

American Dharma: Steve Bannon documentary debuts at Venice Film Festival

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Reuters photo



By

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98 minutes, no stop. No stranger to interviewing some of the most controversial figures of our time, Errol Morris trains his lens on Stephen K. Bannon, questioning him closely about his beliefs, current feelings about President Trump, and films that shaped and continue to animate Bannon's understanding of the world. Morris concludes that whatever one thinks of Bannon, ignoring him is the most dangerous course of action and he is right.

In their wide ranging conversation spanning over 16 hours, Morris questions Bannon on his background, belief system, his worldview, his current feelings on President Trump, and how films such as Henry King's *Twelve O'Clock High*, John Ford's *The Searchers*, and Orson Welles' *Chimes At Midnight* became part of Bannon's understanding of the world.

Errol Morris says:

"Years ago I wanted to start an ostrich anti-defamation league because I thought ostriches were being unfairly criticized for a perfectly reasonable strategy — sticking their heads in a hole in the ground in order to avoid danger. Now I think there's a lot to be said for the opposite point of view. That facing danger, square on, is usually the best course of action. Our country was plunged into chaos, or worse, in 2016. And Stephen K. Bannon was at the center of it. I feel that it is important to talk to him, to investigate him, and to understand his point of view." And continues "Steve Bannon asked me why I wanted to make *American Dharma*."

“I told him I didn’t understand him or why he was doing what he was doing. But I thought if making a film could help me, and others, understand any of this then it would be a good thing. Does shedding light on Bannon give him more attention? Maybe. But I worry more about indifference, silence, avoidance, a lack of thoughtful analysis. The movie both contextualizes his remarks and pushes back against many of them. But my task as a filmmaker is neither to sanitize Bannon nor to attack him, but to try and capture his ideas and represent what he’s trying to achieve — even if that scares me.”

Quite interesting we can say.. Morris continues “One question that the film raises: is Steve Bannon a true believer or an opportunist? I think it’s usually a mixture of both. Take it from me, a former door-to-door salesman, the simple answer is that if you’re selling something it’s much better to believe in it. It’s much easier to sell what you believe. Bannon flirts with classical ideas of fate, of destiny — all, I suppose, wrapped up in his theory of dharma. But what is dharma? Fate? Destiny? Duty? Obligation? At times dharma seems like it could be anything or everything.”

Yes, Dharma is Dharma.

Morris adds “Bannon invokes a much simpler, black-and-white, fantasy world of Hollywood from the 1950s and early 1960s – and an America that tried very hard to reflect those images. The worlds of John Ford, of David Lean, of Henry King, of Orson Welles and of Stanley Kubrick may be incredibly powerful, but they’re movie worlds, not reality. One of the true ironies for me is that Bannon’s interpretation of every single quoted movie in this film is at variance with mine, as if we’re actually looking at two different movies. And maybe we are. But we still inhabit the same world with the same problems and the need for solutions.” And it is true, the need for solutions is the key point.

There is a good Bannon and a bad Bannon, the director says:

“The “good” Bannon is the Bannon who has championed the neglected or forgotten middle class. I agree with him about this. My father died when I was two years old. It was the beginning of the fifties. My mother, on a schoolteacher’s salary, brought up my brother, myself, and a housekeeper. There was very little insurance from my father’s death and yet she was able to do so much for her family. Could she have done this sixty years later? I don’t think so. What happened? Here Bannon and I would disagree. Reagan for me is not a hero but, if anything, an enemy of the middle class. And most certainly Donald Trump is not a friend to anybody but himself. To anybody who thinks that his tax cut and his recent proposal to cut capital gains taxes are populist proposals I would respectfully suggest he have his head examined.”

Another important Morris statement is “Great movies afford alternative explanations. In *Chimes at Midnight* Bannon sees Falstaff as fulfilling his dharma. His dharma? To educate Hal and to prepare him to become king. When this happens, when Hal is crowned Henry V, Falstaff is rejected. How does Falstaff feel about this? For Bannon, he’s the generous courtier who takes pleasure in seeing that he has accomplished his

task. The king is now on his own. But when I see the close-ups of Falstaff he is crying and these do not seem to be tears of joy. He has been banished from the kingdom. It is interesting that in Bannon's view Falstaff is the supreme hero and in my view he is a supernumerary who has been betrayed. There's yet one more interpretation, not discussed in the movie: Bannon sees himself as Henry V and sees Trump as Falstaff." This is the most beautiful scene in the Documentary for me, the most seductive.



Errol Morris

Morris' films have won many awards, including an Oscar for The Fog of War, the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival for A Brief History of Time, the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival for Standard Operating Procedure, and the Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for The Thin Blue Line. His films have been honored by the National Society of Film Critics and the National Board of Review. Morris' work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Roger Ebert, a champion of Morris' work, called his first film, Gates of Heaven (1978), one of the ten best films of all time.

Morris is the author of two New York Times best sellers, Believing is Seeing and A Wilderness of Error, and is a regular contributor to The New York Times opinion pages and Op-Docs series. His most recent book, The Ashtray, was published in 2018.

Morris has directed over 1000 television commercials, including campaigns for Apple, Levi's, Nike, Target, Citibank, and Miller High Life. He has directed short films for the 2002 and 2007 Academy Awards, ESPN, and many charitable and political organizations. In 2001, Morris won an Emmy for "Photobooth," a commercial for PBS.

Morris has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a MacArthur Fellowship. In 2007, he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was a graduate student at Princeton University and the University of California-Berkeley. He has received the Columbia Journalism Award and honorary degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Brandeis University, and Middlebury College.



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Cecilia Sandroni is a member of the Foreign Press in Rome, in addition to being an expert of international relations in communication. Her skills range from film to photography with a passion for human rights. Independent, creative, concrete, she has collaborated with major Italian and foreign institutions for the realization of cultural and civil projects.