

Blue End

Directed by Kasper Kasics.

The opening two-minute sequence of the film *Blue End* consists of a collection of characters, images, and introductions presumably intended to draw the viewer into the filmmaker's critique of science, medical and legal ethics, government, the justice system, and the death penalty. If the irony of the first fifteen words we hear spoken by the district attorney are lost on him ("I would have to say there's nothing in this world that's beyond a reasonable doubt. . ."), the aim of the filmmaker is to make sure - in the next 85 minutes - that it will not be lost on the viewer. We are quickly drawn into this story through clips of individuals who were associated with Joseph Paul Jernigan: his family, the courts in Texas that convicted him of murder and sentenced him to death, and the medical team that planed off his body and turned it into the first digital human being, a.k.a the Visible Human Project.

Initially and purposefully disorienting (there are no typical captions here, the viewer is left to figure out for her- or himself exactly who is who), this documentary intertwines voiceovers of family members with scenes of a medical scientist walking through the hallways of his lab, and overlaps medical descriptions with scenes of the courtroom in which Jernigan was tried and convicted. Weaved in between these scenes are camera shots taken from a moving vehicle traveling at a steady pace; we see houses lining a dusty road at some times, the open highway at others. All of this is set to the refrain of "God Bless the USA." We get the sense of being propelled steadily along on a journey we perhaps do not wish to take.

We also get the sense of being privy to a knowledge that we perhaps do not wish to have. Yet it is difficult to resist being fascinated by the medical doctor's technical descriptions of what is done to a human being in order to transform it from a corpse into a collection of slides that can be viewed over the Internet. There is a voyeuristic separation here, a sickening feeling of being simultaneously intrigued and horrified by the descriptions. The medical doctor's rapture with the process is apparent ("Ah, it's gorgeous," he remarks, in reference to a body part), and this is disturbing, yes. But we keep watching. If we are not convinced that this particular image is "gorgeous," at the very least we may feel that it is *interesting*. And with that comes the feeling of being culpable or implicated. Guilty by association. Such discomfort is heightened by the pull we feel toward the members of Jernigan's family who speak of him in between tears. His brother recounts the day that Jernigan was executed, and, though it may be entirely possible to suspend empathy for Jernigan himself, it is difficult not to feel some emotional tug towards the brother who remembers the moments before his execution ("I don't understand why they couldn't just let him touch him.").

The film is an effective critique of the intersection of medical and legal ethics, the justice system, and technology. By purposefully overlapping narratives, the filmmaker is able to create the sense of the blurred boundaries between science, ethics and the legal system. The film gathers momentum until the obviousness of the one-sidedness of the critique is apparent. I wondered why the filmmaker only included clips which presented the medical technician and the D.A. looking as though they were total dupes. The film lacked substantive positive information with regard to science, and I think that perhaps a less technophobic critique would have strengthened the filmmaker's argument or at least may have left the viewer with a better sense of the fact that there are no simple answers in regard to these blurred boundaries. The film's critique of the justice system gathered so much momentum that the crucial element of all critiques (to raise difficult questions with respect for the idea that there are no easy answers) got a bit lost. Still, this is certainly a film worth watching- intriguing, informative, and overall smart.

Reviewed by Bethany Riddle