

Filmmaker Errol Morris provides the extreme-right's Stephen Bannon a platform in *American Dharma*

By David Walsh
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Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris's *American Dharma*, about American neo-fascist and former investment banker Stephen Bannon, was presented at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival. It has now made its way into movie theaters in the US.

Morris (*Gates of Heaven*, *The Thin Blue Line*, *The Fog of War*, *Standard Operating Procedure*), as we pointed out at the time, has demonstrated obvious skill and intelligence. He, like the German director Werner Herzog, whose appalling *Meeting Gorbachev* screened at the same film festival (and opened earlier this year in the US), has had a propensity for making works about oddities, eccentricities and marginalized individuals. Morris has also treated prominent figures such as Stephen Hawking, Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld in his documentaries.

The careers of Herzog and Morris, in fact, intersected at a relatively early stage in their respective careers. They first attempted to collaborate in the mid-1970s on a project, tellingly, concerned with rural Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein, one of the inspirations apparently for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*. Herzog served as something of a mentor to Morris, even providing him with cash toward the making of an early film.

The documentary maker is a conventional or, more generously, an unconventional American liberal. In 2008, he directed a series of advertisements for Barack Obama, "People in the Middle for Obama." The campaign, according to *Adweek*, was executed "in typical Morris style: interviews with ordinary people against a white backdrop, with music playing softly in the background. The interviewees are all middle-of-the-road voters who claim to be more

concerned with issues than partisan ideology—and who've sided with Obama."

In *American Dharma*, Morris interviews Stephen Bannon, Trump's political adviser and an American fascist. The interview is interspersed with footage of certain personalities and events, including Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders in 2016; the Charlottesville, Virginia, rally in August 2017 organized by extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi groups; Donald Trump's inauguration speech; Bannon's own appearance at a meeting held by the neo-fascist National Front in France; and so forth.

In addition, Morris films Bannon watching clips from some of the movies he claims to be important to him, such as *12 O'Clock High* (1949), with Gregory Peck, and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), with Alec Guinness.

All in all, Morris treats Bannon with kid gloves. Even mainstream media critics noted this. Owen Gleiberman in *Variety* observed that "if you walked into" the film "knowing nothing" about Bannon, "you'd probably find him to be a fascinating, compelling, and at times even charming figure." Gleiberman argued, with some justice, that *American Dharma* "isn't investigative filmmaking—it's a toothless bromance."

How disgraceful is that! In November 2016, when Trump announced Bannon's appointment as "chief strategist and senior counselor to the president," the WSWs wrote, quite correctly: "Bannon is a fascist, and fully warrants the label. As a political operative, Bannon is a specialist in scandal mongering, provocation and innuendo. His online rag *Breitbart News* serves as a platform for white nationalists, anti-Semites, and the so-called 'alt-right.' He is a

person who manages, with his own biography, to combine nearly all the reactionary trends in American political, economic and social life.”

Bannon traces his own outlook to ultra-right and nationalist, in some cases openly fascistic European trends and thinkers, such as Oswald Spengler and Julius Evola. Under Bannon’s leadership, *Breitbart News* emitted a steady stream of anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and right-wing conspiratorial filth. Trump’s decision to bring Bannon into the White House was celebrated by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. “We appear to have taken over,” Duke told an interviewer.

In the face of all this, Morris essentially provides this scandalmonger and inciter of racial and ethnic hatred a platform for most of the one and a half hours of the film, allowing this multimillionaire huckster and former investment banker to posture as a defender of the American common man and enemy of the elite! The filmmaker occasionally delivers a slap on the wrist, noting, for instance, that Trump’s tax policies are “serving big business and the rich.” Bannon has nothing to say to this, and Morris drops the issue.

Bannon blathers on about *dharma*, which he defines as duty and destiny. He paints himself and his extreme-right ilk as lonely and reluctant heroes, *à la* Peck and his fellow World War II pilots in *12 O’Clock High* (“Consider yourselves already dead”), responding to the unalterable call of duty. This sort of language comes from reactionary, irrationalist writers and thinkers in the early part of the 20th century, some of them ultimately pro-Nazi figures. Morris challenges none of it.

Bannon is not a fool. He notes that when Hillary Clinton determined to pursue the presidency in 2016 on the basis of identity politics, “I know we had her.” The Clinton campaign was doomed by its indifference to the suffering of the mass of the population, and its obsession with race and gender.

Bannon refers twice to the danger of a “revolution” in America. Morris and the film’s reviewers miss the point of the comments. They choose to interpret them as Bannon’s threatening to unleash his sort of right-wing “revolution.” No, he is *warning* Morris and the American establishment. If the system doesn’t allow the wealth to be spread, he argues, “we’re going to have a revolution” in the US. Again, later, he says,

“We’re going to have change or we’re going to have a revolution.”

Having entirely misunderstood the comments, Morris finally asks him about the revolution that Bannon is supposedly *advocating*, and the latter has one more opportunity to present himself as a disrupter of the status quo and an opponent of the “whole system.”

American Dharma is a travesty.

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