

How '*The Thin Blue Line*' deploys the codes and conventions of fictional storytelling, rather than the traditional documentary form.

Documentary films aim to offer truth and factual evidence on a subject matter, as opposed to fiction films which intend to tell a story that is often fabricated. Nick Broomfield, a filmmaker whose style is associated with the early Cinéma Vérité movement, defines documentary as “recording an aspect of our history and culture that is representative of it and its time.” (Stubbs, 2002:127) Consequently, early documentary films took on the traits of Cinéma Vérité which focuses on being observational and realist, in order to “give an insight” rather than to construct. However, as cinema continued to evolve, it became common for documentary filmmakers to take on traditional fiction film codes, and vice versa. (De Jong et al, 2012:150) For instance, some documentary films will make similar aesthetic decisions as a fictional film might, such as in terms of editing or lighting, (Etherington-Wright and Doughty, 2011:99) whilst some fictional films will take on a ‘realist filmmaking’ style which may take the form of naturalistic lighting, long takes or handheld cameras to echo documentaries of the Cinéma Vérité form. (Etherington-Wright and Doughty, 2011:101) Errol Morris is an example of a contemporary documentary filmmaker who uses techniques associated with fiction, to the point where his most notable work, '*The Thin Blue Line*' (1988), was initially a topic of controversy for being too cinematic and “not a proper documentary”. Morris purposefully rejected the Cinéma Vérité style and “was interested in doing the exact opposite”, such as by stabilising the camera, allowing subjects to look directly into the camera, and using artificial lighting. (Baker, 2006:2-3) Amongst others, the work of Errol Morris exemplifies how documentaries often deploy fictional storytelling codes and conventions.

The narrative structure of a film is formed with the fabula; the events or actions, and syuzhet; the order in which this is presented. That is to say, the fabula is ‘the what’ and the syuzhet is ‘the how’. (Nelmes, 2012:82) Both fiction and documentary forms have a fabula to work from, only documentaries must achieve it through real people and places. Both forms have the ability to control the syuzhet, therefore enabling them both to follow the classic narrative formula. The structure of a classic narrative follows a protagonist with a particular aim, who inevitably comes across obstacles which lead up to a climax, and finally finds a resolution to the aim. This structure is seen across many art mediums not limited to film, and remains a process that can also be found in documentary film. (De Jong et al, 2012:119) Bordwell and Thompson (2013:354) emphasise how “many documentarists organize their films as narrative, just as makers of fiction films do.” Even Nick Broomfield, whose Cinéma Vérité style would not normally be associated with conventional narrative norm, highlights the importance of controlling the narrative: “It’s an overall shape you bring to the story or the film that you’re telling. That’s the art.” (Stubbs, 2002:131)

The Thin Blue Line can be used to demonstrate how a documentary can follow the classic narrative form. Traditionally, a narrative begins with a ‘premise’; a circumstance which takes us into the story, and a justification as to why the story begins at this point and not elsewhere. (De Jong et al, 2012:120) In *The Thin Blue Line*, the premise is the introduction to Randall Adams and David Harris who are both linked in some way to the murder of Officer Wood. By starting the film this way, it “arouses curiosity and concern.” (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:434) This is parallel to the way in which a fiction film’s premise would also establish the characters and set up suspense. The film then moves into the main body where the protagonist’s problems and conflicts occur. This is where Morris focuses on Adams’ court confrontations and simultaneously where the audience is presented with conflicting testimonies. (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:435) There is also the growing presence of

dramatic irony; the viewer has access to all of the information which the characters on the screen do not know of. (De Jong et al, 2012:123) This device is used as a convention in many dramatic art forms, originating from literary use, and is successfully incorporated into this documentary to heighten suspense. The narrative must then move onto the climax; this is the “key turning point”. (De Jong, et al 2012:120) In the film, this is where the jury declare Adams as guilty and sentence him to death. Like in any fictional film, the climax is where most of the tension lies, and that is true for this segment. Lastly, the film ends with a resolution. As well as tying up any loose ends, a resolution may also infer new challenges ahead and trigger thoughts which linger in the mind of the viewer long after the film is over. (De Jong et al, 2012:123) This is true for *The Thin Blue Line*; in some ways there is a true ‘resolve’ because Adams’ death sentence is reduced to a life sentence, and Harris is convicted with a death sentence, albeit for a different crime. Harris makes a somewhat confession at the end, admitting to the lies which put Adams in jail. However, there is the afterthought left for the viewer, reminding them that Adams is still serving a life sentence for a crime he did not commit. And so, *The Thin Blue Line* seems to follow traditional fictional narrative norms effectively.

As Bordwell and Thompson (2013:355) point out, it is true that many documentaries choose to take on “non-narrative types of form” also. These may intend to “convey categorized information” or “make an argument that will convince the spectator of something”. Nevertheless, traditional narrative principles can also be found in these films too, although more subtly. Michael Moore’s *‘Bowling for Columbine’* (2002) follows a structure similar to an essay; Moore moves from one event to another with each step leading to a new question to explore. (De Jong et al, 2012:107) Although this is unconventional, it does follow the ‘cause and effect’ principle to drive the film forward. Nonetheless, it is arguable that the film still encompasses an establishment; the American gun culture, a climax; the meeting with Charlton Heston – a constant key figure throughout the film, and a resolution, Moore looping back to the beginning imagery of the bowling alley. Therefore, even though approached differently, aspects of a classic narrative can be found.

In fictional storytelling, there is the presence of a protagonist. They are the main vessel who will drive the narrative forward, and take the spectator through the events of the story. In a classic narrative, the protagonist is usually changed by the events, perhaps by having learned something, or their circumstances have changed, or they have come to terms with something. (De Jong et al, 2012:120) To use *The Thin Blue Line* as an example, Adams has succeeded in convincing us of his innocence and also gets a reduced prison sentence. And if Harris were seen as the protagonist, by the end of the film he finally confesses the truth of what happened, and consequently, comes to terms with his actions. In *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore is the protagonist, and he wins a small victory by convincing Kmart to stop their sale of ammo. Therefore, documentary films do appear to have characters who successfully take on the traditional traits of any fictional protagonist.

De Jong et al. (2012) argue that the choice of characters for a documentary is as important as the casting would be for a fiction film. They stress the importance of appearance, since this is the viewer’s “first level of engagement”. For instance, in *The Thin Blue Line*, Adams immediately comes across to the viewer as timid, harmless, and incapable of murder, but in contrast, Harris’ body language echoes the opposite effect. Morris himself states that “we all see ourselves as being protagonists in a private drama of our own construction”, he believes “it is the human condition” and is what his documentaries aim to capture. He goes on to reference his film *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997) on how it follows the lives of four different “characters”. He also states that the film is “about first person narrative, not about fact.” (A Brief History of Errol Morris, 2000) Hence, Morris

purposefully views the subjects in his films as characters or protagonists, terms often used with fictional storytelling. Bordwell and Thompson (2013) discuss how the plot of *The Thin Blue Line* is constructed to make the viewer sympathise with Adams; they specify how he is the first person Morris allows the viewer to see, and also lets him explain his gratitude for finding a good job after moving to Dallas. By doing so, he is presented as a “decent, hardworking man railroaded by the justice system”. This is continued throughout the film; whenever an opposing accuser states their argument, Adams has a counter-argument. For example, when Harris makes his claims about the timeframe of the events, Adams gives his alibi. Through this, Morris allows Adams to become the authoritative commentator. In *Bowling for Columbine*, a similar idea can be found, with Moore taking on the role of the protagonist. Misiak (2005:163) states that he “looks like one of the good old boys from the neighbourhood”, and also that the “image of the director certainly widens the path of his social reach”. Consequently, since the viewer finds him appealing and relatable, they are able to side with Moore’s opinion and be willing to follow him on his journey.

As well as sharing narrative conventions, documentary films also pick up stylistic codes from fiction films, for instance, through use of cinematography techniques. Morris’ films are a fitting example of this, even during the interview segments. In fiction films, there is an importance in the choice of camera angle used to look at a character – whether it is low or high, straight-on or profile; these choices can easily affect the way in which the viewer interprets the character. (De Jong et al 2012:149) The same can be applied to documentaries too. Ricciardelli (2010) explains how in *The Fog of War* (2003), Morris chooses to frame the former Secretary of Defense with a range of close ups which magnify further and further, in order to capture “even the most subtle changes of facial expressions.”, and thereby increasing the intimacy between the viewer and the subject. Morris’ most renowned method for his interview segments is the use of his creation, the ‘Interrotron’. This allows the subject to look directly into the camera whilst being interviewed, and this subsequently creates eye contact with the viewer. Morris claims that this has “dramatic value”. (A Brief History of Errol Morris, 2000) To make a subject to look into the camera is unusual in either fiction or documentary, it is a ‘breaking of the fourth wall’. In that sense it would not be following convention. However, it is sometimes used in spite of this for self-reflexive purposes; when a filmmaker intentionally wants the viewer to be aware of the fictionality. The creative choices behind bending the rules and the norms could arguably be a code of fictional storytelling itself, and so in that manner Morris’ decision to do this could be seen as an effective creative choice.

Morris’ films are also well known for its stylized re-enactments, often shot in slow motion, with top lighting, dutch angles and extreme close ups in order to illustrate interviewee’s testimonies. (Austin 2011:350) In his early work, Morris found difficulty in finding a suitable cinematographer as he felt that “there was such a strong, prevalent idea of what non-fiction film should look like”, when he wanted to create one “in a different way entirely”. His use of re-enactments are completely planned, in his words, there is “nothing documentary-like” them, meaning that the re-enactments in themselves follow fictional codes and conventions completely. Morris explains his reason for this is “to bring an audience closer to understanding what the issues were”. (Tobias 2011) Baker (2006:9), speaking of Morris’ *Mr Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr*’ (1999), compares the statically shot interviews of Fred Leuchter, juxtaposed against the other scenes which feature fluid camerawork roaming around the subject, often tilted and therefore implying the “off-centre view of the world that Leuchter holds”. This highlights not only Morris’ careful consideration of composition, but also in how it can create and enforce meaning as a fiction film would.

On top of this, Morris chooses to film the re-enactment scenes in a way which acknowledges their re-enactedness; the strong use of lighting and smoothly composed shots makes it clear to the viewer that it is a fictionalised sequence. However, there is choice to not show too much, only focusing on “near moments” and not “directly on them”. For instance, the drop of blood falling from a prisoner’s face in ‘*Standard Operating Procedure*’ (2008), (Austin 2011:350) or the minor details like the milkshake in *The Thin Blue Line*. There is no essence of fabricating truth through these sequences, thus it is not breaking any documentary convention, only bringing in stylistic codes from fiction films to enhance the story. The cinematography of the re-enactments in *The Thin Blue Line* follow codes which are associated with the 1940’s film noir genre. The strong use of light and shadow effects and low key lighting evokes a dark and dangerous world, and *The Thin Blue Line* also utilises this. It indicates how the real subjects in the story are no more or less coherent or consistent as they are actors in a narrative. (Williams 1993:12) It is fitting also, as the story itself follows a murder mystery thriller which would not be out of place as a film noir, hence taking influence from a genre of fiction whilst still maintaining its own as a documentary.

Editing conventions associated with fictional films can also be found in documentaries. Joshua Oppenheimer (2013:312-313), a contemporary documentary filmmaker, praises *The Thin Blue Line*’s ability to blend testimonies together with reconstructions in a way which convinces the audience that something else may have happened. Likewise, Nichols (2010:75) comments on how the film does not use any voice-over commentary, and instead likens the juxtapositions of the testimonies as “the voice of the film”. As a result, the *The Thin Blue Line* succeeds in using editing as a tool to carry the narrative forward, with no need for expository narration, comparable to how a traditional fiction film might. Additionally, Morris makes the creative decision to cut together seemingly minute details. For example, if a subject mentions a certain place, there will be an insert shot of that destination. Normally this would not happen in a documentary as it would be an unnecessary interruption, but Morris’ decision to do so suggests an attempt to emulate the vast amount of information that an investigator would need to process. Furthermore, the inserts can induce metaphors, such as the focus on the milkshake pouring out onto the pavement as a representation of “the life pumping out of the fatally wounded officer”. (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013:435) In another example, whilst a witness is making a case against Adams, the legitimacy of her account is challenged by the cross-cutting of her testimony against scenes from a 1940’s crime stopper and his female companion. By doing so, the witnesses claims are weakened and the viewer continues to side with Adams. (Nichols 2010:76) The effective use of editing to create and enhance connotations resembles traditional fictional storytelling methods.

In contrast to the structured continuity editing of *The Thin Blue Line*, other documentaries may follow a less linear form of editing, whilst still taking on fictional film conventions. Montage editing is a form which assembles segments of a story together in order to “symbolise” events. (Nelmes, 2012:97) Finn (2003:65) details Moore’s “mixture of stock footage, cartoons, montages and interviews” in *Bowling for Columbine* order to “[create] a film that is both frightening and entertaining”. The assortment of visuals containing morbid imagery, such as infamous broadcasted deaths, mixed with those of a humorous nature, such as a clip from a cartoon, keep the viewer constantly engaged and emotionally invested. The use of montage, or of “non-diegetic inserts” ranges back to the Soviet montage director Sergei Eisenstien, who is known as a prominent figure in early cinema, and whose methods directly influenced traditional fiction film conventions.

Regarding mise-en-scene, fiction filmmakers will intend to put a certain element into a scene, whereas a documentary filmmaker will usually anticipate finding them. However, these situations can sometimes be reversed; some fiction films will improvise with factual settings and some documentaries will purposefully add elements, although it may not be the norm. Mise-en-scene is vital in persuading the viewer to feel a certain way about the characters or situation. (De Jong et al, 2012:155) There is a prominence of a red and blue colour motif in *The Thin Blue Line*; colours which are commonly associated with the police force. The title of the film itself colours the word "Blue" in a red colour, Bordwell and Thompson (2013:438) suggest that this evokes bloodshed, and also creates a link between the police blue with the "blinking red lights of the opening". Another instance of Morris' decisions for the mise-en-scene is reflected in the costuming of Adams and Harris. Adams' backdrop is a prison, yet he is wearing a white shirt which is often symbolic of innocence in fictional storytelling. In contrast to this, Harris is wearing an orange shirt associated with prison, this implies that he is the criminal figure, and leaves the viewer to wonder if or why he is in prison. These kinds of creative decisions are expected of fiction films, yet Morris utilises them into his documentaries, even through the interviews, to create and enhance connotations which leaves no need to depend on captions or voice narrations.

Sound is an integral element which allows the filmmaker to make implications which cannot be seen. In Morris' films, this is often achieved through use of non-diegetic music. Traditionally, documentaries avoid using music in this fashion as it diminishes the "authenticity of the factual experience" and as it has "strong associations with fiction." However Morris and now an increasing number of other documentary filmmakers are unafraid to make use of non-diegetic music. *The Thin Blue Line* uses a score composed by Philip Glass which is melodic and eerie, allowing it to arouse the feeling of tension. It is highly cinematic and thus unusual for use in a documentary, yet succeeds nevertheless in creating intensity. (Bordwell and Thompson 2013:435) In *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore similarly makes use of music for cinematic effect, but through soundtrack choices rather than an original score. During a montage sequence, a variety of images from moments of war and violence in American history is supported by Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World". The incongruence of disturbing images with a happy song creates an irony which forces an emotional response from the viewer. It is therefore a suitable example of how a documentary can apply creative sound choices which are not limited to fiction films.

To conclude, fictional storytelling conventions can successfully be found in documentaries, ranging from narrative to stylistic choices. Errol Morris is a prime example of someone who draws upon them whilst still maintaining an image as a documentary filmmaker, whilst also enhancing his documentaries to a unique level. His work, most prominently *The Thin Blue Line*, has inspired success in experimenting with breaking documentary conventions, and making use of fictional conventions, to other filmmakers. These repercussions can be seen in many contemporary documentaries, such as Michael Moore's work, which continues to toy with the documentary form through unconventional methods. Thus, by effectively making use of fictional codes and continuing to do so, documentary films remain an evolving genre of cinema.

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