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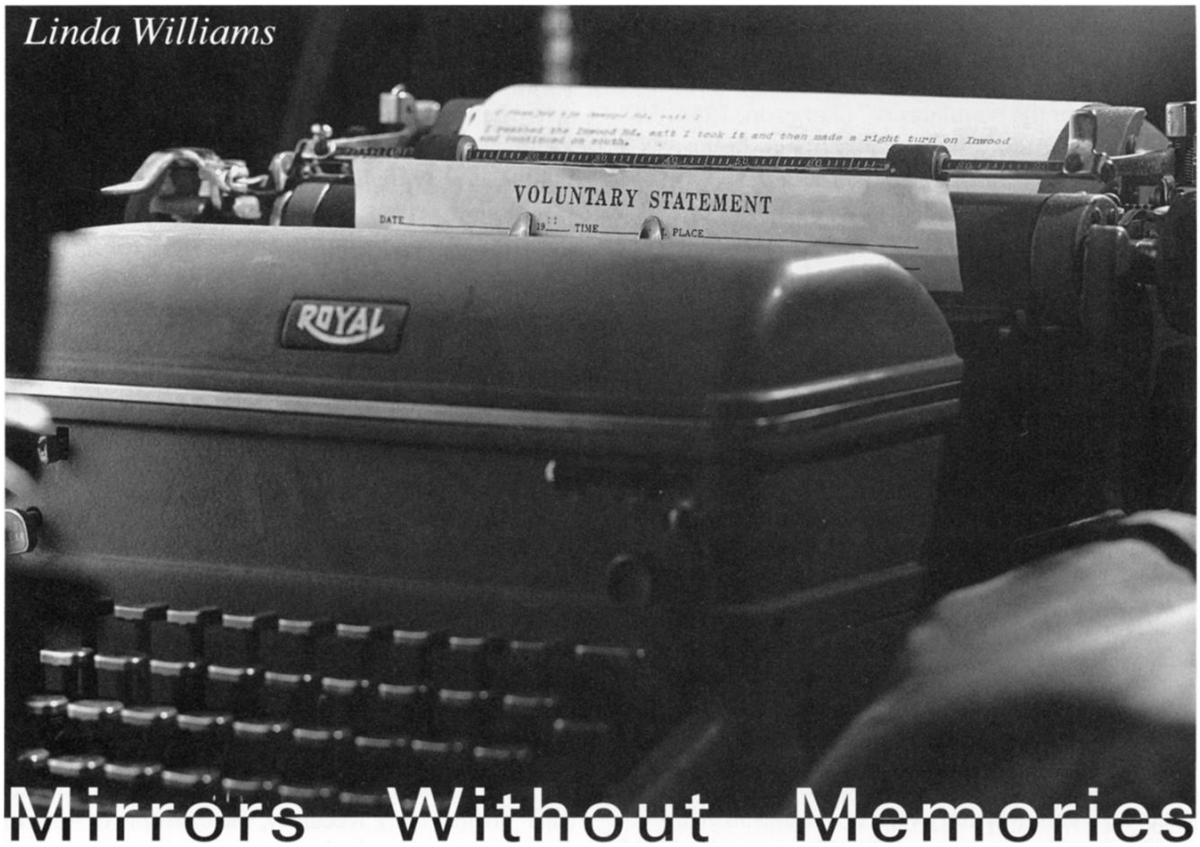
Linda Williams



Mirrors Without Memories

Truth, History, and the New Documentary

The August 12th, 1990 Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times* carried a lead article with a rather arresting photograph of Franklin Roosevelt flanked by Winston Churchill and Groucho Marx. Standing behind them was a taut-faced Sylvester Stallone in his Rambo garb. The photo illustrated the major point of the accompanying article by Andy Grundberg: that the photograph—and by implication the moving picture as well—is no longer, as Oliver Wendell Holmes once put it, a "mirror with a memory" illustrating the visual truth of objects, persons, and events but a manipulated construction. In an era of electronic and computer-generated images, the camera, the article sensationally proclaims, "can lie."

In this photo, the anachronistic flattening out of historical referents, the trivialization of history itself, with the popular culture icons of Groucho and Rambo rubbing up against Roosevelt and Churchill, serves almost as a caricature of the state of representation some critics have chosen to call postmodern. In a key statement, Fredric Jameson has described

the "cultural logic of postmodernism" as a "new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (Jameson, 1984, 58). To Jameson, the effect of this image culture is a weakening of historicity. Lamenting the loss of the grand narratives of modernity, which he believes once made possible the political actions of individuals representing the interests of social classes, Jameson argues that it no longer seems possible to represent the "real" interests of a people or a class against the ultimate ground of social and economic determinations.

While not all theorists of postmodernity are as disturbed as Jameson by the apparent loss of the referent, by the undecidabilities of representation accompanied by an apparent paralysis of the will to change, many theorists do share a sense that the enlightenment projects of truth and reason are definitively over. And if representations, whether visual or verbal, no longer refer to a truth or referent "out there," as Trinh T. Minh-ha has put it, for us "in here" (Trinh, 83), then we seem to be plunged into a permanent state of the self-reflexive crisis of representation. What was once a "mirror with a memory" can now only reflect another mirror.

Perhaps because so much faith was once placed in the ability of the camera to reflect objective truths of some fundamental social referent—often construed by the socially relevant documentary film as records of injustice or exploitation of powerless common people—the loss of faith in the objectivity of the image seems to point, nihilistically, like the impossible memory of the meeting of the fictional Rambo and the real Roosevelt, to the brute and cynical disregard of ultimate truths.

Yet at the very same time, as any television viewer and moviegoer knows, we also exist in an era in which there is a remarkable hunger for documentary images of the real. These images proliferate in the vérité of on-the-scene cops programs in which the camera eye merges with the eye of the law to observe the violence citizens do to one another. Violence becomes the very emblem of the real in these programs. Interestingly, violent trauma has become the emblem of the real in the new vérité genre of the independent amateur video, which, in the case of George Holliday's tape of the Rodney King beating by L.A. police, functioned to contradict the eye of the law and to intervene in the "cops'" official version of King's arrest. This home video might be taken to represent the other side of the postmodern distrust of the image: here the camera tells the truth in a remarkable moment of cinema vérité which then becomes valuable (though not conclusive) evidence in accusations against the L.A. Police Department's discriminatory violence against minority offenders.

The contradictions are rich: on the one hand the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth.

In a recent book on postwar West German cinema and its representations of that country's past, Anton Kaes has written that "[T]he sheer mass of historical images transmitted by today's media weakens the link between public memory and personal experience. The past is in danger of becoming a rapidly expanding collection of images, easily retrievable but isolated from time and space, available in an eternal present by pushing a button on the remote control. History thus returns forever—as film" (Kaes, 198). Recently, the example of history that has been most insistently returning "as film" to American viewers is the assassination of John F. Kennedy as simulated by film-maker Oliver Stone.

Stone's *JFK* might seem a good example of Jameson's and Kaes's worst-case scenarios of the ultimate loss of historical truth amid the postmodern hall of mirrors. While laudably obsessed with exposing the manifest contradictions of the Warren Commission's official version of the Kennedy assassination, Stone's film has been severely criticized for constructing a "countermyth" to the Warren Commission's explanation of what happened. Indeed, Stone's images offer a kind of tragic counterpart to the comic mélange of the *New York Times* photo of Groucho and Roosevelt. Integrating his own reconstruction of the assassination with the famous Zapruder film, whose "objective" reflection of the event is offered as the narrative (if not the legal) clincher in Jim Garrison's argument against the lone assassin theory, Stone mixes Zapruder's real vérité with his own simulated vérité to construct a grandiose paranoid countermyth of a vast conspiracy by Lyndon Johnson, the C.I.A., and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to carry out a coup d'état. With little

Intervening in the process: *JFK* (previous photo: *The Thin Blue Line*)

hard evidence to back him up, Stone would seem to be a perfect symptom of a postmodern negativity and nihilism toward truth, as if to say: "We know the Warren Commission made up a story, well, here's another even more dramatic and entertaining story. Since we can't know the truth, let's make up a grand paranoid fiction."

It is not my purpose here to attack Oliver Stone's remarkably effective deployment of paranoia and megalomania; the press has already done a thorough job of debunking his unlikely fiction of a Kennedy who was about to end the Cold War and withdraw from Vietnam.[1] What interests me however, is the positive side of this megalomania: Stone's belief that it is possible to intervene in the process by which truth is constructed; his very real accomplishment in shaking up public perception of an official truth that closed down, rather than opened up, investigation; his acute awareness of how images enter into the production of knowledge. However much Stone may finally betray the spirit of his own investigation into the multiple, contingent, and constructed nature of the representation of history by asking us to believe in too tidy a conspiracy, his *JFK* needs to be taken seriously for its renewal of interest in one of the major traumas of our country's past.

So rather than berate Stone, I would like to contrast this multimillion-dollar historical fiction film borrowing many aspects of the form of documentary to what we might call the low-budget postmodern documentary borrowing many features of the fiction film. My goal in what follows is to get beyond the much remarked self-reflexivity and flamboyant auteurism of these documentaries, which might seem, Rashomon-like, to abandon the pursuit of truth, to what seems to me their remarkable engagement with a newer, more contingent, relative, postmodern truth—a truth which, far from being abandoned, still operates powerfully as the receding horizon of the documentary tradition.

When we survey the field of recent documentary films two things stand out: first, their unprecedented popularity among general audiences, who now line up for documentaries as eagerly as for fiction films; second, their willingness to tackle often grim, historically complex subjects. Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1987), about the murder of a police officer and the near execution of the "wrong man," Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), about the dire effects of General Motors' plant closings, and Ken Burns' 11-hour "The Civil War" (1990), (watched on PBS by 39 million Americans) were especially popular documentaries about uncommonly serious political and social realities. Even more difficult and challenging, though not quite as popular, were *Our Hitler* (Hans-Jürgen Sy-

berberg, 1980), *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (Marcel Ophuls, 1987) and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Chris Choy and Renee Tajima, 1988). And in 1991 the list of both critically successful and popular documentary features *not* nominated for Academy Awards—*Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston), *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper), *35 Up* (Michael Apted), *Truth or Dare* (Alex Keshishian)—was viewed by many as an embarrassment to the Academy. *Village Voice* critic Amy Taubin notes that 1991 was a year in which four or five documentaries made it onto the *Variety* charts; documentaries now mattered in a new way (Taubin, 62).

Though diverse, all the above works participate in a new hunger for reality on the part of a public seemingly saturated with Hollywood fiction. Jennie Livingston, director of *Paris Is Burning*, the remarkably popular documentary about gay drag subcultures in New York, notes that the out-of-touch documentaries honored by the Academy all share an old-fashioned earnestness toward their subjects, while the new, more popular documentaries share a more ironic stance toward theirs. Coincident with the hunger for documentary truth is the clear sense that this truth is subject to manipulation and construction by docu-auteurs who, whether on camera (Lanzmann in *Shoah*, Michael Moore in *Roger and Me*) or behind, are forcefully calling the shots.[2]

It is this paradox of the intrusive manipulation of documentary truth, combined with a serious quest to reveal some ultimate truths, that I would like to isolate within a subset of the above films. What interests me particularly is the way a special few of these documentaries handle the problem of figuring traumatic historical truths inaccessible to representation by any simple or single "mirror with a memory," and how this mirror nevertheless operates in complicated and indirect refractions. For while traumatic events of the past are not available for representation by any simple or single "mirror with a memory"—in the vérité sense of capturing events as they happen—they do constitute a multifaceted receding horizon which these films powerfully evoke.

I would like to offer Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* as a prime example of this postmodern documentary approach to the trauma of an inaccessible past because of its spectacular success in intervening in the truths known about this past. Morris's film was instrumental in exonerating a man wrongfully accused of murder. In 1976, Dallas police officer Robert Wood was murdered, apparently by a 28-year-old drifter named Randall Adams. Like Stone's *JFK*, *The Thin Blue Line* is a film about a November murder in Dallas. Like *JFK*, the film argues that the wrong man was set up by a state conspiracy with an interest in convicting an easy scapegoat rather than prosecuting the real murderer. The film—the "true" story of Randall Adams, the man convicted of the murder of Officer Wood, and his accuser David Harris, the young hitchhiker whom Adams picked up the night of the murder—ends with Harris's cryptic but dramatic confession to the murder in a phone conversation with Errol Morris.

Stylistically, *The Thin Blue Line* has been most remarked for its film-noirish beauty, its apparent abandonment of cinema-vérité realism for studied, often slow-motion, and highly expressionistic reenactments of different witnesses' versions of the murder to the tune of Philip Glass's hypnotic score. Like a great many recent documentaries obsessed with traumatic events of the past, *The Thin Blue Line* is self-reflexive. Like many of these new documentaries, it is acutely aware that the individuals whose lives are caught up in events are not so much self-coherent and consistent identities as they are actors in competing narratives. As in *Roger and Me*, *Shoah*, and, to a certain extent, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, the documentarian's role in constructing and staging these competing narratives thus becomes paramount.[3] In place of the self-obscuring voyeur of vérité realism, we encounter, in these and other films, a new presence in the persona of the documentarian.

For example, in one scene, David Harris, the charming young accuser whose testimony placed Randall Adams on death row and who has been giving his side of the story in alternate sections of the film from Adams, scratches his head while recounting an unimportant incident from his past. In this small gesture, Morris dramatically reveals information withheld until this moment: Harris's hands are handcuffed. He, like Adams, is in prison. The interviews with him are now subject to reinterpretation since, as we soon learn, he, too, stands accused of murder. For he has committed a senseless murder not unlike the one he accused Adams of committing. At this climactic moment Morris finally brings in

the hard evidence against Harris previously withheld: he is a violent psychopath who invaded a man's house, murdered him, and abducted his girlfriend. On top of this Morris adds the local cop's attempt to explain Harris's personal pathology; in the end we hear Harris's own near-confession—in an audio interview—to the murder for which Adams has been convicted. Thus Morris captures a truth, elicits a confession, in the best vérité tradition, but only in the context of a film that is manifestly staged and temporally manipulated by the docu-auteur.

It would seem that in Morris's abandonment of voyeuristic objectivity he achieves something more useful to the production of truth. His interviews get the interested parties talking in a special way. In a key statement in defense of his intrusive, self-reflexive style, Morris has attacked the hallowed tradition of cinema vérité: "There is no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything" (Morris, 17).

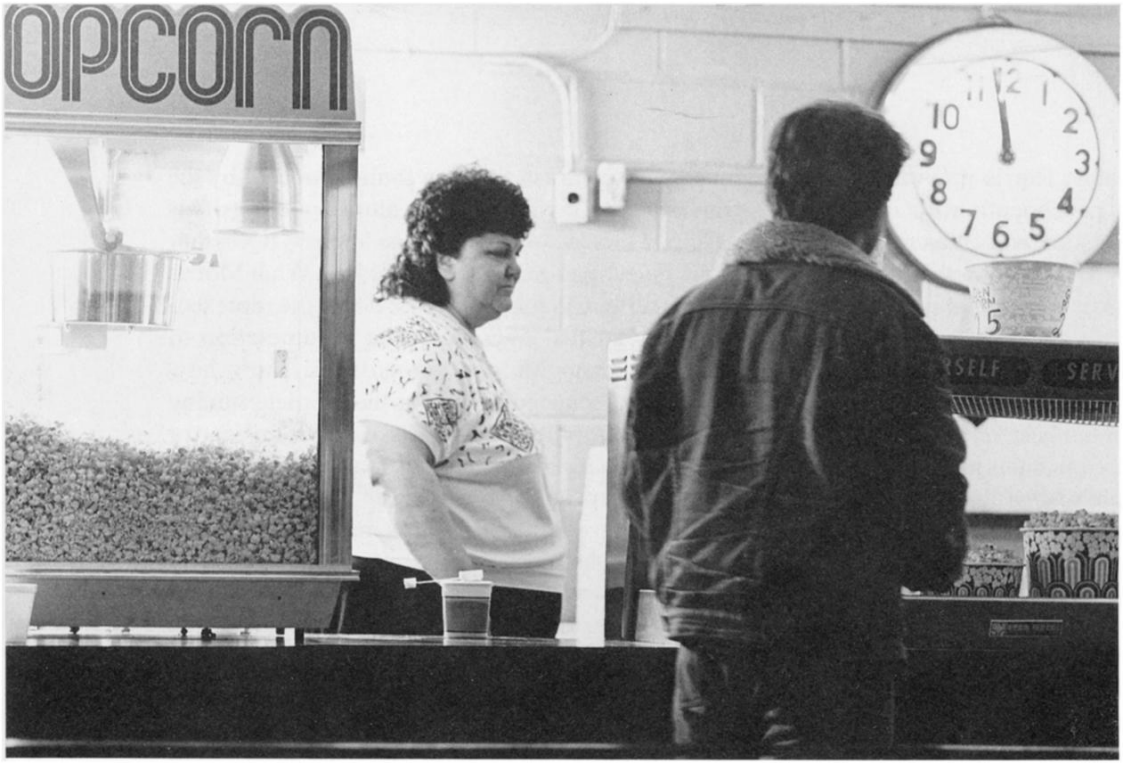
The "personal" in this statement has been taken to refer to the personal, self-reflexive style of the docu-auteur: Morris's hypnotic pace, Glass's music, the vivid colors and slow motion of the multiple reenactments. Yet the interviews too bear this personal imprint of the auteur. Each person who speaks to the camera in *The Thin Blue Line* does so in a confessional, "talking-cure" mode. James Shamus has pointed out that this rambling, free-associating discourse ultimately collides with, and is sacrificed to, the juridical narrative producing the truth of who, finally, is guilty. And Charles Musser also points out that what is sacrificed is the psychological complexity of the man the film finds innocent. Thus the film foregoes investigation into what Adams might have been up to that night taking a 16-year-old hitchhiker to a drive-in movie.[4]

Morris gives us some truths and withholds others. His approach to truth is altogether strategic. Truth exists for Morris because lies exist; if lies are to be exposed, truths must be strategically deployed against them. His strategy in the pursuit of this relative, hierarchized, and contingent truth is thus to find guilty those speakers whom he draws most deeply into the explorations of their past. Harris, the prosecutor Mulder, the false witness Emily Miller, all cozy up to the camera to remember incidents from their past which serve to indict them in the present. In contrast, the man found innocent by the film remains a cipher, we learn almost nothing of his past, and this lack of knowledge appears necessary to the investigation of the official lies. What Morris does, in effect, is partially close down the representation of Adams' own story, the accumulation of narratives from his past, in order to show how convenient a scapegoat he was to the overdetermining pasts of all the other false witnesses. Thus, instead of using fictionalizing techniques to show us the truth of what happened, Morris scrupulously sticks to stylized and silent docudrama reenactments that show only what each witness claims happened.

In contrast, we might consider Oliver Stone's very different use of docudrama reenactments to reveal the "truth" of the existence of several assassins and the plot that orchestrated their activity, in the murder of JFK. Stone has Garrison introduce the Zapruder film in the trial of Clay Shaw as hallowed vérité evidence that there had to be more than one assassin. Garrison's examination of the magic bullet's trajectory does a fine dramatic job of challenging the official version of the lone assassin. But in his zealous pursuit of the truth of "who dunnit," Stone matches the vérité style of the Zapruder film with a vérité simulation which, although hypothesis, has none of the stylized, hypothetical visual marking of Morris's simulations and which therefore commands a greater component of belief. Morris, on the other hand, working in a documentary form that now eschews vérité as a style, stylizes his hypothetical reenactments and never offers any of them as an image of what actually happened.

In the discussions surrounding the truth claims of many contemporary documentaries, attention has centered upon the self-reflexive challenge to once hallowed techniques of vérité. It has become an axiom of the new documentary that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths—the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events. Yet too often this way of thinking has led to a forgetting of the way in which these films still are, as Stone's film isn't, documentaries—films with a special interest in the relation to the real, the "truths" which matter in people's lives but which cannot be transparently represented.

One reason for this forgetting has been the erection of a too simple dichotomy between, on the one hand, a naïve faith in the truth of what the



The Thin Blue Line

documentary image reveals—vérité's discredited claim to capturing events while they happen—and on the other, the embrace of fictional manipulation. Of course, even in its heyday no one ever fully believed in an absolute truth of cinema vérité. There are, moreover, many gradations of fictionalized manipulation ranging from the controversial manipulation of temporal sequence in Michael Moore's R*oger and Me* to Errol Morris's scrupulous reconstructions of the subjective truths of events as viewed from many different points of view.

Truth is "not guaranteed" and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror with a memory, yet some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless the always receding goal of the documentary tradition. Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths. The advantage, and the difficulty, of the definition is that it holds on to the concept of the real—indeed of a "real" at all—even in the face of tendencies to assimilate documentary entirely into the rules and norms of fiction.

As *The Thin Blue Line* shows, the recognition that documentary access to this real is strategic and contingent does not require a retreat to a Rashomon universe of undecidabilities. This recognition can lead, rather, to a remarkable awareness of the conditions under which it is possible to intervene in the political and cultural construction of truths which, while not guaranteed, nevertheless matter as the narratives by which we live. To better explain this point I would like to further consider the confessional, talking-cure strategy of *The Thin Blue Line* as it relates to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. While I am aware of the incommensurability of a film about the state of Texas's near-execution of an innocent man with the German state's achieved extermination of six million, I want to pursue the comparison because both films are, in very different ways, striking examples of postmodern documentaries whose passionate desire is to intervene in the construction of truths whose totality is ultimately unfathomable.

In both of these films, the truth of the past is traumatic, violent, and unrepresentable in images. It is obscured by official lies masking the responsibility of individual agents in a gross miscarriage of justice. We may recall that Jameson's argument about the postmodern is that it is a loss of a sense of history, of a collective or individual past, and the knowledge of how the past determines the present: "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Jameson, 1984, 64). That so many well-known and popular documentary films have taken up the task of remembering the past—indeed that so much popular debate about the "truth"

of the past has been engendered by both fiction and documentary films about the past—could therefore be attributed to another of Jameson's points about the postmodern condition: the intensified nostalgia for a past that is already lost.

However, I would argue instead that, certainly in these two films and partially in a range of others, the postmodern suspicion of over-abundant images of an unfolding, present "real" (vérité's commitment to film "it" as "it" happens) has contributed not to new fictionalizations but to paradoxically new historicizations. These historicizations are fascinated by an inaccessible, ever receding, yet newly important past which does have depth.[5] History, in Jameson's sense of traces of the past, of an absent cause which "hurts" (Jameson, 1981, 102), would seem, almost by definition, to be inaccessible to the vérité documentary form aimed at capturing action in its unfolding. The recourse to talking-heads interviews, to people remembering the past—whether the collective history of a nation or city, the personal history of individuals, or the criminal event which crucially determines the present—is, in these anti-vérité documentaries, an attempt to overturn this commitment to realistically record "life as it is" in favor of a deeper investigation of how it became as it is.

Thus, while there is very little running after the action, there is considerable provocation of action. Even though Morris and Lanzmann have certainly done their legwork to pursue actors in the events they are concerned to represent, their preferred technique is to set up a situation in which the action will come to them. In these privileged moments of vérité (for there finally are moments of relative vérité) the past repeats. We thus see the power of the past not simply by dramatizing it, or reenacting it, or talking about it obsessively (though these films do all this), but finally by finding its traces, in repetitions and resistances, in the present. It is thus the contextualization of the present with the past that is the most effective representational strategy in these two remarkable films.

Each of these documentaries digs toward an impossible archeology, picking at the scabs of lies which have covered over the inaccessible originary event. The film-makers ask questions, probe circumstances, draw maps, interview historians, witnesses, jurors, judges, police, bureaucrats, and survivors. These diverse investigatory processes augment the single method of the vérité camera. They seek to uncover a past the knowledge of which will produce new truths of guilt and innocence in the present. Randall Adams is now free at least partly because of the evidence of Morris's film; the Holocaust comes alive not as some alien horror foreign to all humanity but as something that is, perhaps for the first time on film, understandable as an absolutely banal incremental logic and logistics of train schedules and human silence. The past events examined in these films are not offered as complete, totalizable, apprehensible. They are fragments, pieces of the past invoked by memory, not unitary representable truths but, as Freud once referred to the psychic mechanism of memory, a palimpsest, described succinctly by Mary Ann Doane as "the sum total of its rewritings through time." The "event" remembered is never whole, never fully represented, never isolated in the past alone but only accessible through a memory which resides, as Doane has put it, "in the reverberations between events" (Doane, 58).

This image of the palimpsest of memory seems a particularly apt evocation of how these two films approach the problem of representing the inaccessible trauma of the past. When Errol Morris fictionally reenacts the murder of Officer Wood as differently remembered by David Harris, Randall Adams, the officer's partner, and the various witnesses who claimed to have seen the murder, he turns his film into a temporally elaborated palimpsest, discrediting some versions more than others but refusing to ever fix one as *the* truth. It is precisely Morris's refusal to fix the final truth, to go on seeking reverberations and repetitions that, I argue, gives this film its exceptional power of truth.

This strategic and relative truth is often a by-product of other investigations into many stories of self-justification and reverberating memories told to the camera. For example, Morris never set out to tell the story of Randall Adams' innocence. He was interested initially in the story of "Dr. Death," the psychiatrist whose testimony about the sanity of numerous accused murderers had resulted in a remarkable number of death sentences. It would seem that the more directly and singlemindedly a film pursues a single truth, the less chance it has of producing the kind of "reverberations between events" that will effect meaning in the present. This is the problem with *Roger and Me* and, to stretch matters, even with *JFK*: both go after a single target

too narrowly, opposing a singular (fictionalized) truth to a singular official lie.

The much publicized argument between Harlan Jacobson and Michael Moore regarding the imposition of a false chronology in Moore's documentary about the closing of General Motors' plant in Flint, Michigan, is an example. At stake in this argument is whether Moore's documentation of the decline of the city of Flint in the wake of the plant closing entailed an obligation to represent events in the sequence in which they actually occurred. Jacobson argues that Moore betrays his journalist/documentarian's commitment to the objective portrayal of historical fact when he implies that events that occurred prior to the major layoffs at the plant were the effect of these layoffs. Others have criticized Moore's self-promoting placement of himself at the center of the film.[6]

In response, Moore argues that as a resident of Flint he has a place in the film and should not attempt to play the role of objective observer but of partisan investigator. This point is quite credible and consistent with the postmodern awareness that there is no objective observation of truth but always an interested participation in its construction. But when he argues that his documentary is "in essence" true to what happened to Flint in the 1980s, only that these events are "told with a narrative style" that omits details and condenses events of a decade into a palatable "movie" (Jacobson, 22), Moore behaves too much like Oliver Stone, abandoning the commitment to multiple contingent truths in favor of a unitary, paranoid view of history.

The argument between Moore and Jacobson seems to be about where documentarians should draw the line in manipulating the historical sequence of their material. But rather than determining appropriate strategies for the representation of the meaning of events, the argument becomes a question of a commitment to objectivity versus a commitment to fiction. Moore says, in effect, that his first commitment is to entertain and that this entertainment is faithful to the essence of the history. But Moore betrays the cause and effect reverberation between events by this reordering. The real lesson of this debate would seem to be that Moore did not trust his audience to learn about the past in any other way than through the vérité capture of it. He assumed that if he didn't have footage from the historical period prior to his filming in Flint he couldn't show it. But the choice needn't be, as Moore implies, between boring, laborious fact and entertaining fiction true to the "essence," but not the detail, of historical events. The opposition poses a

Roger and Me

false contrast between a naïve faith in the documentary truth of photographic and filmic images and the cynical awareness of fictional manipulation.

What animates Morris and Lanzmann, by contrast, is not the opposition between absolute truth and absolute fiction but the awareness of the final inaccessibility of a moment of crime, violence, trauma, irretrievably located in the past. Through the curiosity, ingenuity, irony, and obsessiveness of "obtrusive" investigators, Morris and Lanzmann do not so much represent this past as they reactivate it in images of the present. This is their distinctive postmodern feature as documentarians. For in revealing the fabrications, the myths, the frequent moments of scapegoating when easy fictional explanations of trauma, violence, crime were substituted for more difficult ones, these documentaries do not simply play off truth against lie, nor do they play off one fabrication against another; rather, they show how lies function as partial truths to both the agents and witnesses of history's trauma.

For example, in one of the most discussed moments of *Shoah*, Lanzmann stages a scene of homecoming in Chelmno, Poland, by Simon Srebnik, a Polish Jew who had, as a child, worked in the death camp near that town, running errands for the Nazis and forced to sing while doing so. Now, many years later, in the present tense of Lanzmann's film, the elderly yet still vigorous Srebnik is surrounded on the steps of the Catholic church by an even older, friendly group of Poles who remembered him as a child in chains who sang by the river. They are happy he has survived and returned to visit. But as Lanzmann asks them how much they knew and understood about the fate of the Jews who were carried away from the church in gas vans, the group engages in a kind of free association to explain the unexplainable.

[Lanzmann] Why do they think all this happened to the Jews?

[A Pole] Because they were the richest! Many Poles were also exterminated. Even priests.

[Another Pole] Mr. Kantarowski will tell us what a friend told him. It happened in Myndjewyce, near Warsaw.

[Lanzmann] Go on.

[Mr. Kantarowski] The Jews there were gathered in a square. The rabbi asked an SS man: "Can I talk to them?" The SS man said yes. So the rabbi said that around two thousand years ago the Jews condemned the innocent Christ to death. And when they did that, they cried out: "Let his blood fall on our heads and on our sons' heads." The rabbi told

Shoah: Simon Srebnik on the church steps in Chelmno

them: "Perhaps the time has come for that, so let us do nothing, let us go, let us do as we're asked."

[Lanzmann] He thinks the Jews expiated the death of Christ?

[The first? Pole] He doesn't think so, or even that Christ sought revenge. He didn't say that. The rabbi said it. It was God's will, that's all!

[Lanzmann, referring to an untranslated comment] What'd she say?

[A Polish woman] So Pilate washed his hands and said: "Christ is innocent," and he sent Barabbas. But the Jews cried out: "Let his blood fall on our heads!"

[Another Pole] That's all; now you know! (*Shoah*, 100).[7]

As critic Shoshana Felman has pointed out, this scene on the church steps in Chelmno shows the Poles replacing one memory of their own witness of the persecution of the Jews with another (false) memory, an auto-mystification, produced by Mr. Kantarowski, of the Jews' willing acceptance of their persecution as scapegoats for the death of Christ. This fantasy, meant to assuage the Poles' guilt for their complicity in the extermination of the Jews, actually repeats the Poles' crime of the past in the present.

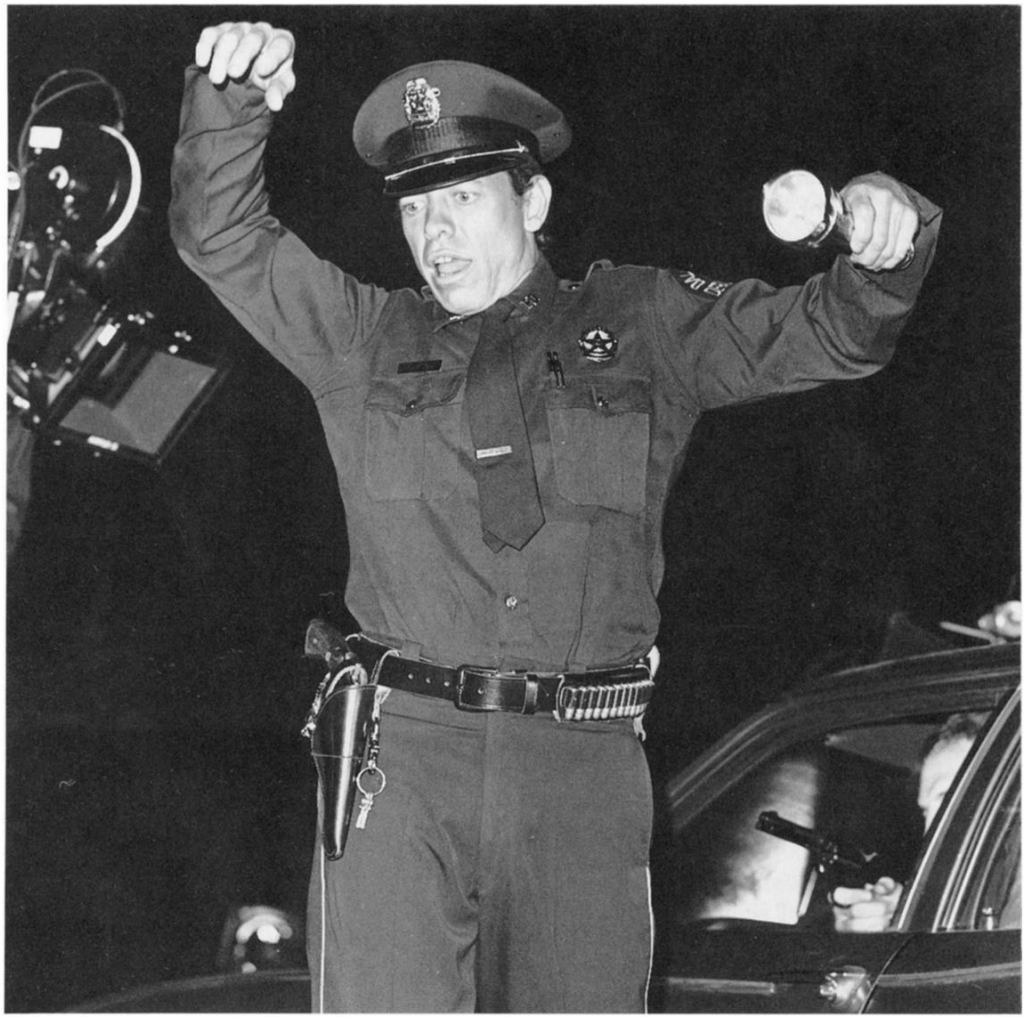
Felman argues that the strategy of Lanzmann's film is not to challenge this false testimony but to dramatize its effects: we see Simon Srebnik suddenly silenced among the chatty Poles, whose victim he becomes all over again. Thus the film does not so much give us a memory as an action, here and now, of the Poles' silencing and crucifixion of Srebnik, whom they obliterate and forget even as he stands in their midst (Felman, 120–128).

It is this repetition in the present of the crime of the past that is key to the documentary process of Lanzmann's film. Success, in the film's terms, is the ability not only to assign guilt in the past, to reveal and fix a truth of the day-to-day operation of the machinery of extermination, but also to deepen the understanding of the many ways in which the Holocaust continues to live in the present. The truth of the Holocaust thus does not exist in any totalizing narrative, but only, as Felman notes and Lanzmann shows, as a collection of fragments. While the process of scapegoating, of achieving premature narrative closure by assigning guilt to convenient victims, is illuminated, the events of the past—in this case the totality of the Holocaust—register not in any fixed moment of past or present but rather, as in Freud's description of the palimpsest, as the sum total of its rewritings through time, not in a single event but in the "reverberations" between.

It is important in the above example to note that while cinema vérité is deployed in this scene on the steps, as well as in the interviews throughout the film, this form of vérité no longer has a fetish function of demanding belief as the whole. In place of a truth that is "guaranteed," the vérité of catching events as they happen is here embedded in a history, placed in relation to the past, given a new power, not of absolute truth but of repetition.

Although it is a very different sort of documentary dealing with a trauma whose horror cannot be compared to the Holocaust, Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* also offers its own rich palimpsest of reverberations between events. At the beginning of the film, convicted murderer Randall Adams mulls over the fateful events of the night of 1976 when he ran out of gas, was picked up by David Harris, went to a drive-in movie, refused to allow Harris to come home with him, and later found himself accused of killing a cop with a gun that Harris had stolen. He muses: "Why did I meet this kid? Why did I run out of gas? But it happened, it happened." The film probes this "Why?" And its discovery "out of the past" is not simply some fate-laden accident but, rather, a reverberation between events that reaches much further back into the past than that cold November night in Dallas.

Toward the end, after Morris has amassed a great deal of evidence attesting to the false witness born by three people who testified to seeing Randall Adams in the car with David Harris, but before playing the audio tape in which Harris all but confesses to the crime, the film takes a different turn—away from the events of November and into the childhood of David Harris. The film thus moves both forward and back in time: to events following and preceding the night of November, 1976, when the police officer was shot. Moving forward, we learn of a murder, in which David broke into the home of a man who had, he felt, stolen his girlfriend. When the man defended himself, David shot him. This repetition of wanton violence is the clincher in the film's "case" against David. But instead of stopping there, the film goes back in time as well.



The Thin Blue Line: reenactment of the night in November, 1976

A kindly, baby-faced cop from David's home town, who has told us much of David's story already, searches for the cause of his behavior and hits upon a childhood trauma: a four-year-old brother who drowned when David was only three. Morris then cuts to David speaking of this incident: "My Dad was supposed to be watching us. . . . I guess that might have been some kind of traumatic experience for me. . . . I guess I reminded him . . . it was hard for me to get any acceptance from him after that. . . . A lot of the things I did as a young kid was an attempt to get back at him."

In itself, this "getting-back-at-the-father" motive is something of a cliché for explaining violent male behavior. But coupled as it is with the final "confession" scene in which Harris repeats this getting-back-at-the-father motive in his relation to Adams, the explanation gains resonance, exposing another layer in the palimpsest of the past. As we watch the tape recording of this last unfilmed interview play, we hear Morris ask Harris if he thinks Adams is a "pretty unlucky fellow?" Harris answers, "Definitely," specifying the nature of this bad luck: "Like I told you a while ago about the guy who didn't have no place to stay . . . if he'd had a place to stay, he'd never had no place to go, right?" Morris decodes this question with his own rephrasing, continuing to speak of Harris in the third person: "You mean if he'd stayed at the hotel that night this never would have happened?" (That is, if Adams had invited Harris into his hotel to stay with him as Harris had indicated earlier in the film he expected, then Harris would not have committed the murder he later pinned on Adams.) Harris: "Good possibility, good possibility. . . . You ever hear of the proverbial scapegoat? There probably been thousands of innocent people convicted. . . . "

Morris presses: "What do you think about whether he's innocent?" Harris: "I'm sure he is." Morris again: "How can you be sure?" Harris: "I'm the one who knows. . . . After all was said and done it was pretty unbelievable. I've always thought if you could say why there's a reason that Randall Adams is in jail it might be because he didn't have

a place for somebody to stay that helped him that night. It might be the only reason why he's at where he's at."

What emerges forcefully in this near-confession is much more than the clinching evidence in Morris's portrait of a gross miscarriage of justice. For in not simply probing the "wrong man" story, in probing the reverberations between events of David Harris's personal history, Morris's film discovers an underlying layer in the palimpsest of the past: how the older Randall Adams played an unwitting role in the psychic history of the 16-year-old David Harris, a role which repeated an earlier trauma in Harris's life: of the father who rejected him, whose approval he could not win, and upon whom David then revenged himself.

Harris's revealing comments do more than clinch his guilt. Like the Poles who surround Srebnik on the steps of the church and proclaim pity for the innocent child who suffered so much even as they repeat the crime of scapegoating Jews, so David Harris proclaims the innocence of the man he has personally condemned, patiently explaining the process of scapegoating that the Dallas county legal system has so obligingly helped him accomplish. Cinema vérité in both these films is an important vehicle of documentary truth. We witness in the present an event of simultaneous confession and condemnation on the part of historical actors who repeat their crimes from the past. Individual guilt is both palpably manifest and viewed in a larger context of personal and social history. For even as we catch David Harris and the Poles of Chelmno in the act of scapegoating innocent victims for crimes they have not committed, these acts are revealed as part of larger processes, reverberating with the past.

I think it is important to hold on to this idea of truth as a fragmentary shard, perhaps especially at the moment we as a culture have begun to realize, along with Morris, and along with the supposed depthlessness of our postmodern condition, that it is not guaranteed. For some form of truth is the always receding goal of documentary film. But the truth figured by documentary cannot be a simple unmasking or reflection. It is a careful construction, an intervention in the politics and the semiotics of representation.

An overly simplified dichotomy between truth and fiction is at the root of our difficulty in thinking about the truth in documentary. The choice is not between two entirely separate regimes of truth and fiction. The choice, rather, is in strategies of fiction for the approach to relative truths. Documentary is not fiction and should not be conflated with it. But documentary can and should use all the strategies of fictional construction to get at truths. What we see in *The Thin Blue Line* and *Shoah*, and to some degree in the other documentaries I have mentioned, is an interest in constructing truths to dispel pernicious fictions, even though these truths are only relative and contingent. While never absolute and never fixed, this under-construction, fragmented horizon of truth is one important means of combating the pernicious scapegoating fictions that can put the wrong man on death row and enable the extermination of a whole people.

The lesson that I would like to draw from these two exemplary postmodern documentaries is thus not at all that postmodern representation inevitably succumbs to a depthlessness of the simulacrum, or that it gives up on truth to wallow in the undecidabilities of representation. The lesson, rather, is that there can be historical depth to the notion of truth—not the depth of unearthing a coherent and unitary past, but the depth of the past's reverberation with the present. If the authoritative means to the truth of the past does not exist, if photographs and moving images are not mirrors with memories, if they are more, as Baudrillard has suggested, like a hall of mirrors, then our best response to this crisis of representation might be to do what Lanzmann and Morris do: to deploy the many facets of these mirrors to reveal the seduction of lies.

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Notes

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1. See, for example: Janet Maslin, "Oliver Stone Manipulates His Puppet," *New York Times* (Sunday, January 5, 1992), p. 13; "Twisted History," *Newsweek* (December 23, 1991),

pp. 46–54; Alexander Cockburn, "J.F.K. and *J.F.K.*," *The Nation* (January 6–13, 1992), pp. 6–8.

2. Livingston's own film is an excellent example of the irony she cites, not so much in her directorial attitude toward her subject—drag-queen ball competitions—but in her subjects' attitudes toward the construction of the illusion of gender.
3. In this article I will not discuss *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* or *Roger and Me* at much length. Although both of these films resemble *The Thin Blue Line* and *Shoah* in their urge to reveal truths about crimes, I do not believe these films succeeded as spectacularly as Lanzmann's and Morris's in respecting the complexity of these truths. In *Vincent Chin,* the truth pursued is the racial motives animating Roger Ebans, a disgruntled, unemployed auto worker who killed Vincent Chin in a fight following a brawl in a strip joint. Ebans was convicted of manslaughter but only paid a small fine. He was then acquitted of a subsequent civil rights charge that failed to convince a jury of his racial motives. The film, however, convincingly pursues evidence that Ebans' animosity towards Chin was motivated by his anger at the Japanese for stealing jobs from Americans (Ebans assumed Chin was Japanese). In recounting the two trials, the story of the "Justice for Vincent" Committee, and the suffering of Vincent's mother, the film attempts to retry the case showing evidence of Ebans' racial motives.

   Film-makers Choy and Tajima gamble that their camera will capture, in interviews with Ebans, what the civil rights case did not capture for the jury: the racist attitudes that motivated the crime. They seek, in a way, what all of these documentaries seek: evidence of the truth of past events through their repetition in the present. This is also, in a more satirical vein, what Michael Moore seeks when he repeatedly attempts to interview the elusive Roger Smith, head of General Motors, about the layoffs in Flint, Michigan: Smith's avoidance of Moore repeats this avoidance of responsibility toward the town of Flint. This is also what Claude Lanzmann seeks when he interviews the ex-Nazis and witnesses of the Holocaust, and it is what Errol Morris seeks when he interviews David Harris, the boy who put Randall Adams on death row. Each of these films succeeds in its goal to a certain extent. But the singlemindedness of *Vincent Chin*'s pursuit of the singular truth of Ebans' guilt, and his culture's resentment of Asians, limits the film. Since Ebans never does show himself in the present to be a blatant racist, but only an insensitive working-class guy, the film interestingly fails on its own terms, though it is eloquent testimony to the pain and suffering of the scapegoated Chin's mother.
4. Shamus, Musser, and I delivered papers on *The Thin Blue Line* at a panel devoted to the film at a conference sponsored by New York University, "The State of Representation: Representation and the State," October 26–28, 1990. B. Ruby Rich was a respondent. Musser's paper argued the point, seconded by Rich's comments, that the prosecution and the police saw Adams as a homosexual. Their eagerness to prosecute Adams, rather than the underage Harris, seems to have much to do with this perception, entirely suppressed by the film.
5. Consider, for example, the way Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March,* on one level a narcissistic self-portrait of an eccentric Southerner's rambling attempts to discover his identity while traveling through the South, also plays off against the historical General Sherman's devastating march. Or consider the way Ken Burns' "The Civil War" is as much about what the Civil War is to us today as it is about the objective truth of the past.
6. Laurence Jarvik, for example, argued that Moore's self-portrayal of himself as a "naïve, quixotic 'rebel with a mike'" is not an authentic image but one Moore has promoted as a fiction (quoted in Tajima, 30).
7. I have quoted this dialogue from the published version of the *Shoah* script but I have added the attribution of who is speaking in brackets. It is important to note, however, that the script is a condensation of a prolonged scene that appears to be constructed out of two different interviews with Lanzmann, the Poles, and Simon Srebnik before the church. In the first segment, Mr. Kantarowski is not present; in the second he is. When the old woman says "So Pilate washed his hands . . . " Mr. Kantarowski makes the gesture of washing his hands.

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