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"She Became the Poster Child for Torture": An Interview with "Standard Operating Procedure" Director Errol Morris

By [Emily Wilson](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [May 17, 2008](#).

In his new documentary, Errol Morris revisits Abu Ghraib, asking tough questions about what was and wasn't revealed in those famous photographs.

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In his first documentary, *Gates of Heaven*, which critic Roger Ebert calls one of the ten best films of all time, Errol Morris examined two California pet cemeteries. Since then the Academy Award-winning filmmaker has made movies about physicist Steven Hawking, lion tamers, and former Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. His 1988 movie, *The Thin Blue Line*, controversial for its use of reenactments and a musical score by Philip Glass, is credited with overturning the conviction of a man on death row. Morris returns to investigating in his latest movie, *Standard Operating Procedure*, about the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

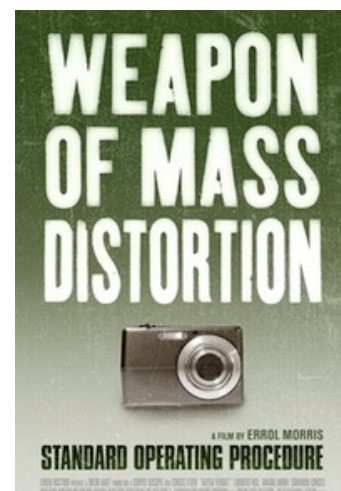
Morris, who has been writing about photography for the *New York Times* website in a blog called Zoom, was fascinated by the photos that came out of Abu Ghraib -- of prisoners being humiliated, piled together, leashed and standing on a box wearing a hood.

Morris interviewed five of the seven members of the 372nd Military Police Company indicted, including Lynndie England, who was in the infamous photo holding a man on a leash, and Sabrina Harmon, who is seen smiling and giving a thumbs up sign next to a dead man in another photo. Other interviews include the very angry Janis Karpinski, the former brigadier general who was the head of the prison system in Iraq before being demoted, and Brent Pack, who was responsible for investigating the photographs. Morris also has a book coming out with the same title that he collaborated on with *Paris Review* editor and *New Yorker* staff writer Philip Gourevitch.

Like *The Thin Blue Line*, *Standard Operating Procedure* has reenactments, slow motion and eerie music, in this movie by Danny Elfman, who scores Tim Burton's films. Morris has said he sees his latest project as a non-fiction horror movie. AlterNet writer Emily Wilson caught up with Errol Morris before the screening of *Standard Operating Procedure* at San Francisco's International Film Festival.

AlterNet: You say you are interested in the context in which the photos were taken. What is that context?

Errol Morris: The important thing to remember about a photograph is it rips a piece of reality, preserving it as if in aspic, but we don't see to the left, to the right, to the top, to the bottom, before or after. That is the context. What are we really looking at? What happened around this picture? Is what we are seeing representative of something and if so what?



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AlterNet:What does the context your movie provides change about the pictures we saw?

Errol Morris: I just wrote an essay for the *Times* about one photograph: Sabrina Harmon's smile and the thumbs up and the body of [Manadel] Al-Jamadi. You look at that photograph you think she killed him. She didn't kill him. The CIA killed him. She was taking those pictures; she was in that room to provide photographic evidence of a crime. She photographs a murder to prove a crime has been committed and she spends a year in prison and the person responsible for killing the guy has never been charged with anything. How's that for context?

AlterNet: You say you love to investigate, like you did in *The Thin Blue Line*. Do you have any hopes for what the outcome of the investigation will be?

Errol Morris: I'd like to see the right people blamed and prosecuted. This is a bad time for this country. It's a very bad time when people responsible for crimes walk away and lowly soldiers are scapegoated and imprisoned. I think it's just wrong.

AlterNet: Do you feel what happened there was part of a well-orchestrated plan or do you think these people were just put in horrible situation and didn't know what to do?

Errol Morris: Both. It's not A or B -- it's A and B. There were policies, well-known policies, that used women to humiliate Iraqi men, policies that relaxed the idea of what was permissible in interrogations, that allowed torture. There was an understaffed under-trained military in Iraq on the whole and Abu Ghraib in particular. It was a disaster waiting to happen, but there were policies in place that certainly encouraged it to happen.

AlterNet: In an essay for NPR's "This I Believe," you said you believe in truth. Do you think you found some truth in this movie?

Errol Morris: Films aren't the truth. This film is my attempt to find out something new. Truth is a pursuit, not something just handed over to you in a movie. The hope, of course, is you go to a movie and you think: you think about stuff that maybe you haven't thought about before, you think about what might be truth and what might be false, you think about what really happened, about who got blamed and who didn't, about justice, you think about, hopefully, a lot of things.

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Emily Wilson is a freelance writer and teaches basic skills at City College of San Francisco.

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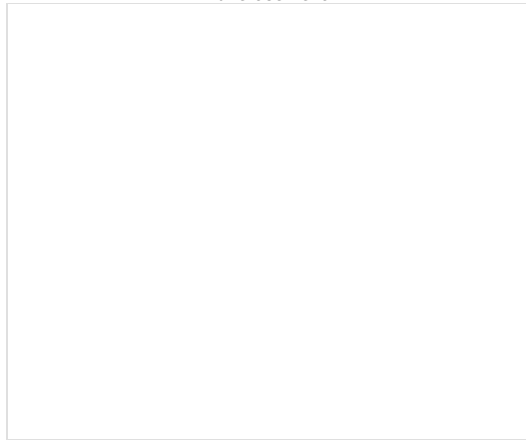
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