

SYNÆSTHESIA

COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

Communications Journal
ISSN 1883-5953

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film review
Summer 2014
pp. 3 – 5

published by



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 Review of *The Writer with No Hands* (Bus Fare Film, 2014)

The famed writer Mark Twain once quipped, “It’s no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.” *The Writer with No Hands* is a fascinating, and at times ironic, multilayered study in the forms of tension that build in people seeking truth set against those seeking to create or maintain a fiction. The documentary centers on the tenacious efforts of Matthew Alford, a journalist and scholar unswervingly devoted to making sense of and uncovering the truth about the suspicious disappearance of Gary DeVore, a late Hollywood screenwriter whose death, it appears, was part of a wider government conspiracy. Juxtaposed, and sometimes seemingly opposed, to Alford is the documentary’s Director William Westaway, who attempts to test, or temper with shades of skepticism, Alford’s enthusiasm to uncover the real story.

The audience senses a measure of tension early on in the opening scene, a black screen with the words of Westaway splayed across it, “Do you think I came into this documentary with a game plan?” to which Alford responds, “Yes, you wanted to make a human interest story – you said that right from the beginning.” The diverging game plans and the energy with which these two characters play them out create an ideal level of friction to keep the audience fixed on sifting through the fictions for parcels of truth which have since developed around the DeVore murder mystery.

We learn that shortly after DeVore went missing *America’s Most Wanted*, a popular American TV series devoted to recreating and dramatizing dubious abductions and other crimes, generated not a single lead. As the details in the documentary unfold, we hear more about the bizarre, if not unbelievable, circumstances surrounding DeVore’s sudden disappearance: the manner in which his car, purportedly, turned up a year later in the California aqueduct; the report in which California Highway Patrol labels the incident an accident; the questionable explanations given by investigators (he’d driven his car into the aqueduct); his missing laptop, firearm and, of course, his hands.



Alford deploys toilet tissue and a toy car to demonstrate the messy and confused accounts given for the appearance of DeVore’s car in the California Aqueduct.

Notwithstanding the obvious necessity of hands to hold a steering wheel to guide a car (with headlamps turned off) going against traffic through a gap in an aqueduct barrier in the middle of the night, various other key details concerning the incident appear to point directly to foul play.

We follow Alford on his survey of clues from Bath, England to Hollywood, USA. Along the journey, we’re invited at the outset for a walk through a wooded area to a summit where in a clearing stands Sham Castle, a “folly” from the British Empire built on the ruins of the long-vanished Roman Empire, which Alford describes as a symbol of contemporary democracy. If the castle façade were a mask made purely for show, the same can be said of American Empire, notes Alford, where TV, cinema, and other media serve as a folly to distract the attention of citizens from focusing on the significant stories that hold real meaning in our lives. The meaning of Alford’s search for truth is certainly not lost on him: “If we could prove ... the US had killed someone in the Hollywood industry purely for reasons of censorship, that would be huge.”



Sham Castle stands on Bathwick Hill overlooking the city of Bath and serving as an elaborate structure that masks vast emptiness.

The intrigue grows as we’re introduced to stories of past writers and journalists who had met suspicious ends, as their investigations would embarrass, threaten or challenge figures in the hallowed halls of established power. Among them are references to Gary Webb, a journalist who in 1996 published a series of exposés detailing the CIA’s tacit involvement in the funding of Nicaragua’s Sandinistas through crack cocaine sales in Los Angeles during the 1980s.¹ Also referenced is the case of Michael Hastings’ untimely demise in 2013² in a fiery car crash (with multiple explosions and the engine of his new Mercedes being ejected 200 feet away).

Alford’s theory that DeVore had uncovered some sensitive details regarding purported activities of rogue government agents operating in Panama during the reign of Manuel Noriega – and was later assassinated for it – is bolstered by

¹ For further details, see Nimmo at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/political-assassination-in-the-us-did-the-cia-kill-gary-webb/304>

² For further details, see Gibson at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/who-killed-michael-hastings/5355606>

his interviews with Director John Irvin, Frank Thorwald, Mike Dunn, Haskell Wexlar, and journalist David Robb. Indeed, Robb points to decades of cooperation, or compliance, that Hollywood has practiced with the military, “The constant drip, drip, drip of ... military propaganda inserted into American entertainment product has had a terrible effect on the American psyche.” Cozy relationships established through work with the military, or its clandestine civilian equivalent, also come with considerable risk to artistic license and in some cases, it seems, personal safety.

Competing interests among the financial backers of a cinematic project, writers who seek honest representations of their work and of history, and the establishment itself can result in the sorts of tension that Alford had lamented in a 2013 interview: “The post-production process [for *The Writer with No Hands*] was two years of ... agony because the director wanted to make a piece of entertainment for a mass market, which necessitated, in his eyes, diminishing the political content and using subtle editing techniques to make me into a bogus ‘character’ with a ‘narrative arch’.”³

Perhaps more unnerving about this film was the critical response it received, which appears to verify Alford’s initial hypothesis with allegations (which are themselves quite persuasive) that someone managed to hack into and delete the film’s promotional website⁴ just after its launch, while several interviewees as well as even production staff backed out of the project at the last minute – citing personal safety concerns.



Along a remote roadside in California, the producer reflects in a moment of self-doubt in his investigation as Westaway defies convention, reframes Alford as the subject, and reinforces the underlying fact that films are the culmination of inequitable power struggles.

Notable for their absences are numerous CIA officials – alluded to in Alford’s own wider research – who worked in the propaganda arm of the Agency, several of whom were close to Gary. Another interviewee, one of Gary’s good friends, was persuaded, at last, by her own paranoia (unwarranted perhaps) while referring specifically to her persistent concern

³ For further details, see Alford at http://www.synaesthesiajournal.com/uploads/Alford_interview_4.pdf

⁴ For further details, see Westaway at <https://twitter.com/WriterWithNo/status/447031092093001728/photo/1>

about the Agency.

Ultimately, the documentary succeeds well because of its consistent openness to balance and self-criticism, due in no small measure to the persona that Westaway adopts, as director and foil. He asks Alford why he doesn’t give up [on this project]. The best reason why Alford can’t comes from his own ex-wife, “He’s completely obsessed with it.”

Yet, it is also worth noting that obsession can legitimately drive not only individuals seeking truth, but also systems of domination and power seeking to conceal truth. Lending further credence to Alford’s theory that power is obsessed with maintaining the present system, or situation, are past stories of abuses of political power in Panama, both in American and Panamanian circles.

Certainly, it can be said that during the Noriega era, cocaine both touched and corrupted the lives of many, high and low, on the social and political ladder. The promise of untold riches in trafficking drugs comprised the moral integrity of even some military personnel and their family members. In America, the 1980s were awash with cocaine, the crystalline stimulant of choice, and Howard Air Force Base in Panama served, ironically, as a black market hub for exports to the States.⁵ As the following article attests, the international trade in guns and drugs represented ever-present temptations to those seeking power, tons of money, and other related perversions of the mind.

British weekly: Noriega made films to blackmail U.S. officials

Associated Press

LONDON — The Bush administration is unable to get rid of Panama’s Gen. Manuel Noriega because the military strongman has compromising films involving senior Washington officials, a British newspaper reported Sunday.

The Sunday Correspondent, a new independent weekly, also said the United States asked Noriega for help shipping arms to Nicaragua’s *contra* rebels, according to secret documents declassified during the *Iran-contra* investigation.

The newspaper said that for

years Noriega invited senior officials from Congress, the CIA, the Defense Department and administration to his Pacific Ocean villa on the Azuero Peninsula.

There, he supplied his guests with girls or boys in bedrooms wired for sound and equipped with hidden cameras, the paper said.

Noriega stored the films “as an insurance policy for the future,” according to the newspaper.

The newspaper said documents released during the *Iran-contra* trials showed the U.S. wanted permission to use Noriega’s “secret drugs and arms airfields.”

Wilmington Morning Star, Monday, October 19, 1989, p. 5A

The struggle between intellectual integrity and duplicitous commercialism unpacked and presented in *The Writer with No Hands* reflects the internal struggles that Gary Devore faced in his own search for and presentation of truth. Like so many stories we may seek a happy resolution to, Westaway is not entirely able to superimpose upon the film his twisted character study while Alford remains at least able to create a film that includes the key elements of the investigation with the dirty background politics and all.

If healthy and free societies are supposed to pivot upon

⁵ For further details, see Leslie Werner, “Panama Drug Rings Said to be Broken,” Special to the *New York Times*, June 2, 1988

the sustained free speech rights of their citizens, the story of Gary DeVore and Matthew Alford teaches a valuable lesson: we should all be obsessed with protecting free speech and defying, at whatever cost, those who seek stifle it.

Bio:

Daniel Broudy, former Army intelligence analyst in Panama during the Noriega regime, studied rhetoric and linguistics at Deakin University where he earned a doctorate in 2007. He has been a lecturer with University of Maryland University College and is Dean of the Graduate School of Intercultural Communication at Okinawa Christian University. He is co-author of the 2010 book, *Rhetorical Rape: The Verbal Violations of the Punditocracy* and co-editor of the 2013 volume *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific*. His scholarly work appears in *System*, *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, and *Synaesthesia: Communication Across Cultures*.