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## ART &amp; INDUSTRY Amy Taubin

Like his earlier documentaries *The Thin Blue Line*, *Gates of Heaven*, and *Vernon, Florida*, Errol Morris's *A Brief History of Time* is TV-financed but geared to theatrical release. And although the subject—British theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking—couldn't be further from *TBL*'s wrongly convicted Randall Adams, the two films are remarkably similar in style, right down to their Philip Glass scores and metaphoric use of slo-mo close-ups. In *A Brief History*, it's a china cup falling, smashing into bits, reassembling itself, and flying away that illustrates Hawking's theory of the expanding universe as the inverse of what happens when celestial bodies collapse and become black holes in space.

"I had gone to Amblin Entertainment [Steven Spielberg's company] to talk about a number of projects including *The Trial of King Boots*, a fiction film based on a true story, which I'll be doing next year with Amblin and Warners, and another project, *Whatever Happened to Einstein's Brain?* Shortly after that, an indie production company approached Amblin with Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time* and Amblin put me together with them."

NBC, Tokyo Broadcasting, and Channel Four/Britain all wound up with broadcast rights. Morris says that working for NBC wasn't so different from working for PBS except that more money was involved and the deadline pressure was heavier. "I was allowed to make the movie I wanted to make. Since it was only delivered a month ago, there's still a question about what form it will take when it appears on

NBC." Morris and the people repping *A Brief History* are trying to convince NBC that the movie would have a lot more glamour if it had a theatrical release before it appeared on the air. In any event it's going to the Sundance Film Festival.

Morris describes Hawking's position in the film as somewhere between narrator and interview subject. "The main appeal of Stephen as subject is the way he communicates." In 1985, Hawking, who has Lou Gehrig's disease, had a tracheotomy, which removed his ability to speak. Since then he communicates via an electronic speech synthesizer hooked to a PC. Morris took this HAL sound-a-like and used it to "speak" a voice-over narration composed of excerpts from *A Brief History of Time* and from Hawking's public lectures as well as information Hawking gave Morris during the shooting.

During the discussion that followed the film's first public screening (for an invited audience during the opening week of Film Society of Lincoln Center's new Walter Reade Theater), it became clear that viewers were confused as to whether what they were hearing was real-time conversation. Many people presumed that the electronic voice was synced to the image of Hawking's working with his computer menu. In actuality, Hawking, who doesn't have the muscles to operate a keyboard, uses a hand clicker to run through menus and select words from a massive stored vocabulary—a painfully slow process, given the rapidity and complexity of his thought.

"The most striking thing about meeting Stephen in person is how difficult it is for him to put together a sentence. I sometimes describe it as not unlike a visit to a psychiatrist. During the editing, I toyed with the idea of showing the process in real time but I decided the pace of the film worked against that." Morris explains that the cinéma-vérité notion of real time isn't very important in his filmmaking. "What gives power to film is the tension between what's real and what's unreal. What's real in my films is what people say—the interview material is the essential part of my movies."

Hawking was worried that the film would sentimentalize him and give his scientific work short shrift. It doesn't, but at the same time, it would be difficult not to fetishize an image of a body that so radically contradicts the message of the medium—that people are their looks. (Hawking, who has a taste for irony—his work seems driven by the desire to box God into the smallest possible corner if not write him off altogether—has two Irving Penn posters of Marilyn Monroe hanging in his office.) In the enormity of the gap between Hawking's physique and what's going on in his mind, the film finds its drama and its limitations.

"Stephen came to Cambridge [Massachusetts], what he calls the pseudo-Cambridge, for about five days during the editing and he gave me big clues that helped the film come together. I had a hard time editing this film—I have a hard time editing all my films. It's not a biography and it's not a science movie—it's somewhere else." ■