

Eye of the beholder movie review

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Eye of the Beholder: Guilt and Politics in ‘ The Thin Blue Line’

1. In her treatise, Patricia Aufderheide explains that documentaries offer a portrait of real life that seeks not to manipulate the material being presented (Aufderheide, 2007). The documentary generally puts forth some kind of analytical argument or story in a narrative flow. The Thin Blue Line meets those criteria, but pushes the boundaries of this kind of storytelling. In fact, Errol Morris’ 1988 film is one of the most interesting attempts to combine intensive interviews with interpretive imagery and staged recreations of the events in question. As one of the first documentaries to adopt what was, at the time, a hybrid approach, The Thin Blue Line stretched the customary definition of documentary.

Although dramatized recreations have been called theatrical, Morris staged them in such a way that they accurately portray what happened. They combine effectively with the use of the “ straight ahead” camera angle, in which the subject looks directly into the camera. There is no appearance of artifice or subtlety, and the disparate accounts of the killing of a Dallas police officer bring to mind the axiom that the truth is in the eye of the beholder. There is also the hovering presence of Kurosawa’s Rashomon as one listens to Randall Adams, David Harris and other participants in the story recount their versions of what happened that night. The Thin Blue Line must be said to fit squarely within generally accepted notions of narrative documentary filmmaking, though its use of stylized editing places it outside the limits of the mainstream.

Aufderheide's description of the classic narrative form is in evidence in *The Thin Blue Line*. It invests viewers in the characters and takes viewers on an emotional journey as the film's interview subjects gradually unwind their stories (Aufderheide, 2007). Despite its unconventional use of re-creations, unconventional imagery and a complementary musical score, the film most nearly parallels Nichols' expository mode, addressing the viewer through multiple perspectives on the story. Nichols states that the expository mode "assembles fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical or argumentative frame than an aesthetic or poetic one" (Nichols, 2001).

Morris' expository approach in *The Thin Blue Line* eschews the aesthetic elements found in poetic or performative modes (Nichols, 2001). The film also exhibits elements of participatory documentary in that the subjects interact with the interviewer.

The film's intensely narrative form lies at the heart of Morris' achievement. He takes a magnifying glass approach to each subject, which inexorably reveals not only their feelings about the case but their characters as well. David Harris gradually comes across as manipulative and chilling, a killer who likely belongs on death row. Randall Adams, on the other hand, the man who was wrongly accused of the killing, appears simple and guileless by comparison. Listening to their responses, one is reminded of Renov's "record/reveal/preserve" mode, and its significance for recording and communicating documented facts. "The modern reproductive technology of the cinematograph was uniquely responsive to the need for factual sustenance...The camera created a reservoir of human observation in the simplest possible way" (Renov, 1993). Renov posits that the preservation of

opinion, of events and of memory was clearly the province of film from its very beginnings.

3. The Thin Blue Line reveals a disturbing predilection in present-day society (and, one suspects, from the past as well) not only to assign blame and manufacture scapegoats, but an alarming tendency among law enforcement authorities such as the Dallas Police Department, to judge people based on appearance (Adams was initially considered suspicious due to his beard and general unsavory appearance). Worse, the film reflects a willingness among officials in positions of responsibility to ignore facts and overlook the truth, insisting on the guilt of an admitted drifter who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Thin Blue Line is more than anything a reflection on how the truth is blurred amid a highly convoluted and complicated case. One man's fact is another man's fiction. It is a "nightmarish meditation on the difference between truth and fiction, an alarming glimpse at the many distortions that have shaped (Randall) Adams's destiny" (Maslin, 1988). Adams was convicted, due to Harris' false testimony, and consigned to death row, though his conviction was later commuted to life imprisonment. Practically speaking, the way in which the case against Adams played out was a fiction that acquired the gloss of truth through police and prosecutors, who used circumstances and Harris' testimony to serve their own ends.

Randall Adams and David Harris were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which evidently did much to determine their worldview and their versions of the murder and its aftermath. In Harris' case, his background had clearly been a major factor in the development of what can

only be called a predatory nature. He exudes an “ Oh well, that’s just me” attitude about his crimes; a true sociopath. The politics surrounding the case were driven by the need to find and prosecute the guilty party, whatever it took; victimized by Harris’ perjury, Adams became vulnerable to the political undertow.

One particularly important theme in the film is the readiness of human beings to blindly accept illogically conceived conclusions in the face of social pressures and misconceived perceptions. During the trial, Adams acted without remorse, which worked against his defense. As it turns out, he simply felt no remorse because he hadn’t committed the murder. His demeanor, and David Harris’ artfully false testimony, led to Adams’ conviction. Ultimately, we are left to speculate about the missing details of this judicial miscarriage as the interviews tantalize but fail to resolve the story – this is no neatly worked-out episode of American Justice. In *The Thin Blue Line*, one disturbing question remains unanswered at the end of Morris’ chaotic story: can justice every truly be served when there is overwhelming political pressure to assign guilt to someone?

References

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