

**REENACTMENT AS UNTRUTH:
ERROL MORRIS AND *THE THIN BLUE LINE***

ROBERT HAWKINS

As a Guggenheim and MacArthur fellow, Errol Morris ranks among the most academically-minded documentarians. His films explore difficult philosophical issues of truth and meaning, which he is always eager to discuss at length in interviews and in his high-profile *New York Times* column. In all of these venues, he frequently returns to a question of great interest to cognitive scientists: to what extent does the mind *construct* reality rather than *capturing* it as it is? This question is also at the heart of the way Morris distinguishes his philosophy of documentary filmmaking from the *cinéma vérité* movement. In this paper, I first establish the terms of the question itself and then review the film *The Thin Blue Line*, especially its use of reenactment, in the context of Morris' career-spanning attempt to answer it.

Morris' primary influences were not from inside the documentary establishment: "the documentaries I saw were by Buñuel, Herzog, and Georges Franju – not the Maysles or Leacock and Pennebaker" [1]. Early in his career, he spent a great deal of time at the Pacific Film Archive, where he subsisted on a diet of Dreyer, Hawks, Renoir, and Nicholas Ray, who are known for their classic fictional films: *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *The Big Sleep*, *Grand Illusion*, *Rebel Without a Cause*. Through these experiences, Morris came to believe that fictional stories can draw our attention to essential details or themes that factual accounts cannot. As Tim O'Brien wrote, "Our myths are stories or images that are not always true in particular but entirely true in general" [2].

This stands in stark contrast with the ideals of *cinéma vérité*, which sought truth by pure, unadulterated replication of reality through the lens of a camera. All the rules are set up to minimize interference: "No lights, no tripod, no microphone boom or pole. . . never ask anyone to do anything

and most especially never ask anyone to repeat an action or a line” [3]. This style of filmmaking creates a powerful impression of being a fly on the wall, watching the scene unfold exactly as it naturally happened. Morris argues that while it does make for powerful filmmaking, adopting a particular *style* does not magically generate truth [4].

Essentially, his argument is that there *is* an objective truth for every question [5] – every murder was committed by a specific person; there was either an attack on August 4th in the Gulf of Tonkin or there wasn’t – but that truth is *perishable* and can only be recovered through a hard process of investigation. Sometimes the necessary evidence just isn’t captured. Even if it is, raw human perception itself isn’t always a reliable source. We trick ourselves into believing falsehoods, misremembering events, or failing to observe obvious details in our environments. Replacing human perception with a lightweight camera and natural lighting doesn’t alter any of these facts, except on the rare occasions, like in *Gimme Shelter*, when evidence happens to be captured and can be replayed under higher scrutiny.

Since these phenomena play such a critical role in Errol Morris’ philosophy of film, it is important to note that they have been the root of countless research programs in cognitive science. Optical illusions in perception provide the most common examples [6], but attention and memory are subject to the same analysis. In one famous study, Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris showed that when participants were instructed to count the number of times a basketball was passed around in a short film, 50% failed to notice a man in a gorilla suit strolling through the scene [7]. Other experiments indicated that people are frequently ‘blind’ to continuity errors across scenes, a fact that filmmakers have long relied upon in the editing process [8]. We also know at a neural level that memories are constantly being changed and reconsolidated [9].

Errol Morris has written extensively about these scientific results and their implications for the pursuit of truth [10]. *The Thin Blue Line* is a case study of the tragedy that can ensue when there is a paucity of evidence and too much weight is given to the perception, attention, and memory of witnesses. The film relentlessly investigates the story of Randall Adams, who was falsely convicted of murdering police officer Robert Wood in Texas and spent 12 years on death row before being released. It makes a case for his innocence through one-on-one interviews with the lawyers and witnesses involved in the case and also through a series of *reenactments* of the murder itself, which was not, of course, captured on camera.

Through interviews, we hear different versions of the story that answer the crucial questions in different ways. How many people were in the car? Did the driver have curly hair or straight hair? What was the murdered police officer's partner doing at the time he got shot? The case hinges on answers to these questions, and each time we hear a different version, it is accompanied by a slightly different reenactment, evoking Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. The use of these reenactments were controversial as a rejection of *vérité* principles. They were explicitly *constructed*, not *captured*, so how could they be truthful? Morris responded, "the reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line* are not illustrations of truth. Quite the opposite. They are designed to take you into untruth. They're illustrations of what people claimed had happened but which didn't happen. They're ironic." [4]

The reenactments, in other words, are an attempt to explore the extent to which people, even witnesses, *construct* reality. Everyone claims they *captured* reality in their minds, but the details contradict one another. At one point, the chief of police talks through the story told by Teresa Turko, the murdered officer's partner. Earlier in the night, the officers stopped by Burger King to eat. When they pulled the car over, Turko was in the passenger seat with a milkshake. In her statement, she claimed that they both got out of the squad car at around the same time and she

positioned herself by the rear bumper to record the license number and other important details, in accordance with standard procedure.

Morris uses crime-scene details to evaluate the truth of Turko's statement. In particular, he noticed that a spilled milkshake had been found 14 feet from the squad car. If she had gotten out at the same time as Wood, as claimed, she would have left it in the car. Even if she had decided to take it with her, why would she have thrown it so far instead of just dropping it? The milkshake seems like a trivial detail, but has significant implications for the reliability of her story, and that story was a key testimony in Randall Adam's sentence. A particularly memorable slow-motion reenactment of the milkshake's trajectory through the air draws attention to this detail, which may otherwise have been neglected [10].

Could a film in the *vérité* style have represented events more truthfully? In this case, the key events had already happened before anyone could have grabbed their cameras. Aside from some documents from the crime scene report, there is no primary source material to pin down the truth, only the fallible memories of those who claim to have witnessed it. The only way to proceed, then, is through *untruth*, pointing out problems in the testimonies and making the case that there is too much uncertainty about the truth to sentence a man to death over it. For the rest of his career, Morris explored the power of *untruth* in situations where truth itself is perishable.

REFERENCES

- [1] Morris, E. (2011). Frederick Wiseman: The Tawdry Gruesomeness of Reality. *Paris Review Daily*.
- [2] O'Brien, T. (1998). *The Things They Carried*. New York, NY: Broadway.
- [3] Leacock, R. (1997). A Search for the Feeling of Being There. Retrieved from <http://richardleacock.com/>.
- [4] Poppy, N. (2004). Interview with Errol Morris. *The Believer*. Retrieved from <http://www.believermag.com/>
- [5] Grundmann, R., Rockwell, C. (2000). Truth Is Not Subjective: An Interview with Errol Morris. *Cineaste* 25(3): 4–9.
- [6] Palmer, S.E. (1999). *Vision Science: Photons to Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- [7] Simons, D.J., Chabris, C.F. (1999). Gorillas in our midst: Sustained in attentional blindness for dynamic events. *Perception* 28(9): 1059–1074.
- [8] Simons, D.J., Levin, D.T. (1997). Change blindness. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 1(7): 261–267.
- [9] Wang, S-H., Morris, R.G.M. (2010). Hippocampal-neocortical interactions in memory formation, consolidation, and reconsolidation. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61: 49–79.
- [10] Morris, E. (2008). Play It Again, Sam (Re-enactments, Part One). *New York Times*.