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Space odyssey

Ground-breaking documentary filmmaker Errol Morris turns his camera on the universe



Stop Watch Director Errol Morris tossed dispassionate documentary to the winds in *The Thin Blue Line* — now he turns his involved, subjective vision of “truth” toward *A Brief History of Time*.

By Michael Fox

A CASUALLY RUMPLED Errol Morris wrests his lanky frame from a chair in his Nob Hill hotel room and strolls over to the coffeepot to refill his cup. Chatty and relaxed on this muted, foggy San Francisco morning, Morris shows no trace of manic energy, no buzz of single-minded ambition. Yet the boyish-looking 44-year-old director is undeniably a trailblazer and, in some circles, an unpopular one. Morris is responsible, more than anyone else you can name, for one of the few encouraging trends in American cinema in the last five years — namely, the emergence of documentary filmmakers from the musty isolation of high-school classrooms and public broadcasting into the bright light of theatrical exposure and mainstream audiences.

Morris' commercial and artistic breakthrough, *The Thin Blue Line*, dazzlingly employed re-enactments to examine, *Rashomon*-style, the chain of events leading to the unjust conviction of Randall Adams for the 1976 murder of a Dallas policeman. Morris' stylistic accomplishment was nearly overshadowed by the film's pivotal role in provoking a new trial, which resulted in Adams' exoneration.

A second round of controversy was subsequently ignited, however, when neither *The Thin Blue Line* nor *Roger & Me* — Michael Moore's cheerfully anarchic, first-person essay about General Motors' impact on Flint, Michigan — was nominated for the Oscar for best feature documentary. That debate revealed the depth with which Morris' peers in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences resented his experimentation with the traditional conventions of the documentary genre.

“I certainly am interested in shaking up assumptions we have about nonfiction filmmaking, about documentary filmmaking,” Morris declares as he reclains his chair. “We have certain expectations about what a documentary film should look like. We also have certain expectations about what a film that's based on reality — the real world — should look like, and I've tried to break up those assumptions.”

“The purpose of those re-enactments, a style which I believe has been imitated in countless movies and television shows, was not to show you what really happened,” Morris continues, growing more animated. “In fact, they are designed to take you deeper into the *mystery* of what really happened. My re-enactments are articulations of untruths, not truths. They illustrate various POVs [points of view], they are mutually contradictory, they are incompatible with each other. They are designed to force us to test our assumptions about

what we see, about what we think is real, about the truth.”

MORRIS' FOLLOW-UP TO *The Thin Blue Line* was a fictional mystery, a Hollywood feature based on Tony Hillerman's novel *The Dark Wind*. But the film has been shelved while its distributor struggles with financial problems; Morris has no idea when it will see the light of a projector.

Morris next agreed to direct a film based on the life and work of renowned English cosmologist Stephen Hawking. An adaptation of Hawking's unexpected best seller, *A Brief History of Time* would be a mystery of another kind — an excursion into the metaphysician's deductions about the nature and creation of the universe.

At once a factual subject and beyond the understanding of most people lacking an advanced degree in physics, Morris' undertaking represented an extraordinarily daunting challenge. “I tried to turn science into metaphor,” explains Morris, who holds a master's degree in philosophy. “I certainly didn't want this movie to be a physics lecture — that was one of my greatest fears, that this was going to turn into some sort of educational program rather than a movie.”

Thanks to Morris' cheeky approach and Hawking's dry wit, *Brief History* avoids that trap. The film blends Hawking's own remarkable story with the evolution of his theories of black holes, to the accompaniment of Philip Glass' haunting music (which also lent *The Thin Blue Line* a surreal tinge). For good measure, Morris tosses in a chicken, an exploding teacup and scenes from a dreadful old Disney sci-fi flick featuring Anthony Perkins and Ernest Borgnine.

Hawking was a brilliant but uninspired student until he was diagnosed at age 21 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease), a degenerative, fatal disease affecting the spinal cord. He was given two-and-a-half years to live. The news triggered a period of acute depression, but then Hawking began working seriously for the first time. His illness slowed (although he is now almost completely paralyzed), and over the next 30 years, with his research into the boundaries of the universe, he established himself as perhaps the pre-eminent theoretical physicist of our time.

Morris' chanciest technical decision was to film the 30-odd interviews with Hawking's relatives and peers in a studio, rather than on location. The filmmaker jokes that *Brief History* “is the first documentary in which there isn't a single real image. I reversed the familiar documentary principle where you take your film crew to your subjects. In this particular case, I took my subjects to my film crew.”

Returning to his favorite theme, Morris grows serious. “I have always been fascinated by the idea of a world you create [as a filmmaker] and its relationship to the world out there. I like to make people think about what that dividing line might be between fact and fiction, where the real world ends and fiction begins. I wanted to create a world around Stephen Hawking, a world of his colleagues, family, friends, students — a timeless world. You always see Stephen Hawking's mother in front of a window and the light never changes. It is as if all of these people around Stephen are suspended in time. Perhaps they are part of the story that is outside of time, a story of community and friendship, of love.”

One of the criticisms of *The Thin Blue Line* was that Morris' liberal use of re-creations was dishonest. On the contrary, Morris contends, few filmmakers are as scrupulous about their integrity. “One of the central themes of *The Thin Blue Line* was self-deception, the fact that people thought that they had possession of the truth when they didn't,” Morris argues. “It's a story about people scurrying away from the truth, either wittingly or unwittingly.”

“The one thing I don't believe is that the truth is somehow subjective, that it's all just simply projection and transference out there, and just thinking things makes it so. There was one important, crucial fact — namely, what happened on the roadway. Someone shot Dallas police officer Robert Wood; it's not up for grabs. And the crucial thing is uncovering what happened. There is a real world out there in which things happen, and the truth may be difficult to uncover and there may be obstacles, but searching for the truth becomes an all-important human activity.”

It's hardly a coincidence that one of Morris' favorite lines in *A Brief History of Time* is Stephen Hawking's mother's description of her son as “a searcher.” “It's not as if he has possession of absolute knowledge or absolute truth,” Morris emphasizes. “But he is involved in some enterprise of trying to uncover what the world might be really like, and extending some understanding about the world and, if you like, trying to uncover truth.”

“There has been a lot written about truth-telling and journalism, how we look at film or photographs or videotape, certainly all of the issues surrounding the Rodney King videotape,” he says, shifting in his chair. “One thing we learned is that a piece of film or a piece of videotape is subject to widely divergent interpretations. It seems the capacity of the people to believe almost anything is unlimited.”

► **A Brief History of Time** opens Friday, Aug. 28, at S.F.'s Lumiere Cinemas.