Just after midnight on 28 November 1976, during a routine traffic stop in Dallas, police officer Robert W Wood was murdered by a man whom police investigators determined to be Randall Dale Adams. Adams was sentenced to death and imprisoned; twelve years later, documentary maker Errol Morris re-examined his story in his film *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). The discoveries uncovered in this film caused the case to be re-opened: Adams was found innocent and was released the following year. Aside from the remarkable fact that his movie helped save the life of a man wrongly convicted of a crime, Morris’ documentary marks a crucial point in the history of documentary film. With its focus on the crime itself and the subsequent investigation, *The Thin Blue Line* introduced many thematic and stylistic elements that have since become commonplace, not only in other documentary feature films but also in related areas such as television documentary.

Morris had previously worked for a private detective agency, and he approached Adams’ story not as a documentarian examining a legal case but as an investigator. Employing a range of techniques and devices – interviews, monologues, found footage clips, re-enactments, and the presentation of documents such as newspaper clippings, maps and photographs – Morris’ film functions as an informal reopening of the case, and asks the spectator to act as a new jury and to reach a decision about Adams’ guilt based on the information presented. The initial case against Adams hinged on the testimony of David Ray Harris – a troubled teen from Vidor, Texas who the film ultimately suggests is responsible for the crime – as well as on the testimonies of four other key witnesses. In *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris demonstrates that each of the five to some degree committed perjury in their testimony, and he also exposes other serious flaws in the prosecution’s treatment of the case. Morris

**Framing Truth and Testimony**

## The Interrogation of Justice in *The Thin Blue Line*

**ALEXANDRA HELLER-NICHOLAS**
does this through the words of those involved in the case, as they each explain their versions of events to the camera. This results in a narrative construction that not only provides an engaging mystery for the viewer to follow but that, more crucially, sets up a number of points from which different versions of the story can emerge, leading us – the ‘jury’ – to question who is telling the truth. Morris does not accuse anyone of lying in the film, but rather lets those who worked to wrongly convict Adams expose themselves as liars through their own words.

Constructing the ‘truth’

But this is only one level on which *The Thin Blue Line* functions: through its careful construction, it ultimately examines issues well beyond the Adams case. Renowned documentary film scholar Bill Nichols\(^1\) has identified six documentary modes: the poetic mode (usually experimental or avant-garde), the expository mode (often called the ‘voice of God’ documentary because of its reliance on voiceovers that deliver what is implied to be a singular, ‘true’ version of events), the observational mode (which encourages direct engagement, and is often called cinema vérité, direct cinema or ‘fly on the wall’ documentary), the participatory mode (which highlights the relationship between subject and interviewer), the performative mode (subjective films that have more interest in getting a reaction than in any search for objectivity), and the reflexive mode, of which *The Thin Blue Line* is a near-textbook example. It typifies this mode through its sense of self-awareness and its exposure of the mechanics of how documentary films state their claims of truth (because of this, reflexive documentaries are often linked to postmodernism).

Instead of offering one singular re-enactment that shows how events unfolded, the film offers a continually changing array of interpretations, each reflecting the differing versions of the story that interview subjects are telling.

So how precisely does *The Thin Blue Line* do this? The answer becomes apparent even in the film’s opening moments. As the words of the title appear on the screen in white text, the word ‘blue’ turns red. This very simple device at the outset of the film asks the spectator to question what they see: by making the word ‘blue’ red, its meaning is destabilised and thus assumptions about basic facts of the film are challenged before it really even begins. This becomes even more apparent in the film’s famous use of re-enactments, which established an approach that has become a norm in the documentary field. Instead of offering one singular re-enactment that shows how events unfolded, the film offers a continually changing array of interpretations, each reflecting the differing versions of the story that interview subjects are telling. This is most visible in the key scene – the shooting of Wood – which is repeated throughout the documentary, but which is altered slightly each time to reflect the particular version of events being told. Notably, there is no re-enactment that shows Harris as responsible for the crime – the scenario that the film concludes is the one most likely to have occurred. By denying the viewer the option...
of the film the spoken words of the interview subjects are often ‘matched’ with visual material that correlates with what they are saying: when Dallas is mentioned, a map of Dallas is shown; when a hotel room is mentioned, a hotel’s neon light is shown; when Harris speaks of stealing a gun, an illustration of a gun is shown, and so on. This also occurs with non-spoken sound, the most powerful instance being when the sound of a gunshot is heard and the image cuts to what appear to be medical diagrams showing bullet entry points, and even a photograph of the deceased himself. Newspaper clippings are used in similar ways, and often close-ups on particular phrases and dates act to economically supply information.

Paying close attention to how Morris displays this information is crucial: in the case of the newspaper clippings, for example, the camera often zooms slowly in to a point where the fibres of the paper and the blurring of the ink is visible. Why? What may at first appear to be simply a stylistic choice in fact has profound meaning when considered next to the broader themes of the film: by exposing the materiality of these documents, we are reminded that they are as fallible (and as potentially misleading) as any of the other types of evidence offered in the documentary, such as witnesses’ accounts of events. Do we know for sure, for example, that the diagrams of the entry wounds are official? Does it matter? Do we assume that they are, simply because they are offered to us in the context of a documentary? What does the map of Dallas actually show us; what information does it offer? What about the illustration of the gun shown when Harris narrates his story? Is it a diagram of the actual gun or, as is more probably the case, simply a file image of a gun? And what is the difference in meaning? By mixing significant visual evidence (such as some newspaper clippings) with materials that are ambiguous in their evidential value (that is, they may or may not contain specific information relevant to what is being told), The Thin Blue Line again underscores not only how tenuous the so-called evidence against Adams in this particular case was but, more generally, it forces the viewer to admit that we often accept visual documentation in these types of films (and, perhaps, cases) on face value, without critically evaluating what it is we are actually looking at.

The most critical evidence offered in The Thin Blue Line, however, comes from the verbal accounts provided by Adams, Harris and the other witnesses. The film is structured around these interviews, and the privileged status of the spoken word is nowhere clearer than in the film’s climax, when Harris all but confesses the crime to Morris in a tape-recorded interview.

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Although accidental (Morris’ equipment failed during his final interview with Harris and he was forced to record on audio cassette), the fact that the moment the film has worked towards has no visual parallel is significant. Throughout this scene, Morris simply shows a dictaphone replaying the tape footage, in close-up and from a variety of different angles. We are not allowed the comforting distraction of visual evidence that aims to support what is being said; rather, we are forced to make hearing, not vision, our dominant sense. This shift of perception exposes just how reliant we have been on the visual as our primary mode of assessing evidence, not only with regard to the visual documentation and re-enactments discussed above, but also in relation to the interviews themselves.

At the time of *The Thin Blue Line*’s production, Morris had yet to invent his infamous Interrotron machine, a combined camera/teleprompter that allows him to capture interviewees looking directly into the camera as they speak (they are talking to Morris’ face, which they see on a video screen attached to the camera). In *The Thin Blue Line*, the director creates a similar sense of intimacy with each interview subject by placing himself as close as possible to the camera so it appears that they are talking directly to the viewer. As Morris has stated in an interview, ‘eye contact is wired into our brains. We are aware when someone is looking at us. It’s one of the central features of communication.’ When we hear each version of the crime and are told that information with someone almost looking us in the eye, our instinct is to believe them, particularly in the context of a documentary film. *The Thin Blue Line*, however, challenges us: it forbids us to be lazy viewers, and forces us to actively involve ourselves in a questioning of what has been assumed to be the truth.

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**Conclusion**

By switching from a passive acceptance of what we are told is the truth to this active, critical interrogation of the evidence (both aural and visual) that has been presented to us we, as an informal ‘jury’, mirror the processes that caused this documentary to trigger the re-opening of Adams’ case. This led to him being released from prison and saved him from the death penalty. Almost twenty-five years after *The Thin Blue Line* was released, Morris himself has questioned whether his film’s accomplishments would be possible today. The internet has
opened the door to a much wider range of voices, meaning that small, hidden and forgotten stories like Adams’ are less invisible than they were in the past. Additionally, the legal system in the United States has changed substantially with regard to appeals for convicts on death row. But rather than filing *The Thin Blue Line* away as a fascinating yet ultimately irrelevant historical artefact, it is important to recognise that its questioning of how evidence is represented in documentary film (and more broadly) is its most lasting legacy. By challenging the spectator to actively participate in deciding what they do – and, even more importantly, what they do not – believe, we become critical viewers rather than passive consumers. The importance of this, as *The Thin Blue Line* so powerfully demonstrates, is crucial: in this case, a man’s very life depended on it.

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**Endnotes**

3. Adams, who worked after his release as an activist against the death penalty, passed away of natural causes in Ohio in October 2010.