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## TIFF13 Review: The Unknown Known (2013)

Posted by Brandy Dean September 11, 2013 0 Comment 1340 views

After seeing Errol Morris' 2008 *The Fog of War*, which I admired very much, I was perplexed to catch an interview on NPR with Morris that outlined the extraordinary anger that some people felt. It's not so much that this enraged contingent of the audience disliked the results, but objected the mere fact giving Robert McNamara any media exposure. McNamara was the bogeyman for a generation much earlier than mine, so I just didn't see it that way. Donald Rumsfeld, on the other, is my generation's bogeyman. And he and Morris go head to head in *The Unknown Known*. At best this is a draw. At worst, point Rumsfeld.

There are too many chilling points in *The Unknown Known* to list – we would be here all day. Here's the one that sent a particularly chilly shiver down my spine. Donald Rumsfeld is having *fun*. He digresses, dissembles, and engages in the kind of dazzling semantic gymnastics he's known for and all the while he smiles like the cat that ate the canary. Seriously, he all but has a wee yellow feather peeking from the corner of his mouth. And as Morris ranges over the copious document that is Rumsfeld long political career – archival footage of press conferences, media appearances, and *thousands* of memos – it becomes clear Rumsfeld was always having fun. He sparred with the press and sparred with the administration, all very publicly, and I'll be damned, he misses that.

Take this apparent fact and those aforementioned memos – “snowflakes” as Rumsfeld fondly calls them – and everything about Rumsfeld is a performance. Those memos are a central organizing principle in *The Unknown Known*. When you can't ring anything out of a subject, Morris seems to suggest, you can examine the totality his of oeuvre and surely something will be revealed. But Rumsfeld's memos are not personal thoughts and not journal entries. Rather they are tiny literary works, just another facet of the administration hopping Donald Rumsfeld show. All the world is his stage, literally and terrifyingly.

Ultimately, *The Unknown Known* is less related to McNamara and *The Fog of War* and more related

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to Joyce McKinney and **Tabloid**. The pleasure we take in that documentary derives not from watching McKinney crack under the weight of forced self-reflection, but rather from watching a true sociopath bob and weave. In **Tabloid**, we know and Morris knows that McKinney lacks empathy, introspection, and it make completely of guile. The difference here is that Joyce McKinney, aside from that Mormon she probably abused, leaves very little impact on the world. Donald Rumsfeld cut a swath of destruction in his wake making this film less delightful and more nauseating.

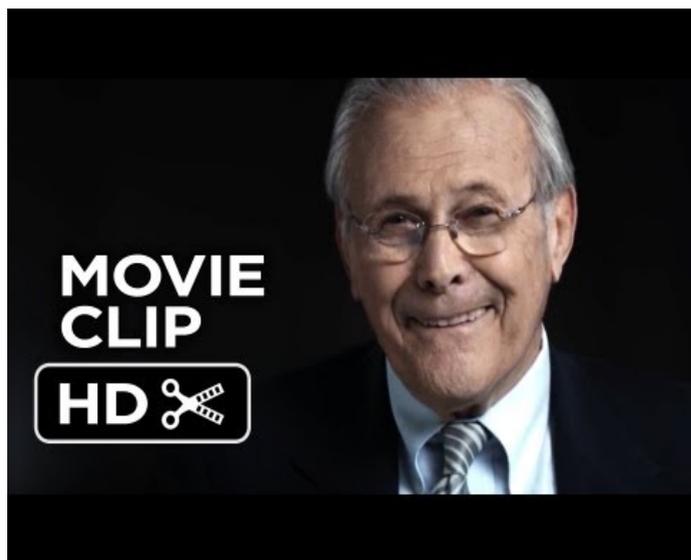
When describing exactly what it is that Errol Morris is a Morris neophyte, I like to say, "He gives everyone enough rope to hang themselves." Turns out, if you give Donald Rumsfeld enough rope, he hog ties you. One this is revealed however. Donald Rumsfeld has a tell: when he is about to commit an act of war on meaning, he slows a beat and delivers a very folksy interjection. Morris is not unaware that he has perhaps met his match, leading to the final moment – and the most chilling one – of **The Unknown Known**. "Why are you doing this?" Morris queries. Rumsfeld, complete with cheshire-cat grin: "That is a vicious question, Errol. I'll be darned if I know!"

### Screening Times for The Unknown Known

Sunday September 8 TIFF Bell Lightbox 1 6:45 PM

Tuesday September 10 The Bloor Hot Docs Cinema 9:00 AM

### Watch a clip from The Unknown Known



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ERROL MORRIS FESTIVAL COVERAGE TIFF13

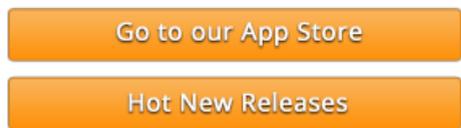


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## About Brandy Dean



Social media consultant, blogger for hire, and lover of classic movies and silent films.

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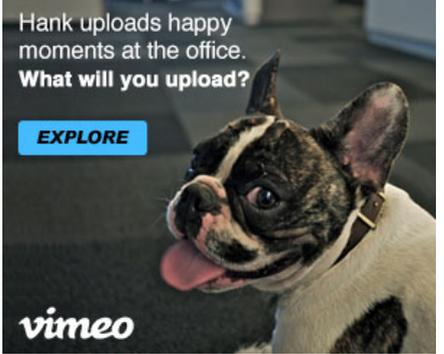
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