

THE THIN BLUE LINE (1988)

"I wanted to make a film about self-deception... about how our need to believe what we want to believe is a lot stronger than our need to seek the truth."

Errol Morris

Credits:

director: Errol Morris

cinematography: Stefan Czapsky and Robert Chappell

editor: Paul Barnes

music: Philip Glass

Background:

Morris initially came to Dallas County in 1986 to make a non-fiction film about Dr. Grigson, the notorious psychiatrist known as "Dr. Death" who is seen briefly in the film. In the course of interviewing dozens of death row inmates sentenced after Grigson's expert testimony, the filmmaker discovered a more compelling subject matter in Randall Dale Adams. Subsequent to the film's release, a state court in Dallas overturned the 1977 verdict and the prosecution declined to re-try the case. Today Adams is a free man, although he has never been legally exonerated of the crime--it is as if the entire trial never happened.

Cinematic Style:

Morris has deliberately defied the traditions of both older documentary (voice-over narration, filming on location) and more recent cinema verite (handheld camera, available lighting, shooting "on the run") in favor of an expressionistic style that seeks to draw attention to another thin line, that separating fiction from truth. In particular, the moody music of Philip Glass, the careful set-ups and color designs of the interviews, and especially the stylized quality of the numerous re-enactments--no less than nine--combine to create an effect of strangeness that cuts against our sense that what we are watching is objective truth. Note that none of the re-enactments (all of them shot months later in New York City) presents the version of what really happened that the film ultimately leads us to believe.

And yet, **The Thin Blue Line** compels the viewer's attention precisely because we experience a heightened sense of reality in the presence of Randall Adams and David Harris. They are not actors, though their characters are constructed through editing into something quite like "roles."

This is the film's compelling paradox: only through artifice, through the manipulation of illusions, is the inescapable truth revealed. "Truth is difficult to know," Morris has said. "It is not impossible to know."

Questions for Discussion:

1. In what sense does this film provide the answers to everything and the solution to nothing? That is, what problems--

aside from the issue of Adams' incarceration--are left unresolved at the film's conclusion?

2. What is the effect of the last section, which focuses on David Harris? Consider the montage of still photographs from David's childhood and the image of the tape recorder playing the last interview with him.

3. How does the film blur the distinction between good and evil as well as fact and fiction? Is there some sense in which Randall Dale Adams is not entirely innocent and David Harris not entirely guilty?

4. What commentary does this film offer on contemporary American society?