

# You Know “We’ll Never Know,” Don’t You?

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*In his new, six-part, seven hours plus documentary – [“Can’t Get You Out of My Head: An Emotional History of the Modern World”](#) – the celebrated English documentary filmmaker, **Adam Curtis**, who has worked for the BBC for decades, tells us that nothing makes sense anymore and it is “pointless to try to understand the meaning of why things happen.” A profound shift in our understanding has occurred, he tells us early on, and he then proceeds to replicate this fragmented, unknowing modern mind by showing us an endless stream of video images from the BBC archives that jump from one seemingly disconnected subject to another to reinforce his point.*

As the reviewer Lucy Mangan of [The Guardian](#) approvingly writes, the film is “a dazzling, overwhelming experience.” This is true, but not in the way she thinks with her five-star rating. The film does dazzle, and fascinate, but in the sense of bewildering or casting a spell. But to what end?

For Curtis maintains that there is no meaning anywhere (not even in a review); we are all living as if we are on “an acid trip”; and we will never know what the hell is going on in the world because...well, because there is no logic to anything and our brains are scrambled with fragmented memories, fleeting images, and paranoid thoughts just like the movie Curtis narrates in his unemotional, matter-of-fact voice. He doesn’t have to say that he’s cool and everyone else is nuts. The style is the man when the authoritative voice calmly speaks above the din. Quite BBCish.

“Everything is relative,” is the underlying message, except that Curtis fails to spell out the contradiction in this post-modern meme: Everything is relative **but** the statement that everything is relative. It is absolute. Some people know and others don’t. Next video clip please.

After watching his pastiche film that is filled with his compulsively fragmented skepticism about “a world where anything could be anything because there was no meaning anywhere,” I was reminded of what a famous philosopher once wrote in his “Critique of Pure Dread”:

In formulating any philosophy, the first consideration must always be: What can we know? That is, what can we be sure we know, or sure that we know we knew it, if indeed it is at all knowable. Or have we simply forgotten it and are too embarrassed to say anything? Descartes hinted at the problem when he wrote, ‘My mind can never know my body, although it has become quite

friendly with my legs.' By 'knowable,' incidentally, I do not mean that which can be known by perception of the senses, or that which can be grasped by the mind, but more that which can be said to be Known or to possess a Knownness or Knowability, or at least something you can mention to a friend.

Like Curtis's title, I have never been able to get those profound words out of my head because they have always seemed in their own way to have captured the underlying zeitgeist of the past half-century and more – the unspoken message that has come to inform the neurotic skepticism of our times. And unlike Curtis's solemnity, at least Woody Allen makes me laugh.

Curtis is a serious man, and when he very seriously tells us in Part 1 that Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney, who was the only person to ever bring a trial in the assassination of President John Kennedy, was a man devoid of logic who once wrote a memo to his staff urging them to think illogically and just look for patterns based on "time and propinquity," he wishes us to consider Garrison a crazy conspiratorial thinker who saw strange patterns when there were none. To see Garrison as a deranged man who used a pastiche method of cutting and pasting disparate unconnected facts to form a conspiracy theory to convince you that there were hidden forces operating behind the façade of American society.

Echoing the CIA's famous memo to its agents and accomplices in the media to use the phrase conspiracy theory/theorist to ridicule its critics, Curtis so solemnly tells the viewer that such crazy conspiracy theories and the method for arriving at them and their claims that there were hidden forces operating behind the scenes are paranoid nonsense and that they would come to infect the modern mind. Most of Garrison's thinking, he says, was pure fantasy and he could produce no evidence for his claims. In other words, Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy, not the CIA.

This claim is factually false, but it becomes the basis for the next five parts of the documentary. And perversely, the entire documentary is constructed using the same method of cutting-and-pasting, "time and propinquity," pastiche/collage so beloved of postmodernists, that Curtis accuses Garrison of using, a method devoid of logic or meaning.

This is not a Woody Allen joke.

There is no doubt that Curtis has found and presents very interesting historical film footage that ranges back and forth across the world and time. He knows how to engage an audience and to draw them into emotive and dreamy experiences of fear and paranoia. As one watches, one feels the walls closing in and terrible disasters lurking in the shadows because no one is in control, for control is an illusion. You'll never know. You'll never know. Everything is relative.

Yet there is much to learn and consider from his footage. But context is all, and the hours one spends watching lead to part six when Curtis circles back to part one to tie the knot on his "emotional history" within what the writer George Trow once called "the context of no context." We learn about chaos and complexity theories, artificial intelligence, multiple selves, drugs, how neuroscientists and psychiatrists have claimed that consciousness does not exist, and that even though people think they are individuals in the age of individualism, they are deluded. In the digital age people are now doing exactly what Garrison did fifty years ago; now they are creating conspiracy theories from patterns of data on the internet

and it's all a form of madness.

Thrown in as an aside, Curtis says of the attacks of September 11, 2001, that "no one had seen them coming." This, of course, is blatantly false, since the U.S. government was not surprised, as is very well known and confirmed, but Curtis's claim reinforces the idea no one knew or knows what's going to happen, that incompetence is the norm, that "nothing makes sense anymore," and that the official narrative on 9/11 is correct, just as it is regarding the assassination of JFK, for Jim Garrison, the man who bravely and brilliantly explored the case early on, was just a nut case who believed in strange coincidences. And his crazy way of connecting the dots has infected our world today. We can't get him out of our heads.

When he finally brings us into the present, Curtis tells us that COVID-19 "was a force that came from completely outside the systems of power." Of course! Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, we are living in a world where the ruling elites are at the mercy of chance and we think they are in control. No, that is our illusion. Shit happens. After spending hours showing us how the world's elites are corrupt and do all kinds of devious things to maintain their power - conspire to do so - we are also told there are no conspiracies. There are and there aren't. We are trapped in an insane world of double-binds, "a world where anything could be anything because there was no meaning anywhere."

I suppose this might apply to this film. But no, it is very meaningful - in the way exquisite propaganda is.

Woody Allen can be hilarious, but Curtis is quite funny himself. After seven plus hours of telling us we live in the world of nightmares where we are trapped and this sense of imprisonment is something we can't get out of our heads and we're all going bonkers, he ends by repeating his opening caption, which are the words of the anthropologist David Graeber:

The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make. And could just as easily make differently.

Really? I never knew that. Did you?

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