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THE SHAPE OF TIME

Errol Morris talks about
murderers, film, philosophy,
and Stephen Hawking,
with Russell Lack

● Errol Morris' long-gestated film *A Brief History of Time*, is not so much a film of Stephen Hawking's best-selling book on cosmology as a meditation upon its author. Hawking suffers from a rare, progressive and ultimately terminal motor-neurone disease which has over the last twenty-five years deprived him of movement and speech. He now communicates to the world, and to his theoretical (and discrete) universe, through a sophisticated computer keyboard built into his wheelchair. Hawking's work is inseparable from his physical condition. Indeed, the belief that he would die from his disease by the age of thirty was the catalyst he needed to begin working.

Morris' film balances both life and work, as Hawking's synthesised voiceover (now his 'real' voice) narrates his life chronologically, pausing to allow a rich gallery of British eccentrics (family, friends and colleagues) to testify to his remarkable personality and talents. It's a warm film, one that allows its elements time to breathe. Exquisitely designed by Ted Bafaloukos, it has the feel of something more than a documentary. Interviews take place in studio sets, sparsely furnished re-creations of suburban living rooms which give an unusual sense of space. In formal compositions, subjects are sharply focused and richly lit: Hawking's mother, dressed in black, looms like a figure from a Vermeer painting. Pauses in thought are represented by fade-outs, to resume with the next sentence. Hawking himself is always presented in extreme close-up, a corpuscular giant gazing out at the computer screen that provides him with the vocabulary that links with his electronic voicebox.

The other elements in the film are more commonplace documentary techniques: montages of photographs, geo-animations and loca-

tion shots linked via a beautifully subdued score by Philip Glass. The film bears many the visual hallmarks of Morris' earlier film, particularly *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), and gives the sense of a story moving inexorably towards its ending. There is little attempt to inject drama into the juxtaposition of faces and stories; rather, the film is a calm arrangement of materials. At times, Morris' films appear almost as meta-documentaries: exposed skeletons of style, menus of stylistic choices available to the film-maker. What emerges is a healthy self-awareness (as opposed to self-consciousness) curiously missing from the work of many British non-fiction film-makers.

If there is a unifying theme within Morris' films it would seem to rest in problems of epistemology. Morris uses the documentary form to examine the ways in which each of us see the world, to present a composite reality where perception is an amalgam of points of view. A world whose sense is relative. Significant to Morris was a graduate student in philosophy before turning to film-making.

"It was a long time ago. I was a post-graduate student in philosophy of science at Berkeley. I found that I was losing interest in philosophy and becoming much more interested in murderers. I conducted some interviews with a number of convicted murderers in prison. I think probably it was a certain dissatisfaction that I felt with being a student. The murderer I've often thought, came out of a very simple principle - much better to *be* a murderer than to *become* one. I went on from mass murderer to film-making.

"At Berkeley there was a wonderful place to watch movies, the Pacific Film Archive, where I went from watching one or two movies a year to two or three hundred. And I decided that this was what I wanted to do. All the stories in my films have a philosophical component to them, or at least I like to think they do. Stories about people in search of something, stories about self-deception. The limits of what you can know. I'm not sure that there's anything to compare the films to. I've never believed that there's one kind, or two or even three kinds of cinema. I think that when you come down to it there are only two kinds of movie - good movies and bad movies - and I just hope to be making good ones".

Morris' early films - *Gates of Heaven* (1978) and *Vernon, Florida* (1981) - are a passport into the little-known backwaters of the US. *Vernon, Florida* is a hallucinatory journey into a small community of swamp dwellers - a succession of increasingly bizarre interviews detailing the everyday concerns and ambitions of the people of Vernon constructed without prejudice but with a storyteller's ear for arrangement.



◀ *Gates of Heaven* is an altogether more strange project, something like a Diane Arbus photograph brought to life.

"All good documentary film-making, I think, ends up as a species of anthropology. In the case of *Gates of Heaven*, the subject almost chose me. I read a story in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, '500 dead pets go to Napa', which was about a pet cemetery that went bankrupt and all the pets had to be exhumed and moved to another pet cemetery, and that became the story of the movie, at least indirectly. I started to meet the people who were part of the story and realised that I had a terrific movie on my hands. The subjects of this film, the owners of the more successful pet cemetery, had an odd world view, which at the same time was strangely familiar. It was the juxtaposition between the different attitudes that interested me". As a result of making the film, Morris won a bet with Werner Herzog, who was obliged to boil and eat his shoe in front of an invited audience.

Throughout the 80s, Morris had a hard time finding the money to get his projects off the ground – the traditional problem of the non-fiction film with its extended production schedules and uncertain audience. For some four years, he was involved in the research and preparation for the one project that did find its way into production, *The Thin Blue Line*, a real life story of truth and injustice, constructed as an investigation into the case of twenty-eight-year-old Randall Adams, on whom a death sentence was passed in 1977 for the alleged murder of a policeman in Dallas, Texas. Through interviews with the key witnesses and members of the judiciary, the film shows a succession of lies and inaccuracies in the preparation of the prosecution case that led to Adams' retrial and subsequent acquittal.

"I stumbled on the story by accident. I was making a documentary called *Doctor Death*, which I'm still working on. That film is about a scientist who is brought in by the state at death penalty trials to say whether or not a defendant is likely to be violent at some point in the future. His testimonials are so convincing that in some 50 per cent of the cases he is involved with, the state is awarded the death penalty. Hence his name, Doctor Death – a real modern-day soothsayer. I was interviewing a number of people on death row and I met one guy who had been convicted of the murder of a cop in 1977. He told me the classic line, it's a line that you always hear in prison, he told me that he didn't do it. But from that point on I became trapped in his story over the course of a three-year investigation until I finished the movie, which fortunately led to his release. Eighteen months later, he tried to sue me because he thought I'd gotten rich from the movie and

US TELEVISION AND DOCUMENTARY

Funded and produced largely by television networks, the contemporary US non-fiction film resembles an endangered species bred in captivity and exhibited primarily for its prestige value to the broadcaster.

If documentary has been dominated over the last three decades less by enduring concerns than by stars such as Fred Wiseman, Bruce Conner, the Maysles brothers and Ross McElwee, this may be partly because television – due to its commercial imperatives and need to create ratings for advertisers – has failed to exploit documentary's traditional function of addressing

continuing social maladies.

There has definitely been a movement away from the traditional quasi-anthropological documentary into more overtly personal uses of the form. Film-makers such as James Klein ('Union Road', 1975 and 'Seeing Red', 1983) and Peter Davis ('Hearts and Minds', 1974) have taken as their starting points existing archive footage, re-editing it to their own ends, levelling criticism not at the traditional institutional targets of the non-fiction film, but at subjects as broad as labour history and American foreign policy.

Others have moved the form in the direction of 'long form' studies of individuals, deconstructing the conventions of biographical portraiture. Robert Epstein's

'The Times of Harvey Milk' (1984) offers an engaging portrait of a personality which attempts to probe both the psychology of the individual and the political impact of Milk's brief career, throwing in a conspiracy theory or two for good measure. The Maysles brothers' 1975 'Grey Gardens' is a verité-style portrait of Big Edie and Little Edie Bouvier, mother and daughter renegades of the Kennedy clan, captured living in a state of manorial decay in New York State's Hamptons. Nothing much happens, visitors come and go, a miserable birthday party takes place, but the pleasure of the film (whose length far exceeds that of conventional television slots) comes from the extreme intimacy the film-makers enjoyed with their subjects.

since then we haven't spoken. But despite the rather dismal end to the story, I'm very pleased that I was able to help him, that I was able to do something... good".

The Thin Blue Line reveals much about Morris' technique, less as a director than as an assembler of 'facts'. The film has a collage structure and is predominantly composed of first-person interviews. These interviews act like jigsaw pieces in an assembly of detailed temporal and spatial information about an incident that lasted no more than a few minutes late one night eight years earlier somewhere out on the Dallas freeway. In a radical break with his earlier practices of incorporating the interview settings within the general settings of his films, Morris deliberately isolates each of his witnesses. Each interview is presented within a demarcated boundary, immaculately lit, almost 'colour coded'. The shooting of the policeman too is presented as successive fragments of re-creation throughout the film. The shooting is never seen, but small details from the scene of the incident are invested with the hyperrealism of advertising photography – the lush sweep of car-body, the slow-motion explosion of a milkshake hitting the ground of that Dallas freeway, and so on.

"The re-enactments in *The Thin Blue Line* are very different in kind from those that you see used in most television journalism. In *The Thin Blue Line*, the re-enactments have an ironic significance; they're illustrations of lies. It's a bit like Kurosawa's *Rashomon* I guess, where you see the same events told from a number of perspectives. In *The Thin Blue Line*, the re-enactments tell you about the different ways in which people were deceived. The film makes no attempt to tell you that *this* is what happened. There's no way I'm saying I was out on that

roadway the night that the cop was murdered.

"I think that there has been a very dangerous tendency in television journalism to put re-enactments on the news in such a way as to suggest that they're not re-enactments at all, but the real thing. A famous example is an American television programme about Felix Bloch, who was accused of espionage. ABC television filmed a re-enactment of him passing a briefcase to a Russian agent; when it was broadcast, the programme-makers 'treated' the tape, deliberately degrading the picture quality to make it look 'authentic'. It was all fake, but ABC didn't feel obliged to tell its audience that. So to me there's a big difference between using a re-enactment that acknowledges that nobody knows what really happened, and one that purports to show you what reality is".

On the surface, the re-creations used in *The Thin Blue Line* might appear to transgress basic requirements of what might be called the documentary's 'objective realism'. But in fact what these distancing devices do is to emphasise the fragmentary nature of a police investigation. Testimonies, like sealed bags of physical evidence, remain passive until combined by the investigator into a wider pattern of converging knowledge, converging evidence, a theory of 'truth' founded in coherence rather than anything else – that dangerous relativism again. *The Thin Blue Line*, with its well-manicured planes of testimony and counter-testimony, presents us with a patchwork of ideas about the presentation of facts. Morris' 'reconstructions' are more like deconstructions – of knowledge, of what can be known about an event. By illustrating the lies of the prosecution, Morris constructs an epistemology in reverse.

The presence of 'fictional' elements within *The Thin Blue Line* distinguishes Morris' ap-

proach from that of veteran film-maker Frederick Wiseman, who eschews any form of staged interview. What makes such a comparison worthwhile is that both film-makers have chosen to give a name to their approaches. Morris calls his films 'fiction documentaries', in which "the only real things in the film are the people being interviewed and what they say"; Wiseman works within what he calls a 'reality fiction'. Comparing the two film-makers, it is not clear that Morris is any more manipulative of his subjects than is Wiseman - interviews in Wiseman's films are subject to a rigorous process of editing, combined with an adroit use of cutaway shots, not out of deference to the interviewer (ie 'reaction shots'), but to establish the tone of the film. This tone is therefore the result of a complex accumulation of emotive testimonies cut together using a highly associative editing technique, as in *Welfare* (1974), with themes built up through character familiarisation in locations marshalled by Wiseman himself. But Morris seems to combine the effects of Wiseman and the traditional approaches to non-fiction film-making into something quite new.

The success of *The Thin Blue Line* drew Morris to the attention of Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment, where producer Gordon Freedman wanted to make a film about the life and work of Stephen Hawking. "I had gone to Steven Spielberg with a completely different project, my 'dog trial' movie. It was there I met Gordon Freedman, and suddenly I was involved with *A Brief History of Time*. Nobody knew at the time that my academic background has been history and philosophy of science and that I already knew some of the central figures involved in modern relativity research".

In so many ways, Stephen Hawking is a perfect subject for Errol Morris. Hawking's work in relativity theory has led to his being called the 'greatest physicist since Einstein', a meaningless title if ever there was one. The piquancy of a man trapped within a wrecked exterior shell postulating a theorem of completeness that could one day explain the origins of the universe fulfils Morris' vision of a cinema constructed on the limits of what we can know. And watching Morris directing the live action sequences of *A Brief History of Time* at Elstree Studios, another similarity springs to mind.

Both Hawking and Morris are men working to a large degree with *a priori* concepts. With Hawking, the rational rather than empirical basis of his theorems is a direct consequence of the discrete 'invisible' elements that are now the standard raw data of theoretical physics; with Morris, the process of film-making itself (in terms of picture composition) seems to be something conducted largely in his head. Mor-

ris appears to be a man drawn to projects more by intellectual attraction than by the technical process of putting a film together. (On set, he relies upon his visual consultant, Ted Bafaloukos, to compose the bulk of the shots, including the finer details of lighting). If the photographic process for Morris has a purely illustrative role, then he may be a completely new kind of documentary film-maker.

"I think it's necessary to make a distinction between movies that use real people and movies that use actors. The movies I've made up to this point have all used real people talking extemporaneously. That basis has been the framework for anything else that I've constructed within the film. That's also true of *A Brief History of Time*. It depends very much upon the actual people involved in this scientific enterprise, particularly Stephen Hawking, who narrates the movie; it's very much about him.

"All of Stephen's work concerns certain kinds of limits - what we can and cannot know. Black holes, event horizons. Contemporary physics is populated by predictors that don't make sense in any conventional way. This becomes an interesting story when connected with Stephen Hawking's life. He's a heroic person; it's hard to spend any time with him without being immensely impressed by him, not simply as a scientific thinker or intellectual, but as a man who has never given up. He's very much there, despite enormous handicaps and disadvantages - he also has a strongly perverse and ironic sense of humour.

"So I'm telling a number of stories; Stephen Hawking and his intellectual development; a story about this area of physics from the 60s to the present time; and about the other people involved in it - a number of colleagues from Russia, the United Kingdom and the US. I

wasn't interested in doing a pure science show held together by graphics about what the birth of the universe might look like, or what a black hole or a neutron star might look like. It's a story of science seen through the eyes of the people who created it".

A Brief History of Time was a co-production between a number of companies including Anglia Television in the UK and TBS in Japan. "The evolution of projects in my career has been dictated by the willingness of people to pay for them. For a long while they weren't backing them, but now I seem to be beginning to find an audience for my work, and that has led to a whole new world of possibilities. For one thing, I'm employed rather than unemployed at the moment, and that in itself represents a gigantic change in my life. I find that it's very hard making a movie, and if you're going to spend a good year or more of your time working on a film you want to make sure that it's going to end up being pretty good, and that you're going to enjoy working on it, otherwise you might as well do something else. This last year I've been directing a lot of commercials, which are terrific in that you gain a lot of experience, and you get paid a lot of money for getting a lot of experience, and the commitment of time is minimal. A project like *A Brief History of Time* means a year or two years of work, and so it's not undertaken lightly".

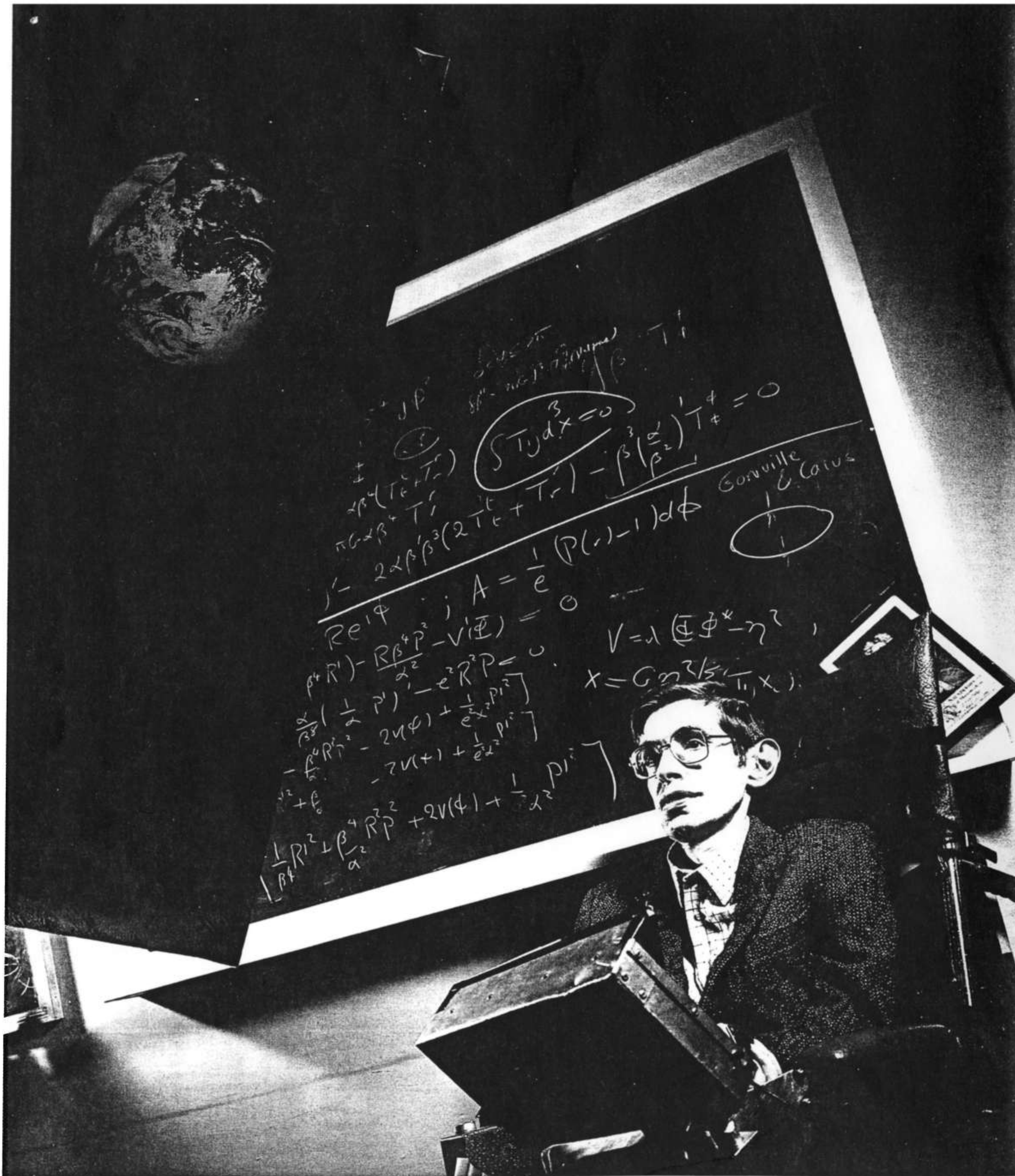
Morris' 'dog trial' movie, a project he has been nurturing for years, also looks likely to be realised. Its projected title is *The Trial of the King Boots*. "This is the true story of a dog that was put on trial for murder in Detroit in 1984. It's a story that I've wanted to do for a number of years and I'm pleased to say that Steven Spielberg and Amblin Entertainment have agreed to do that movie as well".

Boots was a prize-winning Old English Sheepdog found with blood on his jaws near the body of his owner's mother. The coroner pronounced that the victim, a Mrs Monroe, had died from "multiple bites and slashes caused by the attack of a canine". A second autopsy concluded that she had died from a heart attack, and that she had been bitten just once. King Boots' vet visited his client 'in jail' and found the dog to have a wound on his nose which appeared to have been made by a kitchen fork. Had Mrs Monroe, who often carried kitchen utensils around the house with her, tripped over a sleeping Boots, accidentally stabbing him, been bitten once in return and then died from a heart attack? Acquitted, King Boots died "in rather mysterious circumstances". Apparently, Christopher Walken has expressed great interest in playing King Boots' lawyer.

'A Brief History of Time' is on Channel 4 on 3 May and has recently been released on video by Palace



**Relative values:
fragments of the story -
sometimes colour coded -
are patched together like
pieces in a jigsaw to
illustrate the different
ways people were deceived
in Morris' account of
the murder of a Dallas**



Faces and stories:
Errol Morris' film
'A Brief History of Time'
is a meditation on
Stephen Hawking's life
and work. His present
is captured in David
Gamble's portrait, above;
a still photograph from
Morris' film shows his