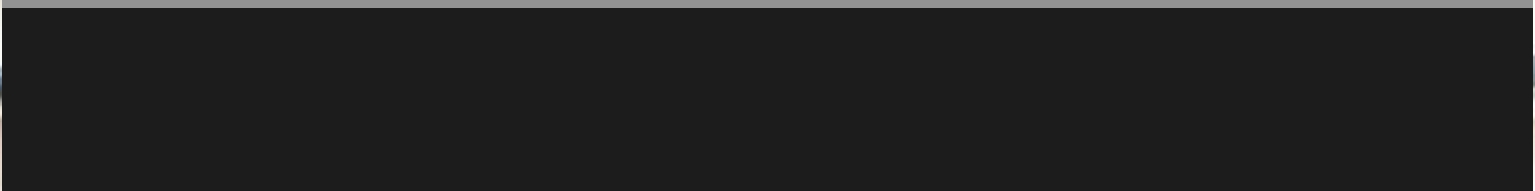


Tuesday, November 5, 2019

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DOCUMENTARY FILM

Dharma Bum

Errol Morris' Dunderheaded Steve Bannon Documentary

November 4, 2019 Michael Giltz

If you want to make a film about the denizens of a small town, you call someone like director Errol Morris.

If you want to take down a two-bit shyster, once upon a time you called Mike Wallace and ordered up a hard-hitting expose for 60 Minutes.

But Mike Wallace interviewing a thoughtful intellectual? No. Errol Morris confronting a doofus doing damage? No thanks. Confronting is not in Morris's DNA.

AMERICAN DHARMA (1/5 stars)

Directed by: Errol Morris

Running time: 95 min.

No one told Morris that. In fact, winning an Oscar for *The Fog Of War: Eleven Lessons From The Life Of Robert S. McNamara* apparently taught him he's the perfect person to speak with and understand political gadfly Steve Bannon.

And that's how we arrive at the worst film of Morris's career. *American Dharma* glorifies Bannon, treats him like a Very Important Person, seems to think he has intellectual depths waiting to be plumbed, and gives him the setting of his dreams in which to spout nonsense. The worst thing one can say is that Bannon must surely love this movie. Morris would hope that's because his documentary is fair. Morris is wrong. A fair film, a serious film, a documentary rooted in facts would not please Bannon in the least.

Perplexed But Polite

Instead, Morris has badly conceived and badly executed *American Dharma*. It's a perplexed but polite profile of Bannon, an unimportant producer of right-wing "documentaries" turned hate merchant for the Breitbart website. Most famously, for a very brief period of about one year, Bannon was a political player leading Donald Trump's campaign and then a top adviser during the early days of a very unexpected Presidency.

Bannon's usefulness gone and his desire for media attention too strong, Trump dumped him. Now Bannon wanders the world, hoping to step back into the spotlight by coaching far-right politicians liked accused child-molester Roy Moore of Alabama, stirring up muck around the Catholic Church, and cheering on fascists like Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil.

In short, Bannon is a crappy filmmaker, a political operative of very little substance who got lucky precisely once, and the opposite of a deep thinker. Like Joaquin Phoenix's *Joker*, Bannon finds it easy to encourage anarchy, to yell and scream and burn things down. Offering up ideas for what comes next or even explaining the rage he's kindled? Not so much.

The Third B.S.

That's the central problem with *American Dharma*, the third in a trilogy of portrait films. The first was *The Fog Of War*, focusing on Robert McNamara, the "architect" of Vietnam. McNamara is a controversial, significant figure in recent American history. His performance in the film is half witness for the defense and half mea culpa and it's fascinating to see McNamara wrestle with what he did. To some degree, McNamara has regrets and wants to explain or understand why. You can debate whether he's seen the light or just trying to rescue his reputation, but Morris's film observes all this calmly and keenly.

The second film is *The Unknown Known*, about Donald Rumsfeld. It's less satisfying if only because Rumsfeld is such a Sphinx-like person. He's certainly not had a Road To Damascus moment and so Morris's hands-off observation isn't nearly so useful. Yet Rumsfeld is also unquestionably a figure of import in recent American history. He was a congressman and adviser to four Presidents, not to mention Secretary Of Defense. So his self-serving dance with the facts has a certain fascination.

But now we come to American Dharma, where Morris wrongly treats Bannon as if he too has some intellectual heft, as though Bannon weren't a footnote even compared with minor historical figures like McNamara and Rumsfeld.

Bannon spouts off secondhand philosophizing such as the fourth turning, the pseudo-scientific claim that history occurs in cycles. But he's no historian or thinker of any sort. The film attempts to undercut some of Bannon's flimsier dissembling by tossing up headlines and video that glancingly show him to be full of b.s., but those barely register.

The biggest problem is that Morris can't debate. Without breaking a sweat, William F. Buckley Jr. or Jon Stewart could eviscerate Bannon in one segment of their old talk shows. One would do it with ideas, the other with comic insight. Morris just sits there, befuddled.

Twelve O'Clock Low

Bannon and Morris also discuss old movies, with all the depth of two guys at a bar drinking beer and waxing poetic over *The Shawshank Redemption*. But Bannon is no film scholar, either.

Morris has produced an entire film with a wrongheaded conceit. When he doesn't show Bannon wandering around and thinking deep thoughts, he interviews him in a mock-up of a set from the Gregory Peck film *Twelve O'Clock High*, the Quonset hut where an American bomber group meets before heading out on dangerous raids. Morris has recreated it from the film with meticulous detail, down to a Robin Hood mug that sits on a mantel. The men turn it a certain way when someone gives them a mission. It's one of Bannon's favorite movies.

But Bannon's rambling, confused praise of that film or *The Bridge On The River Kwai* and the like accomplishes little. And it's bizarre that Morris presents him in such a heroic light. The film ends with Bannon striding up to the mantle and turning the mug because, by God, he's got a mission. How's that for glorification?

Actually, the final shot is the Quonset hut going up in flames. Maybe Morris intends that as an ironic commentary on the senseless damage this man has wrought, ruining even his own movie-centric idea of what it means to sacrifice and be a hero. But really he's just burning shit up. Morris doesn't understand that Bannon will see it, nod his head and think, "Cool!"

Tags: American Dharma, Errol Morris, Steve Bannon



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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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