

ANNETTE SEIFERT

## What's in a picture?

### *Standard Operating Procedure*

After making history by opening the Berlinale with Scorsese's Stones documentary *Shine A Light*, Oscar-winning director Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* will be the first documentary to enter the competition of the film festival. Just in time for the US primaries and to remind a world that is too quick to forget of the infamous pictures of abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners by American military personnel in Abu Ghraib. The story broke in the spring of 2004 and led to a public outrage and subsequent apology by George W. Bush before it was pushed back from everyone's consciousness after the guilty parties got sentenced.

Only, it's never as easy as that and the question of guilt is one of many that the documentary manages to raise. It's a big topic, but Morris decided to focus on the people, not the media frenzy and trials, and tells his story through interviews with most of the involved soldiers, including Lynndie England, Megan Ambuhl and Javal Davis amongst others. These interviews are intercut with the photos themselves, some actual video footage and dramatic re-enactments that range from perversely beautiful to highly uncomfortable due to the extreme close-ups chosen most of the time, filling out the frame and making it impossible not to look.

Morris lets the interviews speak for themselves for the most part and viewer reaction in the cinema included everything from laughter over shock to disbelieving headshakes. They don't really manage to shed any new light on what happened and how it could happen. The excuses and ways of blaming anyone else are familiar and along the worn-out path of "I was only following orders." to "I never know what to do with my hands in a photograph so I just gave the thumbs-up.". Hey, you're lying to me and you're lying to yourself, Morris's interview technique makes that clear.

The most damning interview comes from former Brigadier General Janis Karpinski who was in charge of Iraqi prisons at the time of the abuse. She manages to open up the frame and hint at the bigger picture behind it all, with the chilling message that Abu Ghraib was less of a singular event and more of an emblematic problem. The difference of course is that, for this instance, we have the photos to prove it. Or do we?



This is where *Standard*

**"We're Americans. We know right from wrong." - Janis Karpinski**

*Operating Procedure* is so powerful. It opens and closes with photographs of a sunset as seen from Abu Ghraib, yet – symbolically – we never do go outside of the prison. It's all in the framing and that thought runs like a silent commentary through the film. What's in a picture? Does a photo show the truth or is it merely a representation of a part of the truth? Seeing how some of the widely publicised photos were cropped, leaving out another guilty party, the truth is – at best – highly questionable.

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And how truthful is a photo when the higher-ups are too smart to get caught in one? Morris doesn't exactly leave it up to the viewer to decide how to feel towards England and anyone else involved, but he also shows them to be mere pawns. It would have been easy to vilify them – and they do a more than good job of that themselves – but the bigger picture emerging behind it all is where this documentary succeeds, making it clear that they are scapegoats. Guilty scapegoats, but nonetheless, despite all the photos we have and all the interviews that are shown, we only get to see that little frame in the middle of the big frame. The rest is, literally, in the dark.

Errol Morris: Academy Award for *Fog of War*. Other selected docs include: *The Thin Blue Line*, *A Brief History of Time*. He also writes a blog at the NY Times (<http://morris.blogs.nytimes.com/>).