our imagination of it. The historical world is something that lies outside and beneath all our representations of it. It is a “brute reality” in which “objects collide, actions occur, [and] forces take their toll.” Documentary is therefore not the representation of an imaginary reality; it is an imaginative representation of an actual historical reality. This aligns Nichols’s definition of documentary more closely with the common-sense definition of [John] Grierson than with those that suggest that documentary is no more than a kind of fiction that denies its fictional status. Of course, our perceptions of and ideas about historical (i.e., actual) reality can only be communicated to others in conventional ways.

—Dirk Etizen, 1995

Rashomon is not a movie about the subjectivity of truth. That there’s no objective truth, just subjective truth. A truth for you, a truth for me. On the contrary, it’s a movie about how everybody sees the world differently. But the claim that everybody sees the world differently is not a claim that there’s no reality. It’s a different kind of claim. What really surprised me on re-watching Rashomon is that you know what really happened at the end. It’s pretty damn clear.

—Errol Morris, 2004

In 1985, director (and erstwhile private investigator) Errol Morris became interested in the trial of Randall Adams, who by then had served almost a decade for the murder of a Dallas police officer. As a product of his investigation, Morris released The Thin Blue Line, a film that documents gaping flaws in Adams’s conviction through a series of revealing interviews that culminate in a taped confession to the murder by the prosecution’s chief witness, David Ray Harris. The evidence presented by the film appears to exonerate Adams and is widely credited with securing his release from prison in 1989 (Figure 1). The Thin Blue Line was one of the most critically acclaimed films of the year in 1988. It won best documentary honors from the New York Film Critics Circle, the National Board of Review, and the National Society of Film Critics. Yet it was barred from consideration for an Academy Award. The reason given for this exclusion by the nominating committee was that because of the film’s use of reenactments, it did not qualify as a “true” documentary.

What constitutes “truth” in documentary films has been debated since the onset of discourse establishing the genre. Most definitions still adhere closely to John Grierson’s characterization of the documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality,” despite the gulf that immediately posits itself between creative treatment and actuality. As film theorist Bill Nichols suggests, “‘Creative treatment’ suggests the license of fiction, whereas ‘actuality’ reminds us of the responsibilities of the journalist and historian.”

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences jury barred The Thin Blue Line from consideration for the Oscar because the members judged the use of reenactments as compromising the “actuality” of documentary filmmaking with what Nichols refers to as the “license of fiction.” But is this the case? Are reenactments intrinsically fictive, and does their use necessarily undermine assertions of actuality in a work of nonfiction? Twenty years after the initial release of The Thin Blue Line, Morris addressed his use of reenactments in his online New York Times column:

Critics don’t like re-enactments in documentary films—perhaps because they think that documentary images should come from the present, that the director should be hands-off. But a story in the past has to be re-enacted. Here’s my method. I reconstruct the past through interviews (retrospective accounts), documents and other scraps of evidence. I tell a story about how the police and the newspapers got it wrong. I try to explain (1) what I believe is the real story and (2) why they got it wrong.
Toward the end of this essay, Morris extracts a quote from R. G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of History*—“History is the reenactment of the past in the mind.” For Collingwood, as for Morris, attempts to make sense of the past involve reenactments. All of us replay past conversations and experiences in our minds. Historians use archival documents to postulate narratives, sorting through sets of viable reenactments in the search for the most plausible sequences of causation.

Given our familiarity with reenactment as a universal mental construct, what might account for the widespread suspicion of its use in documentaries? Objections appear to be grounded in assumptions tying photographic images to actuality. Even in an age all too familiar with the digital manipulation of images, photographs still blind us to the limits of their role as unproblematic agents of truth. As Morris notes:

> Photography allows us to uncritically think. We *imagine* that photographs provide a magic path to the truth. What’s more, photographs allow us to think we know more than we really do. We can imagine a context that isn’t really there. . . . With the advent of photography, images were torn free from the world, snatched from the fabric of reality, and enshrined as separate entities. They became more like dreams. It is no wonder that we really don’t know how to deal with them.

Is it not ironic that Morris, pioneer in the now commonplace practice of reenactment, should ask us to be more, not less, wary of the truth-value of photographic images? Morris explained this apparent paradox to me by characterizing the use of reenactment in the recent HBO miniseries *The Jinx*. There, staged depictions of Robert Durst committing murder purport to show events as they actually happened, portraying a singular, repeated, and “official” version of reality. For Morris, reenactments in *The Jinx* and similar instances are diametrically opposed to the role they play in his own work. As he noted in a 2004 interview:

> The reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line* are not illustrations of truth. Quite the opposite. They are designed to take you into untruth. They’re illustrations of what people claimed had happened but which *didn’t* happen. They’re ironic. They make you think about the relationship of images to the world. About the nature of seeing and believing. About our capacity for belief, for credulity, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

> “Credulity despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary” is the subtext, if not the subtitle, to another Morris film, *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.*, wherein architecture and the discipline of architectural history are front and center. The film begins in earnest as an extended interview, establishing Leuchter’s unlikely journey toward becoming a self-taught technician and designer of death row execution equipment throughout the United States. In its depiction of an “oddball with a unique vocation,” *Mr. Death* seems at first to pick up where Morris’s previous film, *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997), leaves off. Thirty minutes in, however, the film’s focus shifts, taking a sudden and unexpected descent into the malignant world of Holocaust denial.

Because of his technical work with gas chambers, Leuchter was solicited as an expert witness by the defense team in the 1988 trial of Ernst Zundel, a self-professed Holocaust denier. Zundel, who immigrated to Canada in 1958 to avoid conscription in his native Germany, was charged with “spreading false news” under Canadian law for publishing works of Holocaust denial. Zundel paid Leuchter to travel to the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek camps to examine the gas chambers there for evidence of the presence of cyanide. Lacking official permission, Leuchter used a hammer and chisel to collect samples of brick and plaster, his actions videotaped by a companion.

The latter two-thirds of *Mr. Death* cycles between Leuchter’s accounts of the “scientific” analysis that led him to deny that gas chambers were present at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek and the overwhelming archival and physical evidence that they did indeed exist, evidence described in exacting detail by Auschwitz historian Robert Jan van Pelt. It is Van Pelt who provides the evidentiary argument against the revisionist (or what he calls “negationist”) narratives of Leuchter, Zundel, and David Irving.

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**Figure 1** Crime scene plan from official Dallas Police Department report, from Errol Morris, director, *The Thin Blue Line*, 1988.
There’s no way that when you go to the crematoria you really can understand what it was to be led there as a victim, to have to undress and be led in the gas chamber. But when you are in the building archive it is possible to re-imagine what the place was like during the war.

... When you go to Birkenau there is very little left and to suddenly have in that room that concentration of evidence. There’s just a tactile reality, an incredible texture, the texture of making that camp.

If Leuchter had gone to the archives, if he had spent time in the archives, he would’ve found evidence about ventilation systems, evidence about ways to introduce Zyklon B into these buildings, evidence of gas chambers, undressing rooms.11

For Morris, the truth is not recovered at the end of a camera lens. “There is no veritas lens—no lens that provides a ‘truthful’ picture of events.”12 Neither can the truth necessarily be gleaned from the most concrete form of reality, architecture, which Morris described to me as the most “premeditated” form of evidence we have. Instead, in each case, it is the careful examination of the documentation that fosters the range of possible narratives that spring forth from consequential events, evidence that may appear to support one set of conclusions but, upon further, perhaps obsessive, examination, reveals something approaching the truth. And truth, according to Morris, is objective: it is ultimately knowable, even if, as the structure of Rashomon suggests, we may encounter truth subjectively.

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Notes
8. Morris, interview by Poppy.
9. The Supreme Court of Canada ultimately overturned Zundel’s 1988 conviction in 1992, ruling that the law under which he was charged was a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In 2000, while facing a new set of charges brought by the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Zundel fled Canada for Tennessee. In 2003, he was arrested by U.S. federal authorities and subsequently deported, first to Canada and then to Germany, to face charges of inciting racial hatred. He was convicted and sentenced to a five-year prison term; he was released in 2010.
12. Morris, “Play It Again, Sam.”