

Documentary Movie Reviews

Cynthia Hsu, Michael Mazur, and SunJung So

INTRODUCTION

In our non-traditional writing guide, we ask you questions that allow your writing to take shape rather than forcing strict guidelines upon you. Keeping in mind that all writing standards are shaped and constantly changed by society, we understand the frustration when the “standard” form of a genre just does not fit what you need to write. So instead, we give you the most basic principles and all of the background information necessary for you to keep in mind while writing your documentary review, and you taper our guidelines to your needs.

UNDERSTANDING GENRE

Before you begin writing a documentary film review, you should understand what a genre is, as well as a documentary’s origins and social functions. Genres are interactions between individuals and social environments; ideas and social environments work together to create a cyclic ecosystem. In addition, communication technology and social relations significantly affect how genres are formed as well as how they change over time.

With this understanding of genre, we can now examine the documentary film review as a genre. Documentaries evolved as a response to the genre of film nearly a century ago. The film review has evolved through the mixing of the newspaper article genre, the op-ed piece genre, and the movie genre. Individuals and society interact through the work of a producer and the cast, the opinions of a review-writer, and the events that are occurring in the world. The documentary film review is written based on the type of films made. Over time the documentary film review will change, which will influence how viewers watch and interpret films. This influences the type and style of films made. As new styles of filmmaking develop, the style of movie review will continue to change. This is the “rhetorical ecosystem”.

In addition, keeping in mind differences in genres, we must also identify the differences between a documentary and a typical Hollywood movie, since these two are different genres that are essentially of the same media. For example, documentaries rarely focus on a “plot” but rather much more on its message or content. Another example is that while both documentaries and Hollywood movies are critiqued on their filming techniques, most documentaries will not be filled with special affects. So in order to improve your documentary review, you need to distinguish the aspects of the documentary you would like to review and their significance to the film before you actually begin your review process.

PURPOSE

The purpose of a documentary film review, at its most basic level, is to inform the reader about the film. Movie reviews are also used by consumers who wish to watch a movie but are unsure as to which is more worthy of their time. However, it can also be a means to voice your political, social, or moral issues. You can express your opinion as well as influence the reader's behavior. By influencing a reader, you can change how they interpret a film, which can change their understanding of their surrounding environment and how they interact within it. You can expose readers to important issues that you feel need attention.

THE WRITER'S ROLE

Having a clear understanding of the participants' role in the genre is important when writing your review. Your role as the writer is to express your intentions using the conventions of the genre and to meet the reader's expectations. The reader expects to have an understanding of what the film is about. Your intention should be to describe the film to the reader and relate it to any social, political, or moral issues that you find important.

Knowing the setting of your review will affect who is included and excluded and how you approach your writing. Typically the medium in which your review will be printed is in newspapers or online, thus your audience will vary from exclusive to comprehensive based on which newspaper or website.

Also, under what circumstances readers read the genre is important. Most readers will read the genre individually either in their free time or in a rush. Since the readers tend to read quickly, it's important to get their attention in the beginning to get them to read the entire review. The social relations of the participants in this genre are between an individual (you) and a group (general public). Although the social relation is between an individual and a group, you should write the review as if you were writing to a single individual because your audience will be reading the review individually.

Furthermore, keep in mind that documentaries appeal to only a sliver of the general public and these viewers are classified into the following two categories:

1. People who watch documentaries because they love the film that is nonfiction
2. People who watch a certain documentary because they are interested in the specific content (i.e. sports, dance, politics, history, etc.)

People in the first group need a documentary review that will tell them which movie is more worthwhile, while people in the second group is more likely to prefer a review that more deeply analyzes the content of the film (in relation to current events, social norms, etc.) You can write a documentary review for only one group or both. (If you decide to write for both audiences, you need to remember that you must talk about how the film is constructed and analyze its content at the same time).

QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED

These questions are valuable to answer before you get started because they will provide you with the adequate background information and research that you will need to include into your review. Acquiring this information beforehand and keeping it constantly in mind will smooth out your writing process.

1. ***What is the main issue/topic of the documentary? Is it a political, social, or just informative piece?*** This is the first step to writing your review. Knowing whether the documentary is political, social, or informative will affect the specific details that you choose to discuss within your review as well as slightly alter your audience.
2. ***What is the context of this issue? Is this issue controversial?*** (Do research if necessary!) Context will help both you and your readers determine the significance and accuracy of the film based on the events at the time. Including context into your review will also allow readers to see that you are knowledgeable in your topic.
3. ***What is the history of the director of the film?*** There are some directors who are well-known for making especially biased pieces (i.e. Michael Moore) or who are well-acquainted with the subjects whom they are filming, which will give you an idea as to the bias of the film.
4. ***How accurate is the documentary?*** Using the context and the history of the director, you can find out what is accurate, inaccurate, or slightly skewed about the documentary. It is very important to inform your reader about this.
5. ***What have you decided your audience to be?*** Here, you will decide whether to write to Group #1, Group #2, or both as discussed above, which will affect the style of your review. Under this question are two more specific ones:
 - a. ***What do participants have to know or believe to understand or appreciate this documentary?*** Your answer to this question is exactly the background information that what you will have to inform your reader about, whether it is in the introduction or insinuated throughout the review. For example, if your documentary is about some unheard-of sport, you may first have to explain the sport's rules in your review. Of course, you may need to do some assumptions as to what you think your audience knows and does not know.
 - b. ***Who would you like to invite into your audience and who is excluded?*** This information is very important to reveal at the beginning of your review because after the first few sentences, readers will know whether or not they are interested, and you should waste as little of their time as possible. Sometimes, making this apparent will require you to change your tone a bit to match the topic of which you are writing.
6. ***Which specific points in the film do you wish to analyze in detail?*** (These can include scenes, quotes, fluency of film, bias, use of imagery, use of music/sound, degree of interest, juxtaposition of shots, etc.) Of course, if you find more points later

that you wish to add, you should do so, but first choosing a few points means that these should be highlighted since they immediately stood out to you.

THE SPECIFICS TO WRITING A STANDARD DOCUMENTARY REVIEW

The organization of a documentary film review has many different layers. Knowing how to organize your review is critical in writing your review. The first half of the organization is broken into format, content/structure, diction/tone/point of view, and sentence structure. The second half is an understanding how to write your introduction/argument, summary/body including rhetorical appeals, and the conclusion.

FORMAT

Format is an important element in writing a documentary film review. By writing in the proper format, your audience will recognize more clearly what they are reading. This relates back to understanding the reader's expectations and understanding the conventions of the genre. The format of documentary film review begins with a title. The title should be the film's title so that the reader knows exactly what they are reading. Following the title is the author, publication date, introduction, description and critical analysis, and concluding statement. The online reviews are approximately a page wide and one or two pages long, while reviews in the newspaper are narrower and slightly longer. (To see an example of the proper format see "A Father...A Son...Once Upon a Time in Hollywood" in the appendix.)

CONTENT/STRUCTURE

When writing your review you should be aware of what kind of content needs to be included and how to structure it. The content that you need to put into your review should include a short synopsis of the film, director's name or the name of an important figure associated with the film, the film's title, specific scenes, quotes, excerpts, and any relevant historical information that is necessary. Understanding how the texts in the genre are structured, what their parts are, and what that says is important for you in writing an effective review. The typical structure of a review includes a brief description of the film's plot followed by critical analysis. Whenever making any critical analysis of the film you should supplement it with a direct quote or excerpt from the film supporting your analysis. You also want to write short paragraphs. Not only are you limited in the amount of space allotted to your review in the newspaper but also readers tend to lose focus and desire to read when there are large blocks of text.

DICTION/TONE/POINT OF VIEW

The diction and tone of the genre dictate how it is read. Your audience will typically consist of the general public and your diction should reflect that. Use simple and concise words to describe the film. Also, do not use jargon or slang when writing because it is likely that your readers have no prior knowledge on filmmaking. However, if your audience is more exclusive

with knowledge of filmmaking it is appropriate to choose the words that will appeal to them. If you are incorporating a political, social, or moral issue associated with the film, you should use words that reflect those issues.

The tone you want to convey in your review should be professional, formal, critical, and impartial. However, your tone may change based on the type of film you're reviewing and the issues associated with it. You should produce eligible and logical text rather than merely relying on your emotional feelings.

The point of view that you will primarily write in this genre will be in the second (you, your) and third person (she, he, her, his, it, they, etc.). You may want to use the second person point of view when addressing the reader and third person point of view when discussing the film and those associated with it. If you are writing a more personal opinion on the film or trying to convince the reader to side with your arguments (political, social, or moral) you may want to write in the first person point of view. By writing in the first person the reader will know the statements are your own.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

The types of sentences that you should use when writing your review vary. Though most reviews use simple, compound, and complex sentence structure, you may choose to use simple and compound to make it comprehensible by as many people as possible (Remember whom your audience consists of). You will also want most of your sentences to be active instead of passive. Active sentences allow you to focus the reader's attention on what you find important. Although you may and probably will use passive voice, keep in mind that by using passive voice you may unintentionally exclude your audience and people from your discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Before writing your introduction, you need a title, which needs to explicitly inform the reader about which film you are analyzing. Then, your first paragraph must be written to attract readers' attention. It should briefly summarize the film in one or two sentences; give critical information like the names of the main characters and director; and the title. The last sentence of your introduction is usually your thesis.

ARGUMENT/THESIS

Your thesis or argument will be included in the end of your introduction. You will support and refer back to this statement throughout your review. (Of course, this is not an essay, so you do not have to constantly support your thesis, but you should keep it in mind as your ultimate message.) Because you are writing a standard review, your thesis should specifically address the film and cover the important points that the reader needs to know. By reading your thesis your reader should have a basic understanding of what you want to convey.

Example from Appendix B:

After all, this intriguing film not only investigates the depths of McNamara's character, but also questions the moralities of war and human nature, both in revealing detail.

SUMMARY/BODY

The body of your review should include a description of the film and your critical analysis. When describing the film you should include quotes, excerpts, specific scenes, and any outside information you find necessary. By using direct quotes and specific scenes, you give the reader a clearer description of the film. Because you are limited to a certain amount of space, you will not be able to write a detailed description of the film. You will want to include only major thematic elements that occur and have relevance to any issues you wish to discuss. When presenting any critical analysis and making an argument you need to follow it up with evidence to support your stance. Evidence will typically consist of quotes, outside facts (from a credible source), specific scenes, and information on those associated with the film (such as director's motives). By supporting your arguments with evidence, you establish merit with your readers. To make your arguments and critical analysis more convincing you will want to use rhetorical appeals.

Example from Appendix A:

While it is an interesting look into the lives of what some have called Hollywood royalty there isn't much deep inquiry into their lives, which can be attributed to the fact that Grant is a close friend of the Douglas family.

USE OF RHETORICAL APPEALS

The three main rhetorical appeals are ethos, pathos, and logos, and we will show you how each can be used to improve the persuasiveness of your writing.

Ethos

This is the amount of authority that you show within your review. Conviction is one of the most important things necessary to make someone believe you. Oftentimes people may still doubt you when you are entirely correct merely because your attitude was hesitant. Here are some ways to enhance your knowledgeable image:

- Use numbers and statistics to prove your point
- Quote important, relevant sources and explain their significance
- Use an authoritative tone and include any relevant credentials if applicable

Pathos

This is the use of emotional appeal to reach out and persuade your audience. How to use pathos will largely depend on what your topic is, but here are some tips:

- Most common sympathy-inducing circumstances include people suffering or people who are perseverant and courageous beyond normal capability
- When you describe the situation, emphasize the most emotional details and give reasons for the audience to empathize with the subjects of the film

Logos

This is the use of logic to convince your audience, which can be one of the most simple or most difficult things to do. Most importantly, your argument needs to make sense and follow smoothly. Make sure you do not contradict yourself and that all of your evidence supports or leads up to the thesis that you made in your introduction.

Example from Appendix D:

And, while McNamara admits to his mistakes, he never exactly apologizes for them. Of course, he is a man who ran a bombing campaign that killed 2 million Vietnamese people for seemingly intangible reasons. However, he still feels that “the United States of America fought in Vietnam for eight years for what it believed to be good and honest reasons... to protect our security, prevent the spread of totalitarian communism, and promote individual freedom and political democracy.” Unfortunately, these reasons are not quite so persuasive to the 3.4 million dead Vietnamese and 58 thousand dead Americans.

CONCLUSION

When writing the conclusion, keep in mind that you should not summarize what you wrote in your review. It is appropriate to reiterate your main argument, but more importantly, your conclusion should raise questions that will capture the reader’s interest. You can also insert a memorable quote from the film or a short statement, sometimes even a fragment, which points out irony, makes a controversial argument, or restates your thesis in a quirky way – anything that captures your reader’s attention. That way, after they read your review, no matter whether or not they decide to see the film, they will still remember your message.

Example from Appendix A:

While there isn’t a very deep exploration into the father-son relationship one would expect or hope from a documentary about the history of two of the most prominent men in Hollywood of their given era, the film’s final scene sums up their relationship rather nicely. Kirk asked, “Was I a good father?” with Michael responding, “You have ultimately been a great father.”

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS AND VARIATIONS

There are several important social functions to the genre. The most basic social function is to inform a reader about a film. Deeper social functions include influencing a person's perception of their social environment, influencing the economics of the film industry through an influence on sales, and influencing how a person watches and interprets a film.

If your intentions in writing a review are more specific or varied, you may want to look into several variations of the genre that will allow you to achieve your intentions. For example, you could choose to write the review in the form of an advertisement, a letter, or a comic strip as well as in a political tone. If you wish to give the deep impression of the film to the readers by emphasizing favorable commentaries, writing an advertisement review would be suitable. Rather than providing specific description of the film, illustrating strongly effective expressions would be necessary. While writing the review in the form of an advertisement, the most significant factor to consider would be intentionally describing the film with the extreme of merits excluding demerits. Writing a letter to the director will allow you to spend more time voicing your personal opinion and exclude having to write a description of the film. You could also choose to write the review with a strong political or social bias. For example, Appendix D shows a movie review written with strong ties to current political events and clearly advocates a political position. These are just examples of different variations that you can try in order to taper the genre of documentary reviews to your intentions. However, feel free to be creative.

A CHECKLIST OF DOS & DON'TS

Do

- Understand whom your audience consists of
- Understand your role as the writer and the reader's role
- Use the proper format: title, author, date/publication, introduction, body/summary, and conclusion
- Include the title and director's name in the introduction
- Do have a thesis
- Give evidence supporting your critical analysis and arguments
- Use quotes, specific scenes, excerpts, and facts as evidence
- Use concise and simple words
- Write in short paragraphs
- Use a formal tone
- Write in second and third person point of view
- Use simple and compound sentences so your audience can easily comprehend your writing
- Use rhetorical appeals to convey your arguments

- Do have a catchy but profound conclusion

DON'T

- Don't use too many passive sentences
- Don't contradict yourself.
- Don't use slang or jargon
- Don't use large blocks of text
- Don't write extremely long reviews

Appendix A: Standard Documentary Review #1

A Father . . . A Son . . . Once Upon a Time in Hollywood

By: Michael Mazur

8/10/06

One man is one of the last of the golden age of Hollywood and the other is one of the most popular leading men in today's film industry. Both have earned Oscars for their work and have been pioneers in their films and the treatment of Hollywood. Director Lee Grant's documentary "*A Father...A Son...Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*" is a look into the careers and personal lives of Kirk and Michael Douglas. Grant uses footage of home videos from the Douglas family, interviews with family members, and film clips to tell their story. It is an interesting and entertaining yet biased look into their lives.

Through the use of interviews with the two men, their family members (including Kirk's wife Anne, ex-wife and Michael's mother Diana, Michael's brothers, and Kirk's sister Fritzi), and friends, Grant shows the complexity of a father-son relationship that was strained by the Hollywood lifestyle that accompanies stardom. While it is an interesting look into the lives of what some have called Hollywood royalty there isn't much deep inquiry into their lives, which can be attributed to the fact that Grant is a close friend of the Douglas family.

Issues such as Kirk's womanizing and infidelity are brought up but are quickly dismissed as unimportant. Interviewee George Schlatter, a film executive, says that Kirk isn't completely to blame for his infidelity, believing rather that the women who threw themselves at him are to be blamed. Kirk goes on to say "I have had lots of women in my life. Women to me are a byproduct of success." Even Michael's alcohol abuse is brought up quickly and dismissed. The film slowly transitions from an examination of the father-son relationship to a compilation of films that each actor has been associated with, without any coherence to why these clips were chosen.

Grant breaks the documentary into two halves, each part focusing on each actor's career. The first half is a look at Kirk Douglas's career and personal life beginning with his tumultuous relationship with his father. It goes on to chronicle his film career with film clips taken from his career. Interviews with his family and friends show a man who fathered children with two different wives, seemed to have little time for his family, spent much of his time working on films, and whose constant infidelity put a strain on the family. Much of these issues are portrayed in a light that shows Kirk as simply being a free spirit that needed freedom. There isn't any responsibility placed on his actions.

The second half of the film is treated much like the first half, dedicated to Michael Douglas and his personal life, career, and struggle to step out of the shadow of his father. Michael's personal life is a near mirror image of his father's; he also fathered children with two separate wives and battle alcoholism, little of which is shown. Grant instead focuses on the struggle that Michael had to endure to step out of the large shadow his father cast in the film industry. The interviewees, instead of talking about Michael's strained relationship with his father, regale of his work on *Fatal Attraction* and the story of Brian DePalma's reluctance to direct if Douglas was cast in the

film. There is some talk about Michael's need for his father's approval but that too is only a short portion of the sequence.

Even with the lack of exploration into their relationship, Grant manages to have several scenes that give a glimpse into what their relationship is like. There are scenes with the two men sitting at a table discussing their personal and professional relationship. There is an interesting conversation between the two regarding the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Michael was producer and the main role went to Jack Nicholson instead of Kirk who had played the main role on Broadway and owned the rights to the story. The incident with the film strained their relationship 30 years ago and with this scene it is evident that they both reconciled and now have a loving relationship although Kirk doesn't let Michael forget that it was his film. Grant ties up the film quiet well with Kirk stating that his greatest accomplishment has been reconnecting with his sons. "I finally got in contact with all my sons from my first marriage and from my second marriage. That was very important to me, because it leads to contact with my grandchildren. I'm in the late stage of life. I have become interested in what is the world going to do with our grandchildren."

While there isn't a very deep exploration into the father-son relationship one would expect or hope from a documentary about the history of two of the most prominent men in Hollywood of their given era, the film's final scene sums up their relationship rather nicely. Kirk asked, "Was I a good father?" with Michael responding, "You have ultimately been a great father."

Appendix B: Standard Documentary Review #2

The Fog of War: Movie Review

By Cynthia Hsu

In “the Fog of War,” Errol Morris and Robert S. McNamara come together through interview to create a seemingly reflective film, but the questions that it raises probe deeply into the viewers’ consciences. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the film won a 2004 Academy Award for the Best Documentary. After all, this intriguing film not only investigates the depths of McNamara’s character, but also questions the moralities of war and human nature, both in revealing detail.

If you worry that this documentary will just be boring shots of a talking head, you will be wrong. Although the film was created from 23 hours of interview between McNamara and Morris, Morris has the uncanny ability to solidify the abstract by adding in graphics, charts, moving titles, tape-recordings of Oval Office discussions, archival footage, and other visual effects to bring ideas to life.

For example, while McNamara describes his work at Ford in the 1950s, trying to make cars “safer envelopes” for the human meat inside, Morris recreates the engineers’ experiments dropping human skulls wrapped in cloth down a stairwell. These kinds of imagery bring reality and context to the film. And Philip Glass’ somewhat disquieting, but entirely exquisite and suitable score merely adds to the film’s tone.

However, the most obviously fascinating is the interviewee himself. A Harvard graduate and high-level military advisor during WWII, McNamara moved on to become president of the Ford Company and afterwards, possibly most infamously, became Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, at the height of the Vietnam War. He was one of the main architects advocating the Vietnam War and sending US troops into Vietnam. In 1968, he resigned and became president of the World Bank for 13 more years.

One would think that a man with this many credentials would have never made any mistakes in his life. And Errol Morris sets out to disprove this, to show McNamara both as a decent man who cared about his society, but also as a man who made mistakes that caused serious damage to the world. Of course to most people, a man who ran a bombing campaign that killed 2 million Vietnamese people for seemingly intangible reasons will receive large amounts of bias, and yet Morris tries to change this bias, to show a certain humanity to McNamara.

After all, McNamara does try to reveal honesty within the film. He does offer one line that can so ambiguously be taken as both self-indictment and self-justification. He says, “[General Curtis] LeMay [who was a colonel in a B-24 squadron in the Second World War] said if we had lost the war, we would have been prosecuted as war criminals. And I think he’s right.... What makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?”

That question is one that chillingly reminds the audience of some of the injustices in the law as well as in the image of morality. And while McNamara seems to be revealing his wrongs in that statement, he is also defending his actions by setting them as a convention of war. That raises the disconcerting thought that perhaps immorality can be justified by convention.

Morris' film succeeds in revealing the character of McNamara in a human way. He shows that McNamara has moments of hesitation too. At the end of the film when Morris asks if McNamara feels at all responsible or guilty for what happened in Vietnam, McNamara replies, "I don't want to go any further into this." Morris states that this was only one of the many questions that McNamara refused to answer, and while you might be aggravated by the lack of potentially interesting answers, Morris uses the information that he has to show the contradictions in McNamara's supposed honesty, because McNamara's silences say much about his character, too.

Perhaps, McNamara does not want to take the responsibility, but also maybe he believes that even if he did do such a thing, nothing would be changed and it would have been a useless gesture. But most of all, it shows that even for powerful leaders, there are some things they regret and some places they are unwilling to go.

Appendix C: Variation Documentary Review #1

“Bowling for Columbine”

Director: Michael Moore
Released Date: 2002
Running Time: 119 minutes

“Provocative!” “Incendiary!”

“The most intriguing and fascinating documentary ever!”

Have you been aware of the rapid pervasiveness of the gun-related violence? Do you and your family feel out of danger? How would you protect your family from the brutal gun violence?

“Bowling for Columbine” is the documentary film directed and featured by Michael Moore, who is well known as the film director for “Roger and Me” as well as “Fahrenheit 911”. He, among the three different documentary movies, zealously describes socially discussed contemporary subjects. Moore is widely known for his explicit critical perspectives on current social and political events.

Moore, throughout the documentary, illustrates the humorous and horrifying scenes about the violence of firearms in the United States. He, like everyone else, wonders how such a terrible incident occurred and judiciously seeks for the interrelated causes. Moore not only incisively examines the horrific massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado but also comprehensively expresses his critical views on gun violence in American society.

Moore’s humorous expressions upon occasions not only make the film more entertaining but also emphasize more somberness in contrast. “Bowling for Columbine” definitely is the documentary movie that tends to arouse audience’s sorrow and enjoyment at once.

The film won the 55th Anniversary Prize at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival receiving standing applause at the end of the documentary as well as many other awards in the category of the best documentary movie.

The winner of the best documentary film from:

Academy Award 2003
International Documentary Association 2003
Broadcast Film Critics Association 2003
Toronto Film Critics Association 2002
National Board of Review 2002
L.A. Film Critics Association 2002
Independent Spirit Award 2002
French Academy of Cinema 2002
Chicago Film Critics Association 2002

Appendix D: Variation Documentary Review #2

The Fog of War: May Clear Government's Cloudy Vision

By Cynthia Hsu

August 10, 2006

“The Fog of War,” a documentary of the life and decisions of Robert S. McNamara, is exceptionally revealing in its exploration of human nature and the morality of war, transcendent through time. And while Errol Morris had no direct political intentions when he filmed his movie, parallels can easily be made between the main topic of his documentary, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War of today.

Robert McNamara was himself a fascinating character. A Harvard graduate and high-level military advisor during WWII, McNamara moved on to become president of the Ford Company and afterwards, possibly most infamously, became Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, at the height of the Vietnam War, before resigning to become president of the World Bank for 13 more years. And he performed in every career without hesitation.

That is why it may come as a shock when McNamara shows the first signs of uncertainty in his interview with Morris. He talks of the Vietnam War being a mistake and even goes so far as to admit that the administration kept “ravaging a beautiful country and sending young Americans to their death year after year, because they [the war planners] had no other plan.” This may be slightly, or very, disconcerting when contrasted to how urgently he pushed for the continuation of the Vietnam War in the 1960's. Now our government is ravaging another country and killing thousands of people for a new war that might become the same quagmire Vietnam was.

And, while McNamara admits to his mistakes, he never exactly apologizes for them. Of course, he is a man who ran a bombing campaign that killed 2 million Vietnamese people for seemingly intangible reasons. However, he still feels that “the United States of America fought in Vietnam for eight years for what it believed to be good and honest reasons... to protect our security, prevent the spread of totalitarian communism, and promote individual freedom and political democracy.” Unfortunately, these reasons are not quite so persuasive to the 3.4 million dead Vietnamese and 58 thousand dead Americans.

It may also be disconcerting to hear that by 1966, McNamara had already become “increasingly skeptical of our ability to achieve our political objectives in Vietnam through military means.” However, that didn't stop his involvement in shaping Vietnam policy or hold back his comments to the public that the US would soon win the war. Won't that send a chill down your spine the next time you hear one of our dear political executives tell us that we are about to win the war in Iraq?

McNamara blames his actions on the need for him to support his president unquestioningly, yet he admits that in hindsight, that was not necessarily the most intelligent or the most beneficial action. Setting an example, Cyrus Vance resigned because he could not advocate President Carter's mission into Iran. Similarly, why cannot our current political leaders support the actions

they believe are moral rather than the ones President Bush believes in? Perhaps in a few decades, our political leaders will be acknowledging regret for their decisions too.

At least McNamara does confess that American made the mistake of misunderstanding the ambitions of the Vietnamese people. We held on to our fears of communism even when evidence proved nationalism and otherwise. We deceived ourselves into believing that the Vietnamese were begging for our aid, just as now we wrongly assume that the Iraqis would welcome the U.S. and British troops as liberators because of our “essential goodness.” We again fail to recognize that US occupation of another country looks quite different to that country’s nationals than it does to us.

Morris is able to draw out some of McNamara’s discomforts throughout the interview and the film. At the end of the film when Morris asks if McNamara feels at all responsible or guilty for what happened in Vietnam, McNamara replies, “I don’t want to go any further into this.” Morris states that this was only one of the many questions that McNamara refused to answer. Perhaps he does not want to take the responsibility, but also maybe he believes that even if he did do such a thing, nothing would be changed and it would have been a useless gesture that would have merely incited more criticism.

This is a great example of McNamara’s humanness that Morris tries to portray, for many reasons. Perhaps he wants to show that even the most decisive of political leaders can have afterthoughts. Or maybe he wants to suggest to the audience that it would be wiser to reconsider the judgment of another war now rather than expressing remorse four decades later.