material to critique and undercut its original rhetorical use. But unlike other found-footage films, *The Fog of War* combines this material with the testimony of an eyewitness observer. Consider, for example, Bruce Conner's use of found footage and media coverage in *Report* (1963–67). Conner's juxtaposition of the footage from John F. Kennedy's funeral procession with battle footage and a bullfight offers a startling, subtle critique of a society that thrives on the media-driven spectacle of violence.<sup>25</sup> While Morris's work clearly shares political sympathies and formal methodologies with Conner's biting, ironic media satire, he differs from Conner in his utilization and juxtaposition of this archival material with the first-person interviews of his subjects. *The Fog of War* thus seeks a middle ground between the earnest archival



FIGURE 2.5. The “number cruncher” becomes the bomber.

unity of Ken Burns’s work and the ironic self-reflexivity of Conner’s assemblages. Neither entirely redemptive nor dismissive of the archive, Morris takes a unique approach to these materials by digitally altering them at key moments to punctuate and critique McNamara’s thoughts. Digital alteration—usually associated with undermining the truth or faking it—here suggests that such transformations can reveal the truth.

In what has become one of the film’s more notorious segments, McNamara relates how he and General Curtis LeMay arrived at the means and methods for firebombing Japan. As Morris has claimed, this is the first place where McNamara discussed his participation in these events—events that many consider to be tantamount to the eventual choice to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After stating that an operation had burned to death “one hundred thousand civilians—men, women, and children—in a single night,” Morris asks McNamara if he knew this was going to happen. He replies, “In a sense, I was part of a mechanism that recommended it.” At this moment, after having chaotically flipped through documents, photographs, and images from the period that document the missions, the film cuts to an image or footage (we aren’t sure what’s causing the movement) of animated blue numbers and statistics falling out the bomb-bay doors of an aircraft down onto a city below. The original source material, a black-and-white, sepia-toned photo, is identical to countless others that feature bombs falling out of an airplane, but this one overtly implies that the use of statistical rationality was equally damaging. Again, whatever its original purpose, through the use of CG animation the photograph becomes the film’s most direct indictment of its subject.

Shortly after the “falling statistics,” McNamara describes a report he wrote for LeMay that argued for flying the B-29s at a lower altitude during their bombing

missions. While this decision increased the risk of a plane being shot down, it dramatically increased its effectiveness in "target destruction." Utilizing a technique that Morris has described as "3-D photography,"<sup>26</sup> the film cuts to a black-and-white image of bombs dropping from a plane. The camera appears to zoom in to the image, but rather than simply enlarge the elements equally as a typical zoom would, elements in the foreground appear to expand and move more rapidly out of the frame relative to those in the background. The visual effect not only yields the impression of three-dimensionality that Morris describes but also gives us the feeling of dropping out of the plane alongside the bombs themselves. In a sense, this is exactly what the men who piloted the planes were doing, given that, under McNamara's direction, they lowered their flight altitude to the extent that they became targets themselves for Japanese anti-aircraft fire. While the shot lasts only approximately eight seconds on-screen, the 3-D effect is startling enough to call it out among the dozens of similar images that the film contains and marks the significance of this portion of McNamara's testimony. As the image digitally "comes to life" relative to the others, we gain the sense that McNamara has gone from being a witness of history to one of its actors, directing its outcome rather than passively observing its course.

One final instance of digital manipulation further illustrates Morris's approach to his archival material. Although less technically innovative than the previous two, its effect is no less powerful. This moment comes as McNamara discusses the result of the firebombing that LeMay carried out on Tokyo and the devastating impact the bombs had on what he calls "a wooden city." Morris's voice is heard off-screen asking McNamara: "The choice of incendiary bombs, where did that come from?" McNamara replies to the effect that the problem lay not in the method of destruction so much as in its extent. He goes on to list the other cities that were similarly destroyed, comparing each target to a similarly sized American city. He states: "[LeMay] went on from Tokyo to firebomb other cities: 58 percent of Yokohama, Yokohama's roughly the size of Cleveland; 58 percent of Cleveland destroyed . . . 99 percent of Chattanooga destroyed, which was Toyama; 41 percent of the equivalent of Los Angeles, which was Nagoya." As he lists the cities destroyed, a black-and-white photograph of ruins appears, with the name of the Japanese city and the percentage destroyed superimposed in red text. This black text fades, giving way to the name of the US city in black text over the same photo. At first, the technique simply illustrates McNamara's examples, but once he stops with the list above, the image track goes on, listing dozens of other cities at an accelerating pace in time with the music. McNamara's point is certainly powerful enough on its own. But combined with the effect of the extended list and its chaotic, accelerated pace, it becomes ample evidence of McNamara's admission, at the end of the sequence, "that [LeMay], and I believe I, were behaving as war criminals."

Graphic superimpositions of this sort are nothing new, but their use here nonetheless stands out for the ambivalent position they occupy between McNamara's



FIGURE 2.6. Tokyo 51.0%. Graphic superimpositions of the percentage of devastation for each city firebombed in World War II provide a powerful combination of two information sources: data and photography.

message about the past and the film's message about him. They pose a contrast between two forms of evidence and representation: the statistical and the photographic. The images of devastation are sufficiently generic that they simply become signifiers of the concept itself rather than descriptors of a given event. Their historical specificity and emotional connection to the audience derive entirely from the names and numbers affixed to them. And yet, the film simultaneously calls this type of statistical information into question, or at least aligns it with the rational worldview that brought about this devastation in the first place. Thus, the statistical information also lacks a level of historical sufficiency without a view toward the physical devastation that it corresponds to—a dimension provided by the images that form the backdrop.

This series of images and their superimposed identifiers occupy a curious middle space. On one hand, the statistics represent the startlingly calculated rational efficiency with which the destruction of Japan was carried out. (As McNamara states, LeMay was the only general who focused exclusively on the percentage of target destroyed per unit lost.) And yet, the film pairs them with photographic representations to redeem and represent that loss by powerfully conveying its true extent. What was once used for the rationalized optimization of destruction (statistical quantification) is now used to generate commemoration and empathy. That which had faded into generic, historical obscurity (photographic evidence of the devastation) is once again rooted into historical time and space. At the time of their creation, such representations were utilized to document and perfect the destruction that they quantify and capture. In retrospect, these same representations stand as evidence of the guilt of both McNamara and LeMay by documenting

their crimes and reinforcing the extent of their impact. While neither form of representation—statistical quantification or photographic evidence—is sufficient on its own to reach this conclusion, figured together in this series of superimpositions they reinterpret one another and provoke a self-consciously synthetic visualization of this untold moment in the history of the war.

#### THEORIES OF HISTORY AND THE ARCHIVE

Along with the falling statistics and the 3-D animations, these graphic superimpositions demonstrate the film's ambiguous approach to its archival material and interview subject. I say "ambiguous" because although there is a reliance on the archive to represent the past, its constant manipulation throughout the film betrays a clear suspicion about its ability to self-sufficiently convey historical truth. Of course, even terms like "historical truth" and "representation" are notoriously slippery and ambiguous, opening themselves to extensive debate by credentialed historians and theorists about the existence of objective truth and its ability to be captured or represented in any given form of history.<sup>27</sup> Despite this ambivalence, however, the film nonetheless approaches its subject with a definite theory of truth and history. Academics may not have agreed on the existence of an objective reality or the possibility for unmediated, individual access to it, but Morris as a filmmaker clearly believes in both propositions. For example, in the June 2000 interview with *Cineaste* cited earlier in which he discusses the tendency of people to "live in a cocoon of one's own devising,"<sup>28</sup> he contrasts this tendency toward individual, subjective delusion with a resolute belief in objective reality. Responding to a question about his background in philosophy and the influence of thinkers like Foucault on his work, his response is worth quoting at length:

*Morris:* I'm certainly aware of it. But my background is in American analytic philosophy rather than in Continental philosophy, and that's where my sympathies lie. I once said that one of the good things about Cambridge, Massachusetts, is that Baudrillard isn't in the phone book. Because first and foremost there is a kind of realism behind all of the movies that I've made. Realism in the philosophical sense. That there is a real world out there in which things happen. . . . This is not up for grabs. You don't take an audience survey.

*Cineaste:* So we have an unmediated relationship with the fact.

*Morris:* I wouldn't say that our relationship with the fact is unmediated, but there is a fact out there.

*Cineaste:* But we have direct access to it.

*Morris:* Well, the world leaves a trail, and it is our job as investigators—or, specifically my job as an investigator—to try to lead myself back to the world. It's not something that you just grab hold of. . . .

[W]e know about the world, we know about our history, through the things that history has cast off, whether it's pieces of evidence, documents, the testimony of people who have lived through those times. . . . History comes by only once, and the residue of history can be lost.<sup>29</sup>

Although using interviews to interpret a film risks confusing textual meaning with authorial intention, this is an instance where such statements merit a little scrutiny. As a “conversation” between McNamara’s words and Morris’s images, the film explicitly addresses competing theories of history, and its release alongside a book and countless other interviews testifies to a desire to make this theory explicitly part of the film’s reception. While Morris’s theory of history may not be identical to the film’s, it at least forms part of its backdrop, and this exchange clearly demonstrates the interplay between the archive and McNamara’s testimony that I have been describing in the film.

The theory of history that Morris puts forward offers historical truth as a possibility, but a fragile and fleeting possibility that must be delicately unearthed through diligent investigative efforts. On one hand, Morris claims, individual social actors have the potential to delude themselves about “reality” and construct for themselves “a cocoon of their own devising”—a possibility shared by McNamara and Morris in the contention that “belief and seeing are both often wrong,” and one more than amply demonstrated in Morris’s prior films *The Thin Blue Line* and *Mr. Death*. And yet, he also argues for the potential of critical reflection by an eyewitness to provide one of the “pieces of evidence” that make up the “residue of history.”

But such testimony is only one piece of the puzzle. Hence the need for the other forms of evidence that history has “cast off,” from documents and photographs to archival footage and statistics. This archival focus on different types of media is what partially differentiates both *The Fog of War* and *Standard Operating Procedure* from Morris’s earlier work (although there are similarities as well). At the same time, however, none of these individual records—the “trail” that history has left behind—sufficiently leads us “back to the world.” This lack necessitates their critical evaluation and reassemblage in the film. Taken as a whole, Morris believes these revised sources may lead back to some level of historical truth, although even when they are preserved and present, the truth they offer is far from self-evident. Individual testimony, historical documents, and archival materials on their own are insufficient. But when reworked, digitally manipulated, critically interrogated, and contradicted, these materials contain a latent potential for representing the past.

A level of skepticism regarding the self-sufficient transparency of the past operates in the background of the film and its treatment of the archive. The film’s dense collage of archival material is animated (or reanimated) in a manner that interrogates its specific historical truth but also the archival impulse more broadly. One

gathers from the film's eagerness to tinker with these materials that the "residue" of the past collected in the archive is perhaps a necessary condition for achieving historical truth, but not a sufficient condition in its own right. The investigator—the one who will seek out and critically interrogate the evidence—is also essential to the process. If we are to achieve historical truth via the archive, if we are to lead ourselves "back to the world," we must tease out this truth from a mass of material in which truth is anything but self-evident.<sup>30</sup> "It's not something you just grab hold of," as Morris puts it.<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, however, the film arrived at a moment when our culture was witnessing an extreme bout of "archive fever," to borrow Jacques Derrida's phrase.<sup>32</sup> One of the fastest-growing portions of the Internet before the rise of user-generated content on social media was the digitization of existing analog archives. This effort was motivated by the hope that putting these materials online might finally arrest the process of physical decay, thereby transforming them into durable, universally accessible resources.<sup>33</sup> But, as Wendy Chun points out, the digital technologies that the computer and the Internet comprise were, from their very conception, viewed as tools capable of organizing the world's information, long before Google took this as its mission.<sup>34</sup> As early as Bush's "As We May Think" and John von Neumann's "First Draft of a Report on the EVDAC," a desire existed for a living, accessible archive of information.<sup>35</sup> But the various technologies we use to achieve this goal are universally reliant on regenerative repetition—a quality that makes them more similar to human memory than archival storage. Rather than a permanent, accessible archive of all the world's information, the experience of the online archive is one of broken links and missing files on a micro level and the medium-specific churn of old and new material on a macro level. The archival Internet is at once a place of both memory and forgetting, creation and deletion, a state Chun calls the "enduring ephemeral."<sup>36</sup> "New" material seems instantaneously outdated, and old material is constantly rediscovered and recirculated as new.

Morris's concerns about the "perishability" of history in his *Cineaste* interview, as well as *The Fog of War*'s general thrust to draw lessons from the past, both align with the positivist, archival thrust that Chun locates in the drive to digitize. And yet the film's critique of McNamara as an "IBM machine with legs" and its willingness to digitally tinker with rather than faithfully transcode its archival sources point to a certain skepticism regarding the transparency and self-sufficient utility of the archive, digital or otherwise. Of course, the film is not "about" the digital archive but rather its critique of computer-driven logic and rationality. Its contention that "rationality will not save us" points to an awareness that there is more to unearthing the past and unlocking the truth in the archive than simply transcoding it into a digital form.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the historical theories of Morris and the treatment of history in the film is by way of reference to an existing if not mainstream approach to visual historiography advocated by the art historian Stephen

Bann. Bann’s work charts the rise of what he calls “historical consciousness” in the visual culture of nineteenth-century Europe. Drawing from Hayden White’s tropological theory of historiography, Bann contends that this growing historical consciousness over the last two centuries has delivered us into an era of post-modern irony regarding the visual presentation of history in venues ranging from Colonial Williamsburg (which effaces the difference between present and past in a move not unlike a Ken Burns film) to more overt, self-conscious juxtapositions of multiple temporalities like the work of landscape architect Bernard Lassus. Lassus’s work restoring historical spaces seeks to preserve the present of the space together with, in Bann’s words, “yesterday, and the day before yesterday”<sup>37</sup> in such a way that all are simultaneously present and yet faithful to the individual periods. While such juxtapositions might seem confusing, Bann argues that contemporary spectators have developed the faculty of “seeing double”—that is, holding in their vision multiple sites of historical engagement at once.<sup>38</sup>

The notion of an “ironic museum” in which past and present are preserved in their temporal and formal separation but sit self-consciously and playfully side by side perfectly captures the approach to the archive that we see in *The Fog of War*. This ironic gesture of juxtaposition without reconciliation helps square the film’s various paradoxical positions: a critique of computational rationality presented using extensive digital effects, camerawork that reveals the biased nature of the camera itself, a man reminiscing about the fallibility of human memory and perception. Like a museum that places today and yesterday (and the day before) side by side, these points are laid out but not reconciled. The film’s insistence that the past is worth preserving and contains lessons for the present saves its ironic methodology from devolving into parody or pastiche. Even as the film’s opening footage reminds us that all media are manipulated, there is a gravity to its tone and subject matter that compels our attention. Indeed, the film’s manipulation of its source material continually reminds us that the “truth” of images is never entirely immanent to the media themselves; rather, truth derives from the rhetorical and critical contexts in which media appear. At once distrustful of the archive but reliant upon it, dismissive of logical rationality but earnest in pursuing some level of historical truth, the film sits evenly between an abstract meditation on media and an exploration of the past that it has captured—a divided attention that will carry over to Morris’s next cinematic project, *Standard Operating Procedure*.

#### STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE’S IMAGE AESTHETICS

If *The Fog of War* works as a meditation on the archive writ large that draws on many forms of media from many different sources, then the focus of the archive in *Standard Operating Procedure* is far more closely circumscribed. Rather than exploring charts, graphs, reconnaissance photos, news footage, audiotapes, news-

papers, and other media as *The Fog of War* does, *Standard Operating Procedure* turns its attention to one specific form of media—the digital photograph—as it is instantiated in one specific collection: the images that emerged from the Abu Ghraib prison complex in Iraq in April 2004. In spite of this shift in scale, however, *Standard Operating Procedure* continues *The Fog of War*'s exploration of the collision between historical events, social actors, and the media representations they leave behind. Like *The Fog of War*, the film is as much about the media representations of an event as it is about the event itself.

Indeed, the two films share a sort of inverse, mirror relationship with one another in several other ways as well. Morris himself calls *Standard Operating Procedure* the "flip side" of *The Fog of War*, "because instead of a policy-maker—perhaps the most important person in the government save the president himself—here you have grunts, people with little or no power,"<sup>39</sup> a point Linda Williams echoes in her discussion of the film.<sup>40</sup> Beyond the difference in rank of their subjects, both films are obviously about war and its effect on both perpetrators and victims, and both films explore the media that these conflicts produce. Furthermore, while *The Fog of War* was a critical and commercial success, receiving generally positive reviews in the mainstream media and garnering Morris an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, *Standard Operating Procedure* received mostly negative reviews from critics and went on to fail miserably at the box office.<sup>41</sup> But if *The Fog of War* received more attention than *Standard Operating Procedure* in the mainstream popular press, in academic circles the situation was reversed. Since its release, *The Fog of War* has been largely ignored in journals and other publications, whereas *Standard Operating Procedure* has generated a great deal of controversy and attention from film and media scholars at conferences and in publications.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond their reception, the two films also mirror one another in that both were released with an eponymous companion text. But whereas Blight and Lang's text expanded the historical facts and philosophical issues explored in *The Fog of War*, Philip Gourevitch's text instead offers a narrative account of events leading up to the Abu Ghraib scandal and its aftermath.<sup>43</sup> For their source material, Blight and Lang drew from their own preexisting research (generated over a decade of working with McNamara before he sat down with Morris). Gourevitch, on the other hand, derived his text largely from the material Morris himself collected for the film. (The interviews alone ran to almost 2.5 million words.<sup>44</sup>)

The treatment of both films on Morris's website also offer parallels and differences. Morris, in the four years between his two films, was slowly becoming a multimedia artist, using the web to *expand* his films rather than just promote them. Whereas *errolmorrison.com* largely followed *The Fog of War*'s release as it was covered by other media (collecting reviews, release events, and interviews with Morris), for *Standard Operating Procedure* the site began to feature original

content that explored points in the film further and defended Morris’s actions in several of the controversies that erupted during its theatrical release. While much of this new material was also part of the blog Morris began writing for the *New York Times* in September 2007, other material on the site related to the film is unique to the site itself (e.g., the sections “The Grump” and Morris’s thoughts on several of his “Aborted Projects”). Furthermore, as *Standard Operating Procedure* comes to focus on an exclusively digital medium—photography—his own “digital” activities online begin to expand as well.<sup>45</sup>

The shift from *The Fog of War* to *Standard Operating Procedure* is thus not a clear thematic break, but rather a shift in focus and scope. Instead of focusing on the life of a single individual who had a hand in several of the bloodiest and most technologically mediated wars of the twentieth century, *Standard Operating Procedure* meditates on the role of a specific media technology in relation to a specific event. But if Morris tightens the focus of *Standard Operating Procedure* to a single technology and event, the problem he explores—namely, the role of photography in our understanding of an event—is approached on a number of fronts at once. In addition to the film, Morris begins simultaneously exploring these ideas on his blog, and considering his work there alongside the film expands our understanding of both.

#### THE OPINIONATOR: MANY THOUSANDS OF WORDS

Tellingly, Morris’s first post to the *New York Times* blog *The Opinionator* appeared nearly a year before *Standard Operating Procedure* premiered, but its content clearly reflected what must have been a major preoccupation at the time given the film that he was in the midst of making. Entitled “Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire,” it offers a discussion of the possibility for photographs to be faked and the role that context plays in their reception and interpretation—an issue that would return front and center once the film came out. It begins: “Pictures are supposed to be worth a thousand words. But a picture unaccompanied by words may not mean anything at all. Do pictures provide evidence? And if so, evidence of what? And, of course, the underlying question: do they tell the truth?”<sup>46</sup> This post offers a fitting preamble to the blog itself, and subsequent posts deal further with photography and reenactment, perception, memory, and any number of other issues central to the investigation in *Standard Operating Procedure*. Many of the posts are extremely long by blog or even newspaper-article standards, often running to thousands of words and spread out over several installments. In one post, Morris even acknowledges, in response to reader comments, that he’s not blogging so much as posting essays—a point he admits before comparing his own method to Descartes’s in the latter’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*.<sup>47</sup> This, moreover, stands in marked contrast to the laconic presence within his films, where he speaks little, if at all, and

offers no narration or voice-over. If, as his first post reiterates, a picture is worth a thousand words, then he seemed focused on using the blog to give the photos he discusses their textual due. Given its thematic preoccupations and its simultaneity with the production and release of *Standard Operating Procedure*, the blog thus forms an additional if indirect background text to the film.

Unlike the focus of the film, Morris's thoughts on photography in his blog only occasionally turn to the Abu Ghraib photographs. Morris's subject is more generally the issue of truth and photographic representations—an issue that leads him to explore the work of Roger Fenton, Matthew Brady, Walker Evans, and others. In typical Morris style, his posts generally begin with a series of older archival images. He then poses a series of questions the images raise upon closer inspection in the tone of an investigation or a detective mystery. These questions often relate to the historical circumstances surrounding the photos and the extent to which they can be said to reflect the "truth" of the scenes they capture. Morris the blogger and Morris the filmmaker draw on a similar set of ingredients: equal parts quirky detective fiction and meditative philosophical reflection on the nature of reality/representation and history/memory. Given the nature of his films, it is not surprising that he often gravitates toward the eccentric and bizarre sides of subjects. A post on anosognosia (the lack of awareness about one's own illness or impairment), for example, begins with an anecdote about a bank robber who covered his face in lemon juice, mistakenly thinking this would allow him to remain invisible to the security cameras that were eventually used to apprehend him.<sup>48</sup> But beyond mirroring the style of his films in general, the material on his blog often relates directly to the issues addressed by *Standard Operating Procedure*.

In one of Morris's first posts, for example, he takes the two Roger Fenton images from the Crimean War entitled "Valley of the Shadow of Death" that have been discussed by Susan Sontag and others and proposes that one of the two nearly identical images must have been staged.<sup>49</sup> Calling them "ON" and "OFF" in reference to the placement of a series of cannonballs in the middle road, Morris investigates a number of different techniques to determine whether Fenton or another party moved the cannonballs into the road or into the ditch for the second image. As a choice of topic, the Crimean War is a natural one in that, as Ulrich Keller has noted, it represents a sort of transitional stage in the visual history of warfare.<sup>50</sup> On one hand, it was the last war to be fought as a grand spectacle for the eyewitness observer, since modern weapons like the machine gun made bold charges toward the enemy dangerously obsolete. But on the other hand, it was the first war to be thoroughly visually documented by modern forms of media representation like lithography and photography. Fenton's photographs, then, are the first to be taken of any war ever, and Fenton, as Sontag notes, is repeatedly cited as the first war photographer. None of this is lost on Morris, as he cites Sontag's book repeatedly, and interviews Keller himself. The blog thus reveals the degree to which Morris

researched the relationship between war and photography as he prepared to make a film about the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Beyond their status as historical forerunners to the Abu Ghraib photos, the Fenton photographs are also relevant to the making of *Standard Operating Procedure* given the nature of the questions they pose. That is, once we allow that the scene on the hillside was altered for one of the images, we must immediately ask which image and why. Leaving aside most of the intricacies involved in Morris’s attempt to order the images temporally (suffice it to say it takes him nearly nine thousand words and the use of spectral analysis to do so), it is worth noting that he traveled back to the location where the images were taken to record his own images and reenact the conditions of their capture—an effort not uncommon in his film projects, and one that led to a great deal of the criticism of *Standard Operating Procedure*.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the images provide Morris with an occasion to reflect on Fenton’s motivations for altering the landscape of his subject. Was he trying to put the cannonballs back in the position where they would have originally landed? (In other words, was Fenton himself reenacting the scene?) Or was he simply trying to capture a more dramatic shot? (And would that have consequently been more or less faithful to the subject he was attempting to capture?) In essence, Morris is concerned with the interplay of visual aesthetics and factual reportage in the two images and which version was more faithful to the veracity of the subject Fenton felt it was his charge to document.

With both the Abu Ghraib photos and the Fenton photos, Morris delves into images of war that were staged or acted out for the benefit of the camera. As many commentators have noted, there is a complicated co-incidence in the Abu Ghraib images between the presence of the camera and the acts of torture that it records.<sup>52</sup> On one hand, the absence of a camera would deprive the world of evidence of these acts, so the camera and its images are necessary to understand what took place. On the other hand, there is a great deal of evidence that some of the forms of torture documented by the camera were specifically staged to create a visual spectacle for the benefit of the camera itself. Thus, what happened *before* the camera might not have happened *without* the camera (or at least not in the same fashion). Paraphrasing Morris’s title from the Fenton post, we might ask, “Which came first, the spectacle or the camera?” But like Fenton, the perpetrators of the Abu Ghraib images arranged the scene in a certain fashion for maximum dramatic impact. Summing up his search, Morris takes a moment to wax philosophic about his desire to arrange the images:

I sometimes wonder: is the entire meaning of photography contained in these twin Fenton photographs—one the *doppelgänger* of the other and often indirectly described as such? The good Fenton photograph, honest and unadorned by a desire for contrivance or misdirection, and the bad Fenton photograph—the photograph decried by Sontag—corrupted by the sleight of hand, the trick, the calculated deception.

But which is which?<sup>53</sup>

In a sense, the Abu Ghraib images present a quandary because they occupy the space between the two Fenton images, and that perhaps is why they came to occupy Morris in the first place.

I raise the issues presented in the blog because how we read that content in relation to *Standard Operating Procedure* affects how we interpret the aim of the film, and, as I will argue, this is a film in which context and the classification or categorization of an object is very much at stake. That is, if we see *Standard Operating Procedure* as an investigation into the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the question of US policy on torture, then we are inclined to place it alongside other films dealing with similar issues, like Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007), Michael Winterbottom's *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006), and Rory Kennedy's *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007).<sup>54</sup> This, of course, is perfectly appropriate given the subject matter and thrust of the companion text and the simple fact that *it is a film* by a well-known filmmaker. But if we place the film in the context of Morris's previous film on war, *The Fog of War*, and his other activities on his blog and elsewhere, then the subject matter takes on a different valence entirely. Seen as part of an ongoing meditation on the relationship between representation and reality, photography and the external world, the film is less about specific policies and events or individual culpability and more about the nature of perception, representation, and human behavior. As the content on the blog indicates, the role of photography in warfare and the nature of photographic technology in documenting and interpreting such momentous events are topics that occupy Morris far beyond any one particular instance or set of photos. We might conclude, then, that *Standard Operating Procedure* is not so much about Abu Ghraib the historical event as it is about the Abu Ghraib images, and their role in the event.

How one determines the film's true focus seems to dictate the extent to which one finds any merit in the film's overall project or approach. Returning to the controversy the film generated, we can draw a fairly clear line between those who did or did not "like" the film based on what they thought its overall subject and intentions were.<sup>55</sup> Scholars who fall into the latter category, like Bill Nichols and Irina Leimbacher, for example, read the film as being about torture and the circumstances behind the events captured in these images.<sup>56</sup> Given this, they find Morris's treatment of the images and his method of reenacting the torture sequences they depict to be fraught with a fetishized aestheticization of the events that lacks a moral center. Such critics further assert that his signature Interrotron interviews simply provide an opportunity for the perpetrators to deny ultimate culpability. Nichols's three primary objections, which nicely sum up the general reaction against the film, are: (1) the limited perspective of the guards, and their inability to assume any of the guilt; (2) the aestheticized nature of the reenactments; and (3) the absence of any voice for the victims.<sup>57</sup> His is a trenchant critique of the film, and if the film is about acts of torture, then all of Nichols's claims are indeed accurate and the film's flaws are, to some extent, inexcusable.

But if we shift the focus of the film from being about the event of Abu Ghraib to being about the images it generated, our reading of its method, and perhaps its faults and omissions, also shifts. Consider, for example, the description Julia Lesage (who was largely positive on the film) offers of its subject:

I use a textual analysis of *Standard Operating Procedure*, which takes as its topic just the Abu Ghraib photographs, to explore issues of affect in the torture documentary. However, I also explore how the film works as an analytic documentary, one that explores what the photograph, or indeed witnesses, can and cannot convey. *Standard Operating Procedure* particularly raises the question of “authenticity” in relation to its interviewees. We are asked to evaluate not only the history of Abu Ghraib torture that these participants tell us about but also how much we trust what they have to say.<sup>58</sup>

Lesage clearly feels that the film is about “just the Abu Ghraib photographs” and what they or their creators “can and cannot say.” Linda Williams similarly reads the film as an interplay between the images and their creators, insisting that the images have as much to do with the larger ideological context that exists as they do with the frame they impose.<sup>59</sup> In a reading that lies closest to the one I am proposing here, Caetlin Benson-Allott writes:

*Standard Operating Procedure* focuses on how atrocities become media files. Morris’s film asserts that although the abuse at Abu Ghraib is undeniably terrible and true, the photographs neither speak directly to us nor offer transparent access to the events. The photographs are insufficient and require interpretation from viewers, who may bring external impressions and motivations to the task. *Standard Operating Procedure* tries to communicate this problem by focusing on how mediation, and digital mediation in particular, disorients rather than facilitates our processes of interpretation.<sup>60</sup>

Like Williams and Lesage, Benson-Allott determines that the film focuses on the subject of digital photography and the photographs themselves and that, in this particular arena, the film offers an important, worthwhile intervention and addition to the collection of films on the Iraq war.

Interestingly, none of the scholars who praise the film deal very extensively with the reenactments it contains. Their discussion of the interview segments (which, for Nichols, allowed the subjects to deny guilt) emphasizes the way in which the film forgoes the question of guilt, leaving this for the audience to decide. My aim here is not to determine which side of the debate is correct or incorrect (though the thrust of the reading I’m offering obviously aligns more closely with those who think the film is about photography and mediation). While I agree with Benson-Allott and the others that the film is ultimately about this collection of digital images, I believe that the emphasis here is not on the images per se but on the collection itself. That is, the extensive commentary thus far offered on the film largely misses the images’ status as a *database* of images.

## DATABASE AESTHETICS

Almost without fail, nearly every critic of the film points out that the images that it deals with are "digital" rather than analog photographs, and that this fact has something to do with the mutability and transportability of their contents. Had they been analog images, they would have been far easier to contain and perhaps less likely to have been created in the first place. Digital images are at once more and less private. Lacking the need for a third party to develop and print the negatives, they can reveal their contents but remain the exclusive property of their creators. And yet, digitality also facilitates copying and sharing, lending them an instantaneous ubiquity that analog photos lack. Digital photos, moreover, are far more open to manipulation via programs like Adobe Photoshop. All of this is surely accurate, and as we will see, the film does highlight their status as *digital* images. And yet, the film doesn't emphasize either of these particular properties, even though both lend themselves to the sort of questions Morris often addresses. Rather, *Standard Operating Procedure* emphasizes and questions another facet of their role as digital media: their status as a collection of files, or, more accurately, as a database. Interrogating the database, Morris most clearly advances the larger themes of representation, mediation, and truth that became so evident in his blog posts.

As it was with *The Fog of War*, the opening sequence of the film is telling. As the opening credit sequence rolls, or rather floats, the viewer is immersed in a cloud of spatially diffuse images floating back and away, a double movement that yields the impression that, as we drift steadily forward, our attention is directed stubbornly backward at images fading slowly into the distance. While many are immediately legible as the more iconic images from the Abu Ghraib scandal, they appear here robbed of any framing context but the frame itself. But what interests me here is not the images themselves or the frame around them, but rather the blank, nonrepresentational space in which they appear—a space that is rather overtly rendered as "no place." While focusing on this blank space instead of the sensational content of the images will at first seem counterintuitive and perhaps the epitome of disinterested spectatorship (how could one *not* look at them?), their distinct aesthetic milieu in the sequence foregrounds the film's relationship to the controversial material it explores.

The aesthetic of this dark nonplace can be illuminated with the area of digital art known as database aesthetics.<sup>61</sup> As far back as his influential *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich described the database as the dominant symbolic form of the digital age. It provides a new interface to the cultural field and replaces the centuries-long dominance of the narrative form that appeared in older media such as the novel and film.<sup>62</sup> While both forms, the database and the narrative, have always existed alongside each other, he argues that at different points either form rises to prominence—an exchange currently taking place thanks in part to

the widespread adoption of the computer as the “Universal Media Machine.”<sup>63</sup> The database as a cultural form is characterized as a collection of discrete entities with an infinite number of possible connections to each other but lacking in any necessary connections that order or prioritize these items. Unlike the narrative, which imposes specific cause/effect, beginning/middle/end relationships on its constituent elements, the database leaves these connections undefined.<sup>64</sup>

Returning to the opening credit sequence, the cloud of images that float there before the viewer present themselves, in this reading, as a collection of discrete digital records, which, as products of various digital imaging technologies, they undoubtedly were/are. Presenting them as a random cluster with no immediate logic to their arrangement or spatial distribution renders aesthetically the material status these records had at various points in their existence, from the nonlinear editing software that rendered any particular shot, to the hard drives of the computers to which the images were downloaded, to the memory cards of the cameras with which they were originally recorded. As digital files, they can be ordered according to any number of different principles—foregrounded or elided depending upon any number of preferences.

We can see this same aesthetic principle at work at several other points in the film. The discrete nature of the image as individual record, for instance, is foregrounded most explicitly in the discussion by army investigator Brent Pack about “metadata.” He defines metadata as the “fancy two-dollar word for information about information” that allows him to order the images according to various factors including the date they were taken and the specific camera that captured them. The collection of images is, at other points, foregrounded as a database of such records. When Pack describes the beginnings of his investigation, he reveals that the army gave him twelve CDs’ worth of images, which he then began to go through and organize. Here, the image track explicitly illustrates a screen with the “thousands of images from Abu Ghraib” as tiled icons on an apparently enormous screen. His goal, as he states it, was to find the images that depict prisoner abuse and to identify who might have been in the area at the time. As the screen rapidly flips through these records, sound effects reminiscent of a hard drive spinning click frantically away. As Pack focuses his attention, the screen isolates specific images, aesthetically calling them forth from the cloud; they appear as records pulled up from the database with individual labels enumerating the aforementioned metadata.<sup>65</sup> As he describes organizing the photographs according to various criteria, the screen image responds by arranging and rearranging images into various timelines.

Again, the material form of this collection of images outside the film *is* a database. This is not, therefore, a quality the film imposes on them. Instead it works to retain and foreground this materiality in their aesthetic treatment each time they reappear. The various visual and sound effects that connote the database here in



FIGURE 2.7. The database of images rendered in different aesthetic configurations.

this narrative medium are somewhat the reverse of the artificial shutter sound that plays when one snaps a picture on a digital camera: aesthetic, sensory appendages held over from another medium to remind one of their origins. Pack’s investigation as it is presented in the film is this migration from one form, the database, into another, the linear narrative. As he puts it, “The pictures spoke a thousand words, but unless you know what day and time they were talking, you wouldn’t know what the story was.”



FIGURE 2.7 continued.

### WHAT THE STORY WAS

Again and again the various social actors in the film highlight this same tension between the extreme legibility of what the images depict and their inability, as Pack says, to narrate the story adequately. This is the tension inherent in the database/narrative distinction that Manovich makes. As critics of New Media art point out, much of what constitutes database art in the strictest sense often presents itself as a “choose your own adventure”-style set of individual materials for participants

to use in creating their own narratives. And this is largely what happened with the database of images from Abu Ghraib. Once they surfaced from the prison, any number of individuals and media outlets began selecting specific images and placing them into various discursive contexts, from the army investigation that Pack started in early 2004 to the *60 Minutes* broadcast that eventually introduced the scandal to the public. Indeed, the film itself is an attempt to understand "what the story was" that produced these images.

I would like to linger on this question of the insufficiency of the images themselves to stand for and represent the events they depict in a complete and self-evident fashion. This is, after all, the ineffable paradox of still photography: on one hand, so automatically, irrevocably indexically bound to the historical world, and on the other hand, so mediated, insufficient, and misleading about that world. Taken together, these fragments of time fail to offer a sufficient account of the circumstances of their creation. As a collection, they are, in the strictest sense of the term, nonrepresentational. While each individual image may offer a mediated, representational glimpse of what existed before the camera at a given moment in time, the photographs' collective meaning has to be supplied externally. The database allows us to order its contents according to any number of criteria, to declare certain images relevant and others irrelevant, and to classify them into categories like "criminal act" and "standard operating procedure," but these organizational schemas are necessarily external to the database itself. In database terms, the individual record itself may be representational, but the data set as a form is manifestly nonrepresentational. It can contain information, but meaning has to be found elsewhere. This is precisely what the film reveals in the extended CGI sequences that I describe as a form of database aesthetic.

Though the film foregrounds the plasticity of its source material, it does not, however, evacuate it of meaning entirely. Quite the opposite. By translating the database into a linear narrative, the film utilizes any number of techniques to account for the structure the database lacks, including the interviews, Sabrina Harman's letters, and, notoriously, the reenactments. Interestingly, the film lacks entirely those elements so omnipresent in *The Fog of War*. Rather than a broad collage of external media sources and archival documents, the film focuses exclusively on the Abu Ghraib images and supplements them with interviews, letters, log books, and reenactments. Instead of animating the contents of the archive by digitally manipulating their appearance or content as he did in *The Fog of War*, Morris aestheticizes the archive itself in order to foreground its immaterial, mutable nature.

The lack of an external, secondary media context of the sort that we saw in *The Fog of War* is, of course, supplied in our contemporary context by the flurry of media coverage that surrounded the Abu Ghraib images when they first appeared and were widely taken up and debated from any number of perspectives. For some, the Abu Ghraib images represented the work of "a few bad apples." For others,

they offered a glimpse of the moral vacuity at the heart of the Bush administration’s prosecution of the war on terror. For still others, they were the unsurprising proof of Western aggression against the Middle East, a manifestation of the larger “crusade,” as Bush himself once called it. As W. J. T. Mitchell asserts, these images proliferated for a brief time with the rapidity and uncanny duplication of the act of cloning, and in each new manifestation they accreted meanings and interpretations along the way. In reference to the infamous “hooded man” photo, he writes: “If ever an image has been ‘cloned’ in the circuits of mass media, this one was, both in the sense of indefinite duplication, and in the further sense of taking on a ‘life of its own’ that eludes and even reverses the intentions of its producers.”<sup>66</sup> For Mitchell, the image’s resemblance to Christian passion iconography and its transposition onto an Arab body indicate its inherent openness to interpretation in multiple pro- and antiwar discourses.

I would instead argue that the fluid nature of the images as a *collection* allowed them to be inserted into multiple competing discourses. That is, lacking a fixed story of their own, the database of images from Abu Ghraib provided ready source material for people on every side of the issues involved: when the images emerged, they had no captions to anchor or interpret their meanings. As Morris, echoing Susan Sontag, claimed in his first blog post, “[A] picture unaccompanied by words may not mean anything at all.”<sup>67</sup> But as they circulated through the mediascape, any number of commentators stepped in to fill the void. Thus, the same “hooded man” image appeared on Fox News with the caption “Detainee ‘Abuse’” and on the cover of *The Economist* with the headline “Resign, Rumsfeld.”<sup>68</sup> This is exactly the flexibility of meaning enabled by the database, and it is this aspect of the Abu Ghraib images that the film repeatedly highlights in its CGI sequences depicting them moving about the screen.

And this is why the film generated so much controversy among critics and academics and so little interest among viewers. That is, by opening up these images to multiple interpretations and by insisting, as Morris’s films always do, that the images themselves mean nothing outside of a specific discursive context, the film confronted a sociopolitical landscape already heavily populated with very definitive interpretations. And unlike McNamara’s reflection on events and debates over thirty years old, these discourses were still in wide circulation. Coming rather late to the party, the film’s claim that these images are still open to reconfiguration proved to be an unwelcome contribution to the discussion. Documentaries, after all, are interpretations of the historical world that invite us to agree or disagree—a move Bill Nichols describes with the enjoinder “This is so, isn’t it?” Unfortunately for Morris and his studio, a majority of the viewing public answered this question with a resounding no.

Outside of the film’s success or failure, however, considered among his other projects of the last decade it clearly stands as his most technologically driven

project to date in both form and content. As digital media came to dominate the field of filmmaking, its implications for truth and representation obviously came to dominate Morris's projects as well. But an event as divisive as the Abu Ghraib scandal lacks the historical distance and twenty-twenty hindsight that the Crimean or even the Vietnam War provides, and as a consequence, the film became swept up in the controversy it explored. While the film has already faded into the background of documentaries addressing torture, it nonetheless exemplifies the ever-growing integration of moving images and digital media, making its thoughts on the dangers therein all the more timely.

### CONCLUSION

If we return to the rather cryptic epigraph at the beginning of this chapter that first adorned [errolmorris.com](http://errolmorris.com) in 2000, it now seems a prophetic inauguration for the shifts to come in both Morris's own work and the political landscape we have been considering here as a whole. As Morris's interests expanded from film to many forms of media both old and new, Chesterton's fear of the "labyrinth that has no center" seems to have served less as a warning than as an inspiration for Morris. Amid a decade that witnessed the extreme polarization of American politics, however—an era in which the center all but disappeared—Morris's work seems to have heeded the call. Moving from the more arcane fringes of obscure Americana into the stormy waters of political filmmaking, Morris's two major projects from this period offer unique attempts to carve out an ethical and political center in the issues they explore. Surely Morris had made political films before, but nothing on this scale.<sup>69</sup> Taking on such notorious figures as Robert McNamara and Lyndie England guarantees that viewers will come to these films with strong, preconceived notions about their subjects—notions that the films attempt to confuse rather than clarify. Thrusting us into the center of complicated ethical issues, both films further force us to empathize to some extent with those who were vilified as the "bad apples" or "bad guys" in their respective circumstances—a move that McNamara himself reminds us is essential if reconciliation is to be achieved and humanity preserved. If his next project was any indication, Morris's work from this decade may prove to be an aberration. Released in 2010, *Tabloid* centers on former Miss Wyoming Joyce McKinney and her odyssey of kidnapping, cults, and non-consensual sex. While it certainly continues his preoccupation with mass media and social mediation, Morris has returned once again to his previous emphasis on idiosyncratic subjects. While it may prove to have been a detour for Morris, however, the intersection of film, politics, and technology that these two films explore was rapidly becoming the center of online activism and documentary filmmaking during the early presidency of George W. Bush.