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Narrative Technique in Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*

For several semesters now in one of my advanced English language courses that I teach here at the Universität Gesamthochschule Essen, my students have been analyzing Errol Morris's cult documentary film *The Thin Blue Line* and writing short essays on topics developed from it. In the winter semester of 2001/02 each student received a video of the film (supplied in part from generous funding from Fachbereich 3) for home viewing in preparation for classroom discussion of several features that have proven difficult for students in the past, such as the dialects of the speakers—standard and non-standard Plains-southern American English (Wells 1982, 527)—the early parts of the film in which the identities and the purposes of the speakers are not yet clear, and the complex (and often non-traditional) narrative techniques employed by Morris in telling his story. In the course of the semester students gave short oral reports as prolegomena to their own written essays (for example, structure, character development, the musical score, and so on). In view of the well-documented interests in internationalism of the recipient of these essays, it is worth mentioning, perhaps, that this group has comprised over the years a reasonably broad spectrum of European students hailing from Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Turkey, and Ukraine. My present remarks are the result of the many discussions of the film held over several years with scores of such students, and I welcome the present opportunity to put to words some thoughts first aired in the classroom. My essay is a formalistic account of the rhetorical narrative devices Morris uses in arguing that the Randall Dale Adams was unjustly convicted of murder.

The Thin Blue Line recounts Adams's arrest, conviction, and death sentence (later reduced to life imprisonment) for the murder of a Dallas policeman, Robert Wood. Shortly after midnight on November 28, 1976, Wood and his partner, Officer Teresa Turko, stopped a car being driven without headlights, and as Wood walked up to the driver five gun shots fired from inside the car ended his young life, the car escaping into the darkness under a hail of Turko's bullets. Adams, on a stopover in Dallas with his brother on their way to California from Ohio, had unexpectedly found a job as a semi-skilled laborer and had been working for six weeks or so when he was arrested in late

December by the Dallas police acting on information provided by a Vidor, Texas, policeman, who had learned that David Harris, at the time a sixteen-year-old on juvenile probation facing additional serious criminal charges, had been bragging to his friends in Vidor that he had shot a Dallas policeman. Faced with prosecution for the crime, he recanted his boasts and fingered Adams; in exchange for prosecution immunity for the murder in Dallas and the charges pending in Vidor, Harris testified in court that slumped down in the passenger seat of the car, he had witnessed the murder. Adams was then convicted and sentenced to death in a sensational trial that has become notorious even in the annals of Texas jurisprudence (Bright 2000). Throughout the film Adams protests his innocence, insisting that Harris had dropped him off at his motel two or three hours before the shooting took place, whereas Harris at first blithely recounts his trial testimony, but then in the movie's final scene, a camera shot of a running audiotape recorder, virtually confesses to the crime. When the film appeared (1988) Adams was in prison following the Supreme Court's overturning of his death sentence (1980), which then on the recommendation of the Dallas County District Attorney was subsequently commuted to life imprisonment by the governor of Texas; Harris was on death row in Texas (where he remains to this day) for the shooting death of a Beaumont, Texas, man during an argument over a woman, thus capping a life of crime, violence, and repeated imprisonment. Largely as a result of the publicity generated by the film—widely credited with freeing an innocent man—Adams received a hearing in 1989 that reversed the original conviction and ordered his release from prison after almost thirteen years' incarceration. Subsequent to Dallas county's decision not to retry Adams, he has since written a book (Adams 1991) about his experiences in Texas, which complements, and sometimes contradicts, the film's version of events.[1]

Also having speaking parts in the film are, in addition to the two principal figures, sixteen people who shed light on Adams's sad tale: three of the policemen who arrested and interrogated Adams (Gus Rose, Jackie Johnson, and Marshall Touchton), an internal

[1] For example, Adams's account (in Adams 1991, 21-27) of his initial meeting with Harris differs in many details from the sketchier version presented in *The Thin Blue Line*; in the film according to Adams, Doctor Grigson states that he could work all day and creep all night, but in the book the doctor so testifying is named Holbrook (Adams 1991, 128), who died under somewhat mysterious circumstances in 1980 (Adams 1991, 194); moreover, Edith James, referred to in the book as Dennis White's co-counsel and in the film (by White) as "the lady lawyer," plays a prominent role in the film but in the book is merely mentioned once or twice in passing (Adams 1991, 44, 52), and her film account of how she came to be involved in the case (Adams approached her) finds no support in the book. As valuable as the book has proven in supplying background details not available in the film, *Adams v. Texas* is deficient in several respects—for example, it has no index, and it is hard to determine the date of any one event because dates are mentioned so seldom and are not carried forward. The Hoffers' decision, if indeed they made it, to have Adams tell his story in the first person was a mistake. *In Cold Blood*, *Oswald's Tale*, and *The Executioner's Song* are all powerful books about criminal conduct primarily because their authors experiment with narrative devices in presenting their accounts.

affairs investigator for the Dallas police at the time of the investigation (Dale Holt), Adams's defense team (Edith James, Dennis White, and, on appeal, Melvyn Carson Bruder), the trial judge (Don Metcalfe), three witnesses for the prosecution (Emily Miller, her husband at the time, R. L. Miller, and Michael Randell),[2] a rebuttal witness questioning the Millers' integrity (Elba Carr), hometown friends of Harris's (Hootie Nelson, Dennis Johnson, and Floyd Jackson), and the Vidor police officer (Sam Kittrell) who brought Harris to the attention of the Dallas police. Some of these people still implicate Adams, while others steadfastly believe in his innocence; Harris is the only one of the film's participants who reverses testimony documented in 1977.

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In essence a composite of dramatic, narrative, and expository elements at the service of an argument (Chatman 1990, 8), *The Thin Blue Line* exploits three innovative film techniques that give the film its special character. The first is the absence of a unified and framing narrative voice-over, traditional in documentary film, that might have guided the viewer through the twists and turns of its serpentine story line; in place of such a voice are the filmed interviews of the eighteen participants mentioned above, visible from just above the waist and looking directly into the camera, who hold forth on a variety of apparently unrelated topics in a seemingly impromptu manner. In appearing to be delivering spontaneous dramatic monologues that develop their own agendas, the talking busts are, in fact, answering questions and responding to points raised by an interlocutor (Morris) that the viewer never sees and only once, at the end of the film, hears.[3] In a meandering fashion these talking busts produce much of the factual information that the viewer requires in order to make sense of the film: the identities and roles of the speakers (where provided; some speakers are named only in the credits trailing the film), how Adams and Harris happened to be in Dallas at the time of the murder, the circumstances in which the shooting of Wood took place, whether Officer Turko did or did not follow correct police procedure at the crime scene, why Adams became a suspect, what the eye witnesses claimed to have seen, the evidence for believing that Harris was the killer, and so on. Thus in place of a traditional overriding vocal guide the talking busts comprise eighteen distinct and superficially unprivileged narrative voices that operate in the film much as multiple narrative perspectives function in a modernist novel, such as Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Like any narrative technique, this one is grounded in certain phi-

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[2] At some time between the appearances of the film and Adams's book the marriage of the Millers was dissolved.

[3] According to Nick Paumgarten, Morris's interviewing technique "is unorthodox. He sits out of sight of the subject, in a curtained booth with a camera and a monitor, while the subject stands ten yards away, facing a customized device that Morris calls an 'interrotron.' Basically, the interrotron is a camera with a special screen that displays the live, disembodied image of Morris as he shouts out questions, makes funny faces, and orders his subjects to repeat things" (Paumgarten 2002, 36).

losophical assumptions about the nature of narrative. Morris's decision to tell the story in the words of eighteen narrators who spontaneously compose their own scripts in the course of their interviews with him undoubtedly owes a lot to modern and postmodern theories of storytelling, especially those that stress the untidiness of reality, the belief that imposing order on the messy details of events as they happen in the real world is inevitably to distort this reality. Especially given the disputed details of the Randall Adams story, a traditional third-person limited or omniscient narrator professing objectivity in presenting the events of the story would belie this tale's basic nature, which in essence is, like any story, conditioned by a series of presuppositions and etiological premises. Thus, philosophically the solution is to present all of the available narrative perspectives that bear on the central events, those of all the participants who would agree to being interviewed, those involving the reports of newspapers, pictures and any other evidence relevant to the story. Significant here is also Morris's characterization (in the interview with Bill Moyers following the film's showing on PBS in the United States) of the movie's theme as "self-deception, about how we can convince ourselves that something is true, even though it isn't, about how our need to believe what we want to believe is a lot stronger than our need to seek the truth." Thus, the Randall Adams story is one that a single narrator, at least in a documentary film, would have difficulty in telling in all its complexity: Adams's story is composed, in this instance, of the actions and words of eighteen people involved in the real-life events of the story before, during and after his conviction. It is also the story of these participants' filmed recollections of those accounts that had sealed Adams's fate before Morris's intervention.

The second non-traditional feature that Morris introduced into the film is the biased reenactment—which uses hired actors to play the roles of various real persons involved in the Adams saga—of three scenes crucial to the case against Adams: the murder scene, the interrogation scene, and the drive-in movie scene. The first of these is the most elaborately presented scene (fifteen reenactments), which establishes the indisputable fact that a murder took place, but questions virtually every other detail mentioned by the seven talking busts who reconstruct the shooting. Again and again we are taken through the differing versions of the crime: first, in the impersonal and multiple point-of-view version three minutes into the film; second, as reconstructed by Officer Holt on the basis of crime-scene forensic evidence and Officer Turko's reports; third, briefly, by Dallas police detective Jackie Johnson; fourth, by the four eyewitnesses (Harris, the Millers, and Michael Randell); and fifth by Adams in summarizing Turko's courtroom testimony and her contradictory report immediately after the accident, and finally by Harris in an account in which he virtually confesses he alone committed the crime. As Morris (in the Moyers interview) characterizes these reenactments, they do not purport to show what really happened but rather to demonstrate that the eyewitness accounts are lies. The second reenactment scene (The Interrogation) creates a heavily biased and unflattering picture, based entirely upon Adams's account, of the Dallas police's interrogation methods, including improper inducement, oppression, and assault. The third scene, showing

two men in a drive-in movie smoking dope, drinking beer and watching soft-core pornographic movies, occurs only once, but is, in addition, alluded to several times in the course of the film.[4]

The third of Morris's innovative devices is to cut into and between the talking busts an assortment of nondiegetic inserts in the form of narrative films and various shots of linguistic and non-linguistic elements.[5] The film clips are taken from a 1950s American television serial (*Boston Blackie*), two B-movies (the drive-in movies *The Student Body* and *Swinging Cheerleaders*), and an unidentified film portraying the ambush of John Dillinger (the first Public Enemy Number One on the FBI's list of wanted persons in the 1930s). The non-linguistic inserts consist of amateur snapshots of participants in the film (Adams and Harris as they appeared in 1976; Harris before and after) and their non-participating relatives (Adams with his brother, Ray, who mysteriously disappeared after Adams's conviction [Adams 1991, 221-23]; Harris and his older brother, drowned when four years old, as small children, and in one snapshot happily playing with their father); photographs and snapshots of prominent players in the case referred to but not appearing in the film (Dallas County First Assistant District Attorney, Doug Mulder; Wood's partner, Officer Teresa Turko; the Dallas psychiatrist James Grigson, alias "Dr. Death"; Dallas County District Attorney, Henry Wade; and, we should not forget, Officer Wood) and of several less significant figures (Mark Walter Mays, the man shot to death by Harris in 1985; mug shots of men appearing in a line-up with Harris, probably prior to his conviction for murder in 1985; unidentified Ku Klux Klan members from Vidor, Texas); camera close-ups of assorted objects, such as an orange-red flashing light rotating on the top of a police car (repeated many times), clocks, a pocket watch swinging back and forth on a chain, strobe lights from a nightclub, typewriter keys; other non-verbal images, such as close-ups of facial details (ears, eyes, noses, mouths, mustaches), mug shots, crime-scene sketches, morgue pictures of Wood, and several artists' drawings portraying court-room scenes and other motifs related to the case. The linguistic inserts consist of excerpts from police archives and crime reports, scribblings on office note pads, signs identifying highways, a restaurant, a drive-in, a motel, a gas station, and a nightclub, maps of Texas and Romania, newspaper headlines (partial and complete) identifying accompanying photographs, and trial transcripts. Apparently random in their occurrence—I list them more or less as I recall them—all of these nondiegetic inserts are simultaneously a kind of visual punctuation to, and a running commentary upon, chapter and verse of the film. Despite many viewers' first impressions, the nondiegetic narrative, linguistic and non-linguistic inserts make up

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4 I had hoped to be able to analyze these scenes, especially the Crime Scene, in some detail, but reasons of space prohibited the inclusion of my remarks in the present essay. Had I but world enough and time ….

5 Nondiegetic inserts are shots "coming from outside the story world" (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 282); in Morris's film, shots of various kinds (photographs, newspaper text, excerpts from court records, and the like) blended (or cut) into the talking busts' monologues.

something like an equal amount of actual screen time measured against the talking busts, as can be seen by running a video of the film on fast-forward replay. The clever mixture of the various textual types represents a large part of the technical brilliance of the Morris's film.

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The Thin Blue Line argues that Adams was unjustly convicted because of sloppy police work, an inadequate defense, and a corrupt prosecution, all of which contributed to the conviction of an innocent man and allowed the real killer, David Harris, to go free and kill again. Part one, largely expository and lasting less than five minutes, places Adams and Harris in Dallas, reconstructs a version of the murder incident, identifies the victim, dates the events and takes us up to the point where Adams is arrested; section two, lasting about twenty-five minutes, criticizes police conduct at the murder scene and during the investigation; the third segment portrays the defense team as well meaning, committed to exonerating Adams, convinced of his innocence, but finally unable to defeat the state's case; the fourth part, the longest section (over eighty minutes), attempts to cast doubt on the prosecution's case, and part five offers a potted history of David Harris's troubled childhood. We can summarize the information of the above paragraph in the form of an outline:

I. Introduction (0:00-4:48 minutes)
II. The Police (4:49-31:10)
III. The Defense (31:11-47:25)
IV. The Prosecution (47:26-1:29:59)
V. David Harris (1:30:00-1:42:22)

The film's opening sequences explain how Adams and Harris came to be in Dallas, how they chanced to meet, and how this meeting changed Adams's life. It is not uncommon for reviewers (and my students) to complain that the opening sequences are confusing, even purposely and perversely obscure. What I will argue, however, is that like all innovators (Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Coleridge, for example) Morris must explain to us how his new narrative, expository, and argumentative methods work, for in violating the canonical rules of documentary objectivity, he runs the risk that an untutored audience will be left behind. Aside from setting up the story, the function of the first part of the film is to teach us how to watch it. Specifically, Morris introduces four means of expository signposting which he exploits to narrate events. The first kind of signposting is his use of deixis to identify speakers, create narrative context, and provide transitions.[6] The second is the use of a speaker's overt references to people ("the judge,"

[6] *Deixis* is the use of "demonstratives, first and second person pronouns, tense, specific time and place adverbs like *now* and *here*, and a variety of other grammatical features tied directly to the circumstances of utterance" (Levinson 1983, 54).

"Mrs. Miller," or "the District Attorney") and to events or places ("the interrogation," "the drive-in movie," or "the break came out of Vidor") to further chart his course. The third is his use of the reenactments to exemplify what the talking busts are talking about. The fourth, likewise a means of illustrating subjects the talking busts develop, is to insert into and between the monologues the nondiegetic cuts mentioned above. Let us see how this signposting works.

Perhaps the most important point to recognize about deixis when speaking about its occurrence in the monologues of the talking busts is that all human beings acquire this linguistic skill as children in a face-to-face conversational context. As Lyons reminds us "all the participants present in the same actual situation [are] able to see one another." He adds that "[t]here is much in the structure of languages that can only be explained on the assumption that they have developed for communication in face-to-face interaction." If, on the other hand, the participants "… are widely separated in space and time … [or] if the participants cannot see each other" (Lyons 1977, 637-638), then the utterances they make are subject to ambiguity. This latter remark applies well to the difference between the original context of the interview in which the speakers facing the interrotron speak to Morris's virtual visage, as opposed to the new context created by Morris's cutting and pasting these interviews into the finished narrative. He exploits deixis as it occurred in the original context of the interviews to determine the order in which speakers appear in the film, to identify them, and sometimes even to create different contexts for their utterances. For example, without being identified in any way, a man in his late thirties wearing an open-collared white shirt and speaking an American dialect that belies his implied origins in the midwest[7] begins the film by explaining how he happened to come to Dallas: "In October my brother and I left Ohio—we were driving to California. Friday morning while I'm eating eggs and drinking coffee I get a good job." Obviously *I* refers to the man speaking, but we do not know his name, and although specific about the month, he does not tell us the year in which he arrived in Dallas. A second speaker, perhaps ten years younger, dressed in a garish orange shirt,[8] and speaking nonstandard Plains-southern English (the dialect of middle Texas), accounts for his presence in Dallas by rehearsing a series of crimes: "I took a pistol from my Dad's … I took a neighbor's car … ended up coming to Dallas". Unlike the first speaker, he partially identifies himself by saying "*This* all started, *Davey's* [my italics] running away from

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7 Adams was born in West Virginia and spent the first years of his life there, perhaps until he was ten or eleven, and his speech still shows traces of this geographical origins (Adams 1991, 4).

8 Some of my students this semester, primarily Ms. Krupa Krishna-Reddy, stated that they recognized the clothes worn by both Adams and Harris as prison garb; I myself did not make this connection when I saw the film the first time. Bordwell and Thompson link (rather implausibly, I think) the color of Harris's shirt ("he is another figure of betrayal"), which they identify as a "prison uniform," to the lady in orange of the Judge's story of Dillinger and to the "ominous blinking red lights of the opening" (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 386).

home." People who run away from home are ordinarily minors (seventeen or younger), and so we conclude that because of the second speaker's age (late twenties), these events took place in an October some ten years or so before the interview was filmed. Davey's use of the deictic *this* produces a wealth of meanings. In Morris's interview with Harris, it could well have been a response to a specific question or remark made by Morris (for example, "Tell us where this all started"), but in its present context it functions much like the classic fairy tale beginning "Once upon a time" in identifying the genre *narrative*. That is, *this* signifies not only that we are going to be told a story but implies that the story is well-known, for like the epic convention that a hero's status is measured by how widely he is known, the speaker's apparent assumption that we know who *Davey* is and what *this* refers to heightens the significance of what might otherwise be regarded as merely a yarn to while away the time. (Also contributing to the sense of importance is the non-deictic fact that people who tell stories in a film tell important stories.) Moreover, talking about oneself in the third person is something only important people, or people who think they are important, do; Davey may not be as self-centered as he appears to us, because we do not hear Morris's questions and proddings that produced Harris's response. But Davey does have a winning manner, and we listen on.

Morris, in this and his other films, seems to believe that narratives are best told by putting someone in front of a camera, getting them talking about how things started, and then bringing on the next speakers until sooner or later enough narrative context and a sufficient number of characters exist to form a story. (We might term this method, on an analogy to the linguistic term defining a class of languages,[9] the agglutinative narrative style.) We will come to recognize, of course, that although the monologues were originally real interviews between the live participants and Morris which he captured on film, the monologues are no longer as spontaneous and aimless as they are made to look. True, the speakers chose their own words in response to off-camera questions and proddings to create the context of utterance, but Morris's editing gives the dialogue an additional narrative context that is conditioned by where it occurs in the film, by Philip Glass's musical score, and by a number of other features of the film I will be looking at in this essay. Obviously, someone later added nondiegetic matter to the comments that speakers originally made, cut the interviews into segments, and rearranged them so as to poke us in the ribs as we listen to them.[10] What appear to be overheard conversations are anything but snatches of meaningless talk taken out of context: they are given an entirely new significance by the editing team's careful work.

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[9] Agglutinative languages, such as Turkish or Japanese, are ones in which "words typically contain a linear sequence of morphs" "to a major extent" (Crystal 1985, 11).

[10] We might imagine when listening to the monologues that, as Jeremy Hawthorn describes the feeling we get when reading dialogue in the novel, "we are witnessing a real conversation but with someone beside us whispering in our ear comments concerning the participants in the discussion" (Hawthorn 1992, 112).

In further creating context by means of speech events, Morris has Adams relate that one day on his way home from work, he ran out of gas and that "a person—at that time—pulled over and … asked me if I needed any help."[11] For clarity's sake Adams might have said something like "a person who turned out later to be named David Harris pulled over and asked me if I needed any help."[12] The fact that Adams does not identify Harris by name (he calls him *this kid* several times in this segment) can be explained in at least two ways: either Adams did not refer to Harris by name anywhere in the three and one-half hours of filmed interview, or Morris cut out such a reference. If the first possibility is true, it suggests that once Morris finished filming an interview, it could not be added to later; no amount of ingenious editing could have repaired deictic matter, sharpened his speakers' dialogue, or added explanatory *ex nihilo* to the stuff he had in the can. If the second possibility is the real explanation, then we might want ask why Morris did not want us to know Harris's name at this point.[13] The second speaker, on the other hand, links his account of how he met Adams by mentioning a *guy* who had run

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11 The account that Adams gives in his book (Adams 1991, 21-22) as to how he met Harris differs in certain details from the film version. The changes that occurred between the time of his interview with Morris (1985) and the appearance of his book (1991) are perhaps minor but nevertheless curious.

12 Adams's lapse may be accounted for by the claim in his book (Adams 1991, 22) that Harris told him on the day they met that his name was Mack Davis; Adams may have decided this was too complex to go into in the film, or perhaps Morris cut this bit out of the interview, or perhaps Adams remembered things differently on two different occasions of telling.

13 We can speculate a lot about why we do not learn until some fifteen minutes into the film from a camera shot of a Vidor police crime report that *Davey* is David Harris. Is this delay a means of heightening suspense, a device to add to his sinister character, a means of keeping him in the background until Adams's story is presented first, and so on, or does the delay result from the fact that of all the speakers who appear in the first sixteen minutes of the film, only Hootie Nelson, one of Harris's boyhood acquaintances, uttered his name ("I heard somebody knocking at the door—it was David Harris"). Naturally, such speculations cannot be answered as long as we do not have access to all of the material Morris filmed, but I raise the question here to suggest that we cannot approach Morris's film in quite the same confident fashion as we regard a traditional narrative film, one that originates from a written script and whose scenes can be reshot several times until the director is satisfied with the final cut. I am guessing that not all of the elements in the film occur as originally planned; occasionally, some things (bits of dialogue that could not be cut out of or placed in the middle of an utterance) occur in their present order because he could not contrive to place them anywhere else and could not cut them without losing too much expository matter.
For all sorts of reasons, besides budgetary constraints and the difficulty of arranging interviews with men in prison, additional filmed interviewing was scarcely feasible. The inherent risks in interviewing participants for *The Thin Blue Line* is documented in Adams 1991, 283: in the middle of Morris's interview with Harris on December 5, 1986, the camera equipment "broke down," forcing him to capture a crucial part of the conversation (Harris's virtual confession to the shooting of Wood) on audiotape. Should Morris have desired at a later date to film this part of the interview with Harris, he had no guarantee that Harris would then have been willing to make similar remarks in front of the camera.

out of gas ("I'm driving down some street somewhere in Dallas—I've just turned sixteen—and there was a guy over there, I think he'd run out of gas") and then stating simply: "This was Randall Adams." Harris's use of the present continuous tense (*I'm driving*) and the deictic *over there* implies that he is visualizing the scene and commenting upon it as if it were projected upon a screen. Levinson's discussion (Levinson 1983, 64-66) of *gestural usage* and *symbolic usage* (and *non-deictic usage*) may help us to explain what is happening linguistically at this point. On the surface it would seem as if Harris is making use of gestural deictics—those identifiable only from a video of the speech event (such as, "I don't want *this* pen, rather *this* pen")—but perhaps he is really only using symbolic deictics, ones that require knowledge of the general context (Levinson 1983, 65)—in this case that Harris is describing seeing Adams for the first time, *over there*, i.e., some place in Dallas. Most likely of all, however, is that he is using *over there* non-deictically simply as another way of saying "I saw a guy *walking along the road* (i.e., *over there*) who, as I remember it, had run out of gas." Interestingly, Morris interprets this use of *this* as gestural, because he inserts both a bird's eye view of what we assume are the Dallas landscape and a streep map of Dallas to illustrate what Harris means by *over there* and *I was driving down some street somewhere in Dallas*. The lesson seems to be that if we do not understand some deictic or non-deictic reference a talking bust makes, we can expect some kind of nondiegetic insert to provide us with additional information.

Harris's reference to his age provides a means of identifying several photos and snapshots shown later in the film of a much younger Harris. Moreover, Davey seems to assume that *Randall Adams* needs no glossing, as if he had said, "This was Lee Harvey Oswald" or "This was Jack Ruby," two very famous men in the annals of Texas jurisprudence that virtually *every* American over the age of forty or so in 1988 would have recognized, whereas prior to the appearance of *The Thin Blue Line* the name Randall Adams would, for most people, have meant little or nothing. Of course, in the context of utterance (the interview) Harris's identification might have seemed quite a natural response to a question Morris put to him (how and where did you first meet Adams?),[14] but the removal of this face-to-face context implies that the name is better known than it actually was. Harris's apparent confidence that we know what and whom he is talking about puts us slightly on the defensive, and we realize that we will have to play catch-up to acquire sufficient information to understand the film. The effect is that either this story must be significant or it is a long preamble to a shaggy-dog story. Thus, we learn by means of deixis and direct naming of participants the name of the white-shirted man and that the orange-shirted man's first name is Davey, and we also learn one way in which the film will identify speakers.

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[14] We ought to bear in mind that "[t]he facts of deixis should act as a constant reminder to theoretical linguists of the simple but immensely important fact that natural languages are primarily designed … for use in face-to-face interaction, and thus there are limits to the extent to which they can be analyzed without taking this into account" (Levinson 1983, 54).

After telling how he got to Dallas and how he met Harris, Adams's next statement begins his account of his arrest and interrogation ("The day they picked me up … December the 21st …"). This transition, however, fails to specify the crime for which he was arrested, and why he was a suspect. Morris must fill this gap by first providing an account of the crime, and later indicating what led the Dallas police to arrest him.[15] Morris fills the gap with his third type of signposting, by running us through the first reenactment of the Crime Scene. Lasting precisely a minute of film time, this reenactment shows a policeman getting out of a police cruiser on the driver's side and approaching from the rear a car standing on the shoulder of the road in front of the cruiser; his partner, a policewoman, gets out of the cruiser on the passenger side, and positions herself behind and to the right of the car in front of the cruiser; as the policeman reaches the driver's door, the driver shoots him several times at point-blank range. His partner runs forwards a few paces and fires several shots at the fleeing car. What this summary leaves out are several highly stylized details in the staging and filming of the scene that demonstrate the impossibility of presenting a neutral or objective reenactment of the crime. A myriad of choices must be made in constructing the scene.[16]

Because we need more information about the crime, Morris then resorts to the fourth means of signposting by providing us with more specific details on the crime scene. Following the reenactment are nondiegetic film clips showing drawings of a human skull with entrance wounds caused by bullets, morgue photos of a dead man, a police

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[15] One way to fill us in on the details of the crime would be to have Adams recount the shooting of Officer Wood, as Adams does in his book (Adams 1991, 8-15), but how could Adams, who like all the other talking busts habitually speaks in the first person about things they had witnessed first hand, at this point in the film describe a scene that he had not personally witnessed? In his book (Adams 1991, 8-15), we observe the kinds of problems that are created by having Adams describe the murder scene. He begins his book in the first person (both singular and plural), but in recounting the murder, he switches to the third person ("Twenty-seven-year-old Robert Wood was a full-blooded Choctaw Indian …," 8). Either he knows some of these facts because he witnessed them ("As Officer Wood emerged into the night air and approached the car in front of him, the driver rolled down his window, pointed a .22-caliber High Standard revolver and squeezed the trigger" (Adams 1991, 9), or some unidentified person is talking. Is the phrase "the night air" his language (let's hope not!), and how does Adams, who claims to abhor guns (23), know so much about the details of the murder weapon? Squeezed (rather than *pulled*) the trigger? If in a similar manner he had described the Crime Scene in the film, this account might well have incriminated him, for how could he have known the things he tells us unless he had been there? Later, however, when Adams describes the scene on three occasions (30:36-30:42; 41:14-41:48; and 44:42-46:28), it is clear that he is basing his remarks on Officer Turko's accounts, not on his own observations. Likewise, later in the film, in the last showing of the crime scene reenactment (1:24:25-1:25:25), Harris all but incriminates himself by narrating events in the first person singular: "I remember there was a car coming pretty fast up the road … didn't see me … and I'm just looking back ."). Morris is much too subtle a storyteller to make this neophyte's mistake.

[16] Lack of space prohibits a detailed analysis of this scene.

uniform, a smiling police officer, and again the police uniform. A clip showing an excerpt from the *Dallas Morning News* with the title "Officer's killer sought" is accompanied by photos of a female and a male police officer; the camera pans to a close-up of the male officer, moving so quickly past the name of the female (Teresa Turko, as we learn in the credits following the film and from Adams 1991) as to make identification of her name uncertain. (Some viewers can read it, others cannot.) The male officer is identified as Robert Wood, killed Sunday. Additional shots of the newspaper date the killing as having occurred on November 28, 1976, at 12:30 a.m. Finally, a camera shot of a newspaper photo pictures a bushy-haired man, head bowed in the classic pose of someone trying to avoid the camera, dated December 21, 1976. After viewing these inserts, we know the crime for which Adams was arrested, even if we have yet to learn why he was a suspect. Our curiosity alerted, we continue to view the film with heightened interest.

Thus the first five minutes of the film introduce us to the two principal characters in the story, Randall Adams and David Harris (even if we do not know Davey's surname), tell us that the two men spent a day together in Dallas twelve years before the film was made, express Adams's misgivings about having met the *kid* in the first place, inform us that a policeman was murdered in November of 1976, and conclude that for some reason Adams was arrested for that murder. Many commentators have faulted this part of the film for not being more expositorially explicit,[17] but I have tried to show that although the film makes serious demands on the viewer it is by no means to be faulted for doing so.

4

One way of approaching this section (4:49 -31:11) is to imagine that its purpose is to induce in the viewer a growing sense of wonder, bordering on incredulity, "that anyone ever blamed Randall Adams for the crime" (Morris 1989). Obviously, one group of people involved in the case who blamed, and still blame, Adams is the Dallas police, and Morris suggests that had they investigated things more intelligently, they might have focused on the real killer from the start. In attacking their investigation of the murder Morris shows how their flubbing of the initial stages yielded no concrete leads for nearly a month, putting them under mounting political pressure to find the killer. He then seeks to show how the Vidor, Texas, police presented the killer, gift wrapped like a Christmas

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[17] Adams states that "Morris was clever in his presentation; the film never blatantly proclaimed my innocence or David Harris's guilt; rather, it more or less purposely confused the viewer in the beginning and then inexorably unraveled the web of lies and half-truths, allowing the viewer to draw his or her own conclusions. It was flawed, but compelling; a low-budget, high impact true-life drama" (299).
See Barnouw 1995, 138, for a more sophisticated account of why Morris proceeds as he does: basically, she argues that he allows us to participate in "unfolding the true story," which, finally, is why we believe Morris.

goose, to the Dallas police and how they then made a mess of the feast. David Harris, revealed in this section as one of the prime suspects in the case along with Randall Adams, then recounts "the story [he] told," a tale short on details and big in *Twilight Zone*-loopy disclaimers ("I don't know why, but it's always seemed like time just stopped or something, you know … it's like a flash"). For Adams, on the other hand, the narrative includes times, places, precisely remembered events, and nicely articulated facts that give stories shape and accuse Harris of being a pathological liar and psychopathic killer. The section concludes with further evidence that the Dallas police's version of events raises more questions than it answers.

In order to demonstrate that Adams's conviction is unsafe, Morris not only characterizes the Dallas police's investigation of the crime as flawed but also shows how the crime might have been avoided by Wood's and Turko's more rigorous attention to police procedure (properly checking out over the radio the car they stopped before Wood approached the driver). No one wishes to dwell on the unpleasant suggestion that a young man's senseless death at the hands of a murderer is his own fault, but it is a fact that once the crime occurred the police could have acted more expeditiously if, in the words of Officer Jackie Johnson, they had not had the wrong information (that is, Officer Turko's incorrect identification of the car). A more speedy arrest would have assured that much of the evidence might still have existed that had disappeared or grown cold in the month or so in which police all over the state looked for a Chevrolet Vega rather than a Mercury Comet; this evidence might have exonerated Adams and forced the Dallas police to confront the indicators pointing at Harris as the killer. (Imagine, for the sake of the argument, how much differently matters might have turned out for Adams had Harris been arrested on the Monday or Tuesday following the Thanksgiving Weekend on which Officer Wood was killed; the employee at the shop near Adams's motel where he bought cigarettes on the previous Saturday night would have been much more likely to remember that he had been in and out at 9 or 10 o'clock; his brother, alcoholic or not, could more credibly have sworn that his brother was home well before midnight; people at the drive-in would have been able to corroborate Adams's chronology of events rather than Harris's, and so on.) In one sense one of Morris's allies in this endeavor is the Dallas police collectively, notorious nationwide since Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald live on television in 1963, an event that further contaminated the most bungled murder case ever investigated in Dallas.[18] In another sense, Morris's chief allies are the four Dallas police investigators who appear in the film, for it is hard to imagine how a more damaging case could be mounted against them than the one they muster themselves. Somehow, Morris gets them to reveal on camera, apparently in their own words (out of the mouths of cops, not babes), how their misdirected efforts to find

[18] Even at the current moment the Dallas police force stands accused of a wide-ranging drug-busting scam reaching perhaps into the District Attorney's office (Hollandsworth 2002, 44-49).

Wood's killer led them to use Harris to convict Adams instead. They, of course, do not act alone in accusing themselves—that is, it is not just their assaults on the English language nor merely their own pride (misplaced, in Morris's opinion) in netting the killer that creates the dramatic irony in which their remarks are anchored—but rather Morris's art as a film-maker that colludes in creating largely fictional stereotypes of redneck cops clomping around in cowboy boots. Think for a moment of how Morris might theoretically have made the police look even more unsympathetic: he might have written a treatment of their testimony, put together a script using exactly the lines that the talking busts actually deliver, hired professional actors to play the roles, coached them extensively in how to perform their monologues in such a way as to make them really unappealing, and then filmed them delivering their lines in a faithful imitation of the non-standard dialects spoken by the actual talking busts. Is it likely that any actors could have improved on the actual performances delivered by Gus Rose, Jackie Johnson, Marshall Touchton and Dale Holt? I hardly think so, and while Morris is fortunate in having discovered these actors in search of a forum who play themselves so brilliantly—and perhaps even more fortunate in acquiring their cooperation before and after filming the interviews—it is neither their appearance, nor the low-prestige dialects they speak, nor their ineptness in not having found Harris sooner that assures his successful assault on Dallas's finest. On the contrary, Morris uses all of his craft as a storyteller in setting up their performances.[19]

Indeed, a case can be made that Morris loads the dice against them. Before Gus Rose appears as a talking bust, Adams tells of his arrest and interrogation, an account in which virtually all of his rights (and then some) as guaranteed by Miranda Law (1966)

[19] With respect to his talking-bust policemen, Morris is lucky in small matters that add up to big points. For example, when Johnson is scoffing at Turko's misidentification (and incidentally glossing Touchton's regret at her error), he confidently begins his remarks with a condescending smile and a smug observation ("There's a big difference between a Vega and Mercury Comet"), and then commits a crucial gaff: "… every piece of information that was called in, they were calling in regard to a *Comet* ... [a vigorous shake of the head] *I mean a Vega* [my italics]." If Morris had written this bit of dialogue, we would have accused him of over-egging the pudding, but the lapsus linguae is Johnson's alone. Moreover, Touchton, as if to confirm our suspicions that flatfoot seeds have trouble saying what they mean, comes up with this gem: "When we started putting the facts together on how much information we actually had, on the leads that we had to find out what we had, we found out we didn't have anything. The only thing we knew that we were looking for was a blue Vega." Finally, Dale Holt, in illustrating how the driver shot Officer Wood, mimics the shooting with his right hand across his body aiming at an imaginary target, at the same time making gun noises, *pop, pop, pop*. Later when one of David Harris's friends from Vidor, Dennis Johnson, reenacts how David confessed to shooting the cop—a confession no one really believed at the time—Johnson makes a similar motion, saying "and, pow, he shot him," a visual coincidence that, in the world of Morris's film, tends to confirm the accuracy if not the veracity of this account.

were violated:[20] Rose attempted to obtain at gunpoint both Adams's signature on a confession which he had had no part in composing and his fingerprints on a pistol that was most likely the murder weapon. To support Adams's statements, Morris introduces the second reenactment scene, The Interrogation, which focuses on anonymous coyboy boots and hands performing the actions described by Adams's voice over: walking into a room, placing a revolver on a table, drawing, cocking and aiming a pistol at the camera. Adams concludes this segment of The Interrogation by stating that Rose "stormed out." Then a talking bust appears, unidentified but obviously Detective Rose (we have just learned in the first part of the film that when a name is mentioned, the next person who appears will bear that name), and states: "I had what I call a casual, friendly conversation with him to start with, to try to size him up, to see what he liked and what he didn't like …". In the context of Rose's original interview this statement might well strike a viewer as bland, something hardly usable as an indictment of police interviewing tactics, but in the context created by Morris, Rose looks like a liar by characterizing as "casual" and "friendly" an interview that we have just seen dramatized as befitting banana-republic fascism minus rubber hoses and cattle prods.[21] When my students accuse me of overstating the case, my standard retort is to ask them whether they think Gus Rose would be happy with how Morris has fitted him out in the role of the bad cop.

Rose testifies that he discovered pretty quickly that Adams expressed little or no sense of guilt. His partner, Detective Jackie Johnson also states that "[Adams] showed no expression whatsoever … he showed [and here Johnson searches in vain for a word, perhaps *conscience*, *remorse*] no reaction to any of the questions." Rose again: "He, of course, almost overacted his innocence." Adams, on the other, states simply, "They didn't want to believe me," for reasons that the film at this point has yet to make clear. What, we ask, is the evidence against him at this point? Obviously, we object, if Adams is innocent, he will show no remorse, and the testimony that Rose and Johnson present up front, without providing us with any evidence on which to base their conviction that he is guilty, makes them seem biased, at least over-hasty in arriving at their assertions for which there is up to this point no support. We must remind ourselves that the police are not responsible for where Morris places their statements in his film.

Morris's indictment of the police really begins to pick up speed, however, when Dale Holt, at the time of the murder an internal affairs investigator for the Dallas police and later Chief of Police in Ennis, Texas, speculates on two conflicting details of the Crime

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[20] The details of this famous case and its significance for the Adams case can be checked in the Internet under "Miranda case," and then clicking under "Miranda Law and Self-Incrimination."

[21] Several years ago a satirical program on American television used to flash the title, "He is lying," on screen whenever President Reagan spoke; Morris's method is arguably more subtle, but the effect is the same. It is hard to believe that Rose saw the final cut of the film before signing a release allowing Morris to use this footage. For a contrast in rhetorical skills, see Adams's much less effective account in his book (Adams 1991, 28-29).

Scene reenactment: whether Officer Turko was sitting in the car when her partner was shot or whether she was standing behind the killer's car observing things from the distance of a few feet. This point is important, for if Turko remained in the car while Wood checked out the driver, then her subsequent testimony as to the number of people in the car, to say nothing of the killer's appearance, would be seriously compromised. Moreover, if she did not get out of the police car until she heard shots, this violation of procedure would explain why she could not identify the car and why she failed to note the license plate number. Holt, a photogenic man of considerable charm, does his best, on the one hand, to minimize Turko's part in Wood's death ("So how do we hold her responsible for not following procedure at that point?"),[22] but, on the other hand, he cannot disguise his bias against female patrol officers ("His [Wood's] partner was one of the first female police officers that was assigned to patrol") nor hide his exasperation that she failed to notice more about the suspect's car ("If you're the investigator assigned to the murder, you get frustrated with other witnesses, but when you got a police officer that witnessed it, you expect that they would know a little more than she knew"). Holt's major criticism of Turko, of course, is her failure to make proper observations about the make of the car and to note the license plate number. The irony made implicit in the earlier comments made by Officer Johnson ("Woods [sic] didn't take his ticket book out of the car") and Touchton ("He [Wood] didn't know that the car was stolen") that Wood and Turko were careless is probably not lost on Holt, athough he does not address the point; obviously, had Wood and his partner radioed in details of the car, there would at least have been a record of the car's license plate if not confirmation that the car had been stolen earlier from a Mr. Calvin Cunningham, David Harris's neighbor in Vidor, Texas. Holt also inadvertently illustrates very well Morris's desire to "take the viewer deeper and deeper into the ambiguities of the case,"[23] because when he states that Wood stopped a car "with two dudes in it with no lights on," he is obviously repeating one of Turko's versions that there were two people in the car, whereas she apparently also re-

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[22] An answer to his rhetorical question, of course, is that one way of holding her responsible is to examine her conduct in precisely the way Holt in fact does and to conclude, as he does implicitly, that her failure to follow procedure contributed to Wood's death, a conclusion that seems not to be borne out by the facts (Adams 1991, 10-11); after all, some gunshot victims cannot be saved.

[23] As a matter of fact, in the reenactments portraying the eyewitnesses' accounts, there is very little ambiguity. What they show unambiguously is that if we superimpose reenactments based upon all of their accounts, then they could not have seen what they claim to have seen. The unlikelihood that their accounts are true might not be apparent in a court of law, because most people's visual abilities and memories would not be capable of holding all of their accounts in suspension to see where the contradictions occur. It would take a clever lawyer to bring out these discrepancies, and as I will argue later, Adams's legal team does not appear on film like the kind of dazzling performers we are used to from narrative film performances.

ported shortly after the murder that only one person was in the car (Adams 1991, 335).[24] That is, although Holt in no way explicitly confirms or denies the presence of Adams in the car, he apparently here remembers the official version as testified to in court by Turko rather than her statement directly after the murder. (As we shall see in further discussion of the Crime Scene reenactments, the reliability of a witness's statement can be measured against how many people they claim to have seen in the car.) But what Holt does confirm is that Turko's story was not believed in its entirely by the internal affairs investigating team ("Speculation at the time was that his partner [Turko] was settin' in the car"), and as he takes us through the reenactment three times we begin to see that the version changes with the agenda of the commentary. Morris reminds us more than once of this ambiguity (in/out of the car) by showing us the paper cup containing the malted milk flying through the air.

The Dallas police's frustration at their inability to solve the murder on their own is borne out by Gus Rose's remark, "we finally got the break that cleared it—it came out of Vidor, Texas" (15:10). In the three minutes that follow, the Vidor detective working on the case of a stolen Mercury Comet, Sam Kittrell, provides the viewer with enough evidence to convict David Harris several times over. Harris, seen driving the car stolen from his neighbor, is also questioned in connection with rumors which police had been picking up in Vidor from David's "comrades in crime" (Kittrell) that he had been involved in a shooting in Dallas. Three of them testify, in non-standard dialects (almost incomprehensible to my students) so ludicrously appropriate to denizens of a Texas city reputed to be the state capitol of the Ku Klux Klan that had Morris hired actors who imitated them accurately, we would have accused him again of cooking the evidence. One claims that Harris "swore up and down" that he "shot that fucking pig." Another even demonstrates, in apparent imitation of the miming gestures used some six minutes earlier by Dale Holt, how David had described the shooting (see note 18). This friend (identified in the credits as Dennis Johnson) also states that David had reported that the police had stopped him, "checking out a stolen car," thus providing Harris with a motive for shooting Wood and revealing that he did not actually know at the time (as we do now) that Wood was merely going to tell him to turn on his lights and "be on his way"(Touchton). Officer Kittrell is even led by David to the murder weapon that he had hidden behind his house in a swamp. As Hootie Nelson (even a Dickens would have had trouble finding a more appropriate name for a redneck) puts the matter, making it clear what none of David's friends and Officer Kittrell doubt up to the days on which their

[24] In addition, at 44:42 in the film a shot of printed text, most likely from a newspaper report, shows the words "Officer Turko" and beneath them the phrase "only one person," which I understand as documenting her original statement that only one person was in the car, an observation made, according to Adams (in his commentary to Crime Scene Reenactment VIII, starting at 44:42 as well as in his book, 335), fifteen minutes after the murder.

interviews were filmed and long before Adams was released, "… I don't guess I really realized he did shoot the cop."[25]

The explanation the Dallas police offer on camera as to why they did not believe that Harris was the killer is their belief that Harris had simply been bragging to his friends, but that later had decided, rather than to face a life of imprisonment, to "come clean," as Detective Touchton puts it, adding "He just seemed like a friendly kid… I may have talked to him … on a friendly basis, just to, uh, just to keep him friendly."[26] On Touchton's reliability as an interpreter of Harris's thought processes, we ought not to forget that it is Touchton (and not as Adams claims in his book [Adams 1991, 301] Rose) who explains why Adams's brother does not testify at the trial (fear of being accused of perjury), whereas in fact the brother did, according to Morris (in his interview with Moyers), testify unconvincingly about Adams's whereabouts on the fateful evening. Gus Rose, always the most articulate of the three Detectives, hits the nail on the head: "It wasn't very long till I realized that what he [Harris] knew was the facts of the case, and it matched perfectly with what we knew, and it had to be right." The scenario that the police present in this section of the film is not impossible, even not implausible if the rest of the evidence points to Randall Adams. That is, even though people in Vidor who knew David well think that he is capable of murder, the Dallas police may have gotten it right after all. I, for one, would feel more confident about their conclusions if I felt more confident about the Dallas police, who in Morris's capable narrative hands have been made to look up to now like bad cops. Whatever the truth, the fact of the matter, the identity of Officer Wood's killer, there can be no doubt that the Dallas police, as presented in *The Thin Blue Line*, bear a major responsibility for putting Randall Adams's head on the block. They do not seem in the least uncertain of their conclusion nor repentent that Adams is still in prison. Could it be that the police, obviously experienced in investigating crime and despite the circumstantial evidence to the contrary, managed to arrive at the right deduction? This is the question that the rest of the movie will debate.

5

The mystery of why Adams rather than Harris was prosecuted is further investigated in the third section of the film (31:11-47:25). In addition, Morris begins to introduce the question of how and why, given the evidence pointing at David Harris and that exonerating Randall Adams, the latter was convicted. One possible reason for his prosecution that is not examined in this section (nor really given much credence anywhere else in the

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[25] An utterance that I must translate for my students into standard English as follows: "I guess that at the time I did not actually realize that David in fact had shot the cop," which also entails the notion that he was convinced at the time he made the statement (in 1985) that David was the killer.

[26] No one needs to be reminded that Rose also had spoken of his "friendly" conversation with Adams.

film) is that the Dallas police and Assistant District Attorney Douglas Mulder believed that Adams was guilty. One might argue that experienced police officers like Gus Rose develop a sense of which suspects are telling the truth and which are not, and it is entirely possible that they were honestly convinced in 1976, as they seemed still to be at the time their interviews were filmed (1985), that Adams was the culprit. Moreover, despite all of the evidence that Morris, Adams's lawyers, local reporters and the prosecution uncover—and despite all of the alleged shoddy tactics practiced by Douglas Mulder—there is still the possibility that the police and the prosecution got the right man. To convict Adams it matters little whether he lacked an apparent or plausible motive for killing Wood, so long as it can be demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that he did so, and if the witnesses to the murder are to be believed, then their testimony is evidence that he killed the policeman.[27] Morris, of course, understandably does everything he can to counter this version of events—after all, he honestly believes that Harris is the guilty party—and offers two reasons for prosecuting Adams, the first a relatively optimistic conclusion voiced by one of Adams's attorneys, Dennis White: "I felt that some policeman, whether in Vidor or Dallas, made the decision about who to prosecute and set the wheels of justice in motion in the wrong direction, and they got going so fast no one could stop them." The second, more cynical, conclusion is arrived at by Edith James, who claims that Adams was prosecuted, "not that they had him so dead to rights, but just that he was a convenient age," that is, he could, if convicted, be put to death, whereas Harris, aged sixteen at the time of the murder, could not be so sentenced. Morris would seem to share James's view, at least in part, when he states in the Moyers in-

[27] According to Linda Williams (Williams 1993, 21, note 4) Charles Musser argues in a paper "that the prosecution and the police saw Adams as a homosexual." In response to an e-mail I sent Ms. Williams inquiring whether there was any evidence to back up this interesting suggestion, she replied that it was just a theory, meaning, I take it, that there is no evidence external to the film that the police or the D. A. believed Adams was homosexual. That is, for some undisclosed reason (perhaps an imaginative interpretation of why Adams would spend the day with, and go to a drive-in in the company of, a sixteen-year-old) some viewers of the film hatched the theory of Adams as homosexual and then projected this notion onto the Dallas police. She also asserts (Williams 1993, 21, note 4) that "this perception" was "suppressed by the film." If what Williams means is that nothing in the film suggests that Adams is gay or that the police so regarded him, then claiming that the *perception* was *suppressed* begs the question. Richard K. Sherwin, who speaks of the sexual connotations of "… going to a soft-porn drive-in movie," asks the question "Why were the car's lights off that night on Inwood Road?" and suggests that Adams and Harris were engaged in "a tryst that night along a dark road" (Sherwin 1994, 60). This latter assertion ignores the fact that the film shows us repeatedly that Officers Wood and Turko stopped the car when they observed it moving without headlights. There thus can be no question of the police coming upon a parked car containing Adams and Harris, as Sherwin implies. His conjecture also ignores the case Morris makes that *all* the evidence which places Adams in this car at the time of the shooting is highly tainted. Sherwin's article is an example of how to create ambiguities by alleging them into existence and then weaving them into a dual plot, one of whose strands he has elaborately contrived through tendentious misreadings.

terview that "a kind of blood-lust took over in 1977 at Adams's trial: 'here's the killer, he's the one who did it, now let's all pull together, get a conviction, and kill the guy'." Another reason, one we deduce from the film but which no character states explicitly, is that Adams was prosecuted because if the state believed him, they would not be able to use Harris's testimony, the chief eyewitness account by someone a few feet away from the murderer when the crime occurred (Adams 1991, 62).

How and why Adams was convicted is another matter, and Morris begins to suggest some of the reasons in this section. One reason is that if, like Adams, you lack sufficient money to hire an adequate defense team, the defense you will get might resemble that provided by his two lawyers, and it will have a limited chance of success against the greater resources, both in money and people, possessed by the state. (In this connection see Radelet 1992.) The presumption of guilt weighing upon the accused requires more than the innocence of the defendent, and a defense lawyer's belief in his or her innocence, to defeat the state's case. Dennis White, experienced in civil, not criminal, law prior to taking on Adams as his client, and his partner Edith James, by her own account completely inexperienced in the world of capital crime, probably had little or no chance against Douglas Mulder, a legendary prosecutor whose won and lost record in murder trials until his retirement from public office puts him at the top of the chart. Indeed even a partial list of his record shows that in cases where the death penalty was not exacted, the convicted were sentenced to long prison terms, up to and including one of 5005 (five thousand and five) years in prison.

Be that as it may, Morris treats Edith James and Dennis White with respect throughout the film, and does not indulge in the kind of criticism of White's conduct of the case made in Adams's book (Adams 1991, 288-89, 312-13).[28] But they do indict themselves from time to time, as do all the characters who appear in the film, with the exceptions of Adams, Officer Sam Kittrell and, perhaps, Melvyn Bruder. Beginning this section abruptly, Edith James, an ebullient, salt-of-the-earth type—a poor man's Roxanne, perhaps—does not fit the central casting office ideal of the hard-nosed, sharp-witted, sleek and elegantly dressed and stylishly coiffured lawyer whom the likes of O. J. Simpson can afford to hire when faced with a capital offence, and although she apparently spent little or no time examining witnesses or presenting evidence in court, this fact is not evident from the film. (Adams 1991, on the other hand, makes almost no mention of her role in the case). Dennis White is in all respects a sympathetic man, scholarly in demeanor, soft-spoken, articulate, obviously intelligent, a good man apparently designed to give the lie to the thousands of lawyer jokes that discredit the race; as a matter of fact, he reveals in the film that he has given up the practice of law following this case after discovering what kind of tactics must be employed to defend a client in the only system

[28] This lack of criticism is partly a result of Morris's narrative style: to make a case against the two lawyers would have necessitated some third party's expository remarks on how they conducted the case, a tactic that would have been counter-productive for a number of reasons I have no space to go into here.

of justice available. (Melvyn Bruder, a man who later makes a couple of brief appearances in the film, comes into the story to help with Adams's appeal and strikes a more professional, even cynical, approach to the business of dealing with people like Doug Mulder; but by then it is too late; Adams was on death row, and the business of granting him a new hearing would take over eleven years.) At the time the film was made, all three members of the defense team had one thing in common, of course: a complete inability to ward off fate that all but crushed Randall Dale Adams.

Both James and White reveal things that indicate the size of the task confronting them. James tells us that she was supposed to interview the man running the store near Adams's motel that he allegedly stopped in at on the night preceding the murder, but that she did not get over to Fort Worth (some thirty-five miles from Dallas) "for a long time." Naturally, the man could no longer be sure that Adams had been in the store on a night at least two months previously, and James may have had good reasons why she could not find the time to get to Fort Worth (aside simply from making a living working on other cases), but her statement makes it seem as if she was derelict in her duty. But had Randall Adams been able to afford more investigators, this kind of evidence would undoubtedly have been more forthcoming. Moreover, the defense team's interview with the manager of the drive-in movie, which might well have brought to light the fact that the last feature finished earlier than Harris claimed it did, was less complete than the prosecution's investigation (Adams 1991, 259).[29]

White, for his part, testifies to his difficulties in presenting his crime spree theory, that David Harris had committed a series of crimes before and after the murder of Wood and that it was he who had "the heart filled with malice," the person more likely to have committed this crime because he had committed similar ones before and the man anxious to escape from the police. (Adams, on the other hand, is portrayed as having no tangible motive for shooting the policeman; "Why would he do it," White asks?) For White, the man bearing the responsibility for his not being able to present this evidence is Judge Donald Metcalfe. Morris, perhaps wisely, does not go into the details of the legal niceties on this point. (How would a viewer not trained in the law be able to decide

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[29] It was Morris's research in 1985 that uncovered the report (based on State Investigator Jeff Shaw's visit to the 183 Drive-In on March 29, 1977) that reveals a discrepancy in Harris's chronology. Shaw's report documents that, even if Harris's account of when they arrived at the drive-in (while *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was showing) and when they left (while *The Student Body* was showing) is accepted, Adams and Harris could not have left the theater later than 23:30, rather than sometime after midnight, as Harris testified (Adams 1991, 259). We remember that Wood was shot at 00:30, that is, a few minutes later. Adams claims, on the other hand, that they arrived during the showing of *The Student Body* (sometime between 19:00 and 20:40) and left while *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was still running (sometime between 20:40 and 10:24). Had the defense team produced a similar report, which Mulder apparently illegally withheld from the defense (Adams 1991, 260), they could have questioned Harris's account and further questioned his veracity. Whether a discrepancy of some forty-five minutes would have tipped the balance in Adams's favor, however, is doubtful.

who was right? On the one hand White is bitter, and on the other none of the appellate courts, apparently, saw fit to reprimand the Judge on this point.) Morris is content to attack the Judge on narrative-cinematic grounds. First, he has James introduce him into the film by saying, in a manner reminiscent of Gus Rose's debut, that the Judge allegedly remarked to Dennis White's wife, "what do you care, he's just a drifter." Then in a manner to which we are now accustomed, the Judge appears and characterizes himself as a man who grew up in a family in which he was taught a great respect for law enforcement, because, as he explains, his father was an FBI agent in the 1930s, "probably at the worst possible time to be in the FBI." Morris introduces a clip from a Hollywood B-film in which the reenactment of the shooting to death of John Dillinger is presented. The Judge then proceeds to relate some facts that he characterizes as *trivia*, recounting with great gusto the story of the Lady in Red, the woman who, apparently, betrayed Dillinger. The manner in which the Judge serves all this up, and the character of the nondiegetic film clip, brands the Judge as a law-and-order man, a not-quite-man who as a boy had real cops-and-robbers stories (in which J. Edgar Hoover was the good-guy) sprinkled over his cornflakes and who grew up to be a Hanging Judge. He must have been the only youth in American who rooted for the FBI against Dillinger, and we can believe he was on the Texas Rangers' side when they did battle against Faye Dunaway as Bonnie and Warren Beatty as Clyde. Mostly, the judge in this segment appears to be a silly man, one fighting hard to create a sense of dignity, probity, and objectivity worthy of adjudicating the fate of a man who is only a drifter charged with killing one of the family. The harshness of the portrait of the Judge will increase in intensity—out of his own mouth he will appear virtually incapable of looking dispassionately at the evidence of his misconduct in the trial, as determined by the United States Supreme Court.

The impression gained from the rest of this section is that Adams is a better lawyer now than his two defense attorneys were then. As Adams, for example, takes us through Teresa Turko's testimony shortly after the murder and her contradictory courtroom testimony, we wonder why his lawyers were not able to make the same discrepancies obvious. Space prohibits me from further analyzing these elements, but this section ends on the note that one reason that Adams is in prison is that he committed the Unforgivable Sin in the United States of being a poor man accused of a crime.

6

In attacking the prosecution's conduct in the Randall Adams case, Morris shifts into a higher gear, so that his portrayal of the trial judge, Don Metcalfe, and the three surprise witnesses to the murder, Emily Miller, her husband R. L. Miller, and Michael Randell, achieves a comic savagery only obtainable by a great artist. Morris's criticism of the police and Assistant District Attorney Douglas Mulder is indirect (Mulder, of course, does not appear as a talking bust), but by attacking the witnesses he impugns the prosecution for allowing them to testify in court. Indeed, one of the great mysteries in the Randall

Dale Adams case is how the prosecution was able to present the testimony of the three eyewitnesses so that the jury found it believable. Why, we ask, did their sworn statements against Adams not immediately result in his leaving the courtroom a free man? However, we must never forget that the medium of the courtroom obeys other laws than those of the film world, and that what Morris can do with a camera, his interviewing technique, and a team of expert cutters changes the equation. On camera the surprise witnesses are comic figures, grotesque caricatures of unreliability and duplicity, virtual allegorical characters in a show of dummies portraying how justice can go wrong. We can laugh now only because Adams has been freed of their baleful power over his life, but before the film was made, few of the sympathetic eyes observing his sorry fate could have remained dry.

Once again, I would like us to imagine that Morris constructed a fictional narrative account of the Randall Adams saga. That is, Morris makes up the entirely fictional story out of whole cloth, wrote the script in such a way that it makes little or no reference to the actual world (aside from choosing Dallas as its setting), hired the actors to play the parts, and then filmed them performing the roles as he had conceived, written and directed them. The imaginary film that Morris eventually produces, we are to imagine, precisely duplicates the film as we have it, the only differences being that the dialogue spoken by the actors is pre-scripted, actors play the fictional characters and everyone is an informed party to, and a willing conspirator in, as it were, the nature and aims of the film. Let us further try simply to imagine the preposterous scenario in which Morris interviews a few dozen actresses in the vain attempt to find one able to approximate the brilliant performance of the actual Mrs. Miller, an artist capable of capturing her on-screeen combination of good-ol'-girl star-struck naiveté and winsome slatternliness. *Fictional Morris as movie producer puffing a large stogy to central casting*: "Could you send over a gal who looks like a burned out hooker with a heart of granite and sewed-on button-eyes, preferably bleached-blond, one whose face hints at a brain which drugs, alcohol, and years of existence on the bottom rung of the human evolutionary scale have reduced to hominy grits, a ding-bat who will stop at nothing to achieve her fifteen minutes of fame?" Would this fictional Morris have obtained a fictional actress more capable of acting the part of the actual Mrs. Miller? Equally hard to believe is that Morris could possibly have found a man to appear on camera who could approach the inarticulateness and mental dullness of Mrs. Miller's spouse, or the comic egotism of Michael Randell. Again we marvel at two things: Morris's luck that the witnesses actually appear in the guise that nature has given them and the camera so brutally exposes, and his good fortune that they agreed to submit to the interviews at all. We must never forget that had they, and the other talking busts, refused to sign releases, as did Douglas Mulder, Randall Adams would most likely still be in prison.

Morris begins his attack by merely allowing Mrs. Miller to tell us about herself. What she says makes her look sufficiently silly and inane for Morris's purpose of impugning her testimony:

> "You know it's always happening to me, everywhere I go, you know, lots of times there's killings or anything, you know, even around my house, wherever, and I'm always looking, or getting involved, you know, finding out who did it or what's going on."

Virtually the only thing missing from her account of the world that would make her appear less in touch with reality is a tale of being kidnapped by visitors from outer space who taught her how to see through walls and etch glass with her powers of thought. But when Morris introduces nondiegetic cuts from old *Boston Blackie* television episodes (a popular detective show from 1950s television, as I must explain to my students) to illustrate her childhood dream of being the girlfriend of a detective, he suggests that only a D. A. extremely confident of his powers, as well as being indifferent to truth, would have taken the risk of presenting her to a jury. She concludes her introductory remarks with the comment that "I listen to people, and I'm always trying to decide who's lying or who killed who, before the police do, see if I can beat 'em." No Hollywood scriptwriter would allow one of her unsympathetic characters to speak like this—she would have no defense against the charge of over-writing—but Morris, apparently a documentary film maker blessed by the gods, gets Mrs. Miller to say all this on her own. How much would Morris's discrediting of the prosecution have suffered if Mrs. Miller had appeared just normally goofy rather than more than slightly demented?

Her appearance and her on-screen chatter would matter little were it not for Morris's indictment of her as a liar, a woman who committed perjury that almost cost a man his life and actually cost him eleven years of prison time, some of it at hard labor. He goes about establishing her perfidy by permitting her to describe the death scene, a narration that she prefaces with the remark that she and her husband were having an argument prior to the events she witnessed. She begins thus: "So about that time a police [sic] came out of a restaurant on the right hand side of the road, and he went to pull the man over." After a shot of a rotating light, the roof of the police car, and a bushy-haired driver adjusting the rearview mirror, Mr. Miller, in making his first appearance in the film, jumps in with "I didn't think she seen the guy, but she did, because I said, 'what are you looking at,' because I knew something had went wrong." Even if we remove the non-sequitor from this last statement and recast their remarks into standard English, we cannot change the impression Morris creates that as they are talking to each other their car has driven beyond the point where they could have seen the driver clearly or have seen him shoot Officer Wood. A shot of a yellow car (presumably theirs) shows it approaching from the east the two stationary cars that are facing west as Mr. Miller utters his remark quoted above, and another shot shows their car drawing even with the blue compact as they continue to reduplicate their conversation, the camera focusing on Mr. and Mrs. Miller in turn. Morris contrives to make the length of their conversational exchanges represent a certain distance travelled by their car, so that by the time they explain to us what they claim to have seen, their car is far beyond the point where they could have seen into the car or have seen the shots being fired. (A comparison of several

other reenactments establishes a relative chronology of events: the driver adjusts the rearview mirror; the policeman reaches the driver's door as the driver rolls down his window; the shots are fired.) Thus, at the point in their narration when they pass the car, the policeman is still several yards from the driver's door (the window is still rolled up). Mrs. Miller states: "It was real dark, and it was cold [that is, the window must have been closed]; it was hard to see in that car." Apparently, she realizes the significance of her statement (that she could not have seen the driver clearly enough to identify him), so she adds, "But, see, his window was down, the driver's window was down, and this is how I got such a good look." That it is unlikely that her version is true is an impression we gain by how the film is edited. Told without the insertion of the reenactments, her account might seem more plausible, but measured by the law of seeing is believing, a certain logic identifies the lies: The Millers's car is beyond the parked car before the policeman reaches the rear tire of the blue compact; the window is first rolled down some time after this point; ergo the Millers could not have seen the driver through the rolled up window. Thus Morris discredits the Millers' narrative and documents their perjury, and to add insult to injury Mr. Miller makes what is perhaps the most damning remark in all of their comments taken collectively; after describing the driver's appearance, he says: "But you know, like I said, when he was in court, he sure look a lot different." We can assume (I have not read the trial transcript) that he made no such statement in court, for if Adams did not look the same in court as on the night of the murder, he could not have been identifiable; he could not legally have been the same man.

In order to support the point that he has made subtly with film technique, Morris allows Edith James, Dennis White, and Ms. Elba Carr, a fellow worker of Mr. Miller's at a gas station, to comment on the Millers' testimony. First, James exposes a discrepancy in Mrs. Miller's courtroom testimony by pointing out that she had not been working for a gas station just prior to picking up her husband on the evening of the murder, because she had been fired two weeks before for "till-tapping." (James also alleges that the Millers offered their information on the murder to the police to extricate themselves from charges of disorderly conduct at their apartment.) Dennis White states that he got a call from a woman offering to testify against the Millers; she also stated that she had phoned the D. A.'s office during the trial, warning them not to believe anything the Millers said. Ms. Carr, a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman, appears on screen and states simply, "they [the Millers] were scum, they were just … actually scum." She states that the day after the murder Mr. Miller told her that "he couldn't see a damn thing … he didn't see a damn thing, he couldn't see nothing, it was too dark." She expresses "shock" that despite his remark that "for enough money he would testify to what they wanted him to say, or he would say anything that they wanted him to say, or he would see anything they wanted him to see," he did "go ahead and get up and tell that he did see the actual shooting." She also expresses doubt about the reliability of what he actually said he had seen, observing that she doubts whether he could have seen anything from where he was

"with binoculars." After this treatment, the Millers, to use a current American idiom, are toast.

Morris, we might guess, is probably as proud of his treatment of Michael Randell, the third of the surprise eyewitnesses to the murder, as of any other segment in the film, for this brief cameo exquisitly deflates the ego of a truly unlikable man. Again the principle "out of the mouths of talking busts" is the device for doing Randell in, for he begins by telling us matter of factly how he has developed a powerful memory over the years: "I'm a salesman, and you develop something like a [sic] total recall. I don't forget places, things, streets, because it's a habit … something I just picked up." (Presumably Morris had asked him, to elicit this bit of blasé self-characterization, what made him such an excellent witness.) In support of his own estimation that he possesses total recall, Randell's on-camera monologue begins promisingly enough: "I was leaving the Plush Club one night driving a 1977 Cadillac heading west on Hampton" [so far so good: the reenactment shows a car, maybe a 1977 Cadillac, drawing level with the two stationary cars]. But things begin to get out of hand rather quickly: "I noticed an officer had two individuals pulled over to the curb [no curb visible] in a blue [pause] some type of vehicle. [Reenactment shows Cadillac level with the two cars, then passing them] It was [pause, face showing strain], it was … a blue … I think …yeah, it was a blue Ford … It was a blue sumpfin!" So much for the photographic memory, but Randell plows ahead nevertheless: [While the reenactment shows the Cadillac further past the two cars] "The driver had long blond hair, a mustache, the other one didn't have no hairs [!] on his face." Those viewers who have been paying attention to the reenactments shown up to this point know that there is no visual basis for his assertion that there were two people in the car; only Dale Holt and David Harris have said that there were two men in the car, and Holt, of course, not an eyewitness, was apparently repeating a dubious version of events provided by Officer Turko, which she later revised in her court testimony; Adams has made it clear, citing Harris's story, that by this point Harris was slumped down in the seat, so that he could not have been visible from outside the car. Thus, Randell is here recalling an impossibility, apparently based upon his faulty memory of what Harris or other witnesses testified to in court; he could not have seen what he claims to have witnessed. The other possibility is that he is accurately recalling a lie that the three witnesses hatched in consultation with the proesecution. Furthermore, he continues to give his imperfect imitation of a man with a perfect memory:

> "He'd [the police officer] walked up … his car was behind… lemmie … I don't know if it was behind or in front, but I know he had him pulled over … And he was up to the car … I think he was up to the car … Let me think … yeah, he was up to the car… as we [sic] was going by … yeah, he had been up to the car … yeah, he was up to the car.

Of one thing he is sure, however: "… I didn't see no bullet … cause I went on," leaving us to believe that had he not driven on, he, like Superman, would have been able to see bullets, no doubt a skill that he had taught himself in his capacity as a salesman. Finally

in this segment, he also provides an inadequate explanation for why Adams and Harris were stopped: "A person that is white going through that area at night—he's a sore thumb … If they don't look right, they going to stop you." As we know from commentary from several talking busts, the car was stopped because it was being driven without headlights, not because the driver looked suspicious. Like the commentary of the Millers, Michael Randell's remarks disqualify him as a reliable witness to events: he cannot really remember what he saw, which might be understandable after the passage of about seven years, but his arrogant assumption of infallibility destroys any faith in his powers of observation or his integrity in reporting them.

Before Morris is finished with this witness, however, he later inserts some additional commentary provided by Randell which I will treat here. Randell admits, apparently for the first time publicly, that as he drove by the two stationary cars, he was ministering to the needs of an inebriated young woman whom he had picked up in the nightclub before driving home. That is, regardless of what he could have seen in the "blue sumpfin," it is unlikely that he was paying as much attention to the scene as his previous remarks suggest. In any event, he lied, by omission if not commisson, about the circumstances in which he witnessed the crime. Like the Millers, his testimony is effectively characterized as perjured.

The remainder of this section further calls into question the integrity of the prosecution's case. Morris is not content merely to leave the viewer with the impression that an honest mistake was made in convicting the wrong man—as if Adams's fate could be equated with the bad luck a man suffers in being run over by a freight train—but that a constellation of two circumstances resulted in this crass miscarriage of justice: an adversarial system of criminal law in which winning is perhaps more important to the prosecution than adjudicating facts and arriving at a just decision, and a judge whose political biases predisposes him unduly to the prosecution's arguments and procedures. I would like to stress here that as a person with no formal training in law, I cannot evaluate the legal issues at stake in some of the charges against Judge Metcalfe's rulings. But we can as sentient beings with knowledge of human nature and the rules of narrative composition tell when a man appearing in a film looks suspect in his role as judge. Whereas the attack on the prosecution has approached it by indirection, with the exception of a few pointed remarks by Edith James against the personality of Douglas Mulder, Morris now aims his guns directly at Judge Don Metcalfe.

Judge Metcalfe indicts himself when he explains that one of Douglas Mulder's arguments in his summation to the jury moved him to the point of tears. Mulder had argued that the line protecting law abiding citizens from civil disorder consisted of the thin blue line composed of police officers (in most cities in the United States police uniforms are blue rather than the traditional green in the Federal Republic). One does not have to be a knee-jerk liberal to recognize not only the political right-wing bias in this argument but its specious character. However undesirable a society without an honest and courageous police force might be—as the example of, say, Guatemala amply demonstrates

(Goldman 2002)—most people recognize that what keeps us safe in bed at night is not the presence of the police but the restraint, developed over hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, that the vast majority of us exercise in not dealing with our neighbors in ways that surface in our darkest dreams. While it may be too much to expect the Judge to express misgivings about such a blatant appeal to the baser instincts of a jury, he ought to recognize that a public expression of sympathy for such an argument might work against him. Moreover, when he states that he has sympathy for a man who might steal to feed his family (not really a crime, surely), or for a seventeen-year-old boy who goes joy-ridding in a car (not a felony comparable to murder) or for a heroine addict who needs the drug (a medical rather than a legal problem), but that he has no compassion for a killer of a policeman, we wonder whether he has the intellectual equipment required of a judge in a capital case. Finally, in his explication of the significance of the Supreme Court's ruling (8-1) against the death sentence in the Adams case, the Judge offers a classic example of chop-logic in which he attempts to turn a humiliating defeat into a face-saving victory. He explains that the Supreme Court has not said that he was wrong in his conduct of the case but merely that they disagreed with him, that he was not *wrong* but merely "incorrect." He also adds up the votes cast by the Appellate Court in Texas (9-0) and the Supreme Court votes (8-1) and concludes that he won 10-8. (According to this reckening, had the Appellate Court voted 5-4 and the Supreme Court 5-4, then a penalty shoot-out would have had to decide the issue!) It is part of Morris's genius as a film maker that he can take a judge whose physical appearance and winsome smile could get him chosen virtually anywhere as the favorite uncle, and then turn him into such an unappealing character. I am decidedly on the side of the viewers who do not much care for the judge.[30]

The rest of the segment attacks the prosecution's performance in a straightforward expository manner. Adams is shown to have been found guilty, two Dallas psychaitrists testify that he would be a danger to society if released, and he is sentenced to death; the inadvisability and unreliability of such a procedure is discussed. Adams mentions how often he heard what happens to someone electrocuted in the electric chair, and concludes that the D. A. was not interested in whether he was guilty or not but merely in killing him. David Harris says that he never expressed any interest in what happened to Adams, that after he testified he "was gone." A motion for retrial was denied, despite evidence that a case for armed robbery against Mrs. Miller's daughter was dismissed a week later in the same court by the same judge, Don Metcalfe. Very little of the evidence which Ms. Elba Carr might have presented in the original trial was allowed, because of legal technicalities that are hard for a layperson in law to follow. The commutation of Adams's death sentence to life imprisonment is mentioned, and Adams's lawyer in his appeal, Melvyn Bruder, relates how he thought there would be a retrial when the District

[30] Barnouw dislikes him (Barnouw 1995, 137) but not as much as I do, whereas Bordwell and Thompson seem to like him (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 385).

Attorney, Henry Wade, expressed the notion that in his book there was no room for a man convicted of murdering a policeman not getting the death penalty; Bruder expresses "shock" that by commuting the sentence the State of Texas decided not to retry Adams, partly, Bruder feels, because they were uncertain that a re-conviction of Adams could be obtained. The Vidor police officer Sam Kittrell tells us that in the meantime David's troubles with the law over the years have not ceased: he was involved in a possible abortive rape case in Vidor; he spent time in a military prison for beating up one of his ranking officers; he was in prison in California, apparently for kidnapping and burglary; and finally he was convicted of murder in nearby Beaumont while in the process of committing a felony (kidnapping, among other things) and sentenced to death. Near the end of this section David more or less unwittingly confesses to being alone in the car and leaving the scene in such a way as to just miss colliding with an oncoming car (the driver of which, strangely enough, seems not to have come forward). Randall Adams comments on Harris, saying both that "kid scares me … He had seven crimes coming down on him … and Dallas County gives him complete immunity for his testimony," and then concludes by quoting his mother who judged on her first night in Dallas, "if there was ever a hell on earth, it's Dallas County." Adams adds, "she's right, she's right."

The last section of the film is composed of Sam Kittrell's potted history of David Harris's childhood, aided by David's own assessment of his strained relationship with his father after the accidental death by drowning as a child of David's one-year-older brother. Perhaps the most convincing reason for believing that David is the killer is his virtual admission on an audiotape (shown playing on camera) that Randall Adams is not guilty. Here we hear Morris's voice for the only time in the film, which prods Harris into ever more precise admissions that he in fact shot Officer Robert Wood.

What is the final lesson we learn from this film? Despite its brilliance and the political debate it raised, we ought not to forget that Adams was granted a hearing that finally freed him in 1989 by a different judge from the one who had originally presided at his trial and had repeatedly turned down his request for a new one and that a virtually new team was in place at the D. A.'s office. It is a moot point, one we can be sure that Randall Dale Adams would not have cared to put to the test, whether he would ever have received a new trial if Mulder, Wade, and Metcalfe forever held the reins of Dallas County justice in their hands. As for statements by those attempting to vindicate the system of justice in Dallas County by pointing out that in some countries Adams would never have been released from prison, they would not have consoled many people who had spent much time in Randall Adams's shoes.

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