

Mr. Death —portrait of a specialist in "humane and dignified" executions

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Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr.,
*directed by Errol Morris; produced by David Collins,
Michael Williams and Dorothy Aufiero*

We first see a silhouette of what looks like a bird cage. As flashes of blue electricity run up and down the bars of the cage, we catch glimpses of a grinning man seated behind the cage. The image brings back memories of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster. We quickly learn, however, that this film is not science fiction.

This film is US documentary maker Errol Morris's most important work to date. Previously known for films like *The Thin Blue Line* and *Gates of Heaven*, Morris is known for a glossy, high-tech film style in his captivating works. His trademark is making documentaries with no narration in the course of which the films' subjects speak without interruption or prompting from Morris and take the spectator on a journey into their lives and minds.

The subject of this film is Fred Leuchter, Jr., a self-employed Massachusetts engineer. He seems an eccentric, giddy man given to frequent grinning as he pontificates about his engineering expertise. He is a type of twentieth century American (usually) male, who, inspired by such nineteenth century inventors as Thomas Edison, set out to invent gadgets, many of dubious utility, to make life easier. Fred is especially self-satisfied because he can make a living at his hobby.

Fred Leuchter's hobby is to create machines for "humane and dignified" executions. As a child, his father took Fred with him to his job as an employee of the Massachusetts correctional system. On these trips Fred learned many skills such as picking locks and cracking safes which led to his interest in engineering. Especially memorable was sitting in the state's electric chair.

From this beginning, Leuchter developed a reputation as an expert on the electric chair. He takes us on a journey into the world of capital punishment. We learn the logistics of how states create their execution machines. Fred is disgusted with the condition of the electric chairs he finds in many states. Most were constructed by inmates from photographs. He is horrified at mishaps such as the execution in Florida two years ago where Jesse Tutarro's head caught on fire or another where the chair split during an execution leaving the executee writhing on the floor for half an hour while it was repaired.

Leuchter assures us that, while he supports capital punishment, he does not support torture. He informs us that the human body is not easy to destroy. If an execution is not done right "the meat will come off the executees body just like when you cook a chicken." He has learned that an electrical execution requires two jolts which must be over 2000 volts and maintained for several minutes. The prison transformer must be constructed to maintain this electrical charge so as not to shut down during the execution. If it is not done right, the executee's heart may restart 20 or 30 minutes later, and "the vegetable will have to be strapped back in the chair and reelectrocuted."

Leuchter shows us the high-tech electric chair he constructed for Tennessee, which leads other states to contract his services. New Jersey wants him to create a lethal injection machine. Delaware wants him to construct a gallows, since the one they had in storage for 30 years has fallen apart. A bemused Leuchter wonders why expertise in electric chairs gives him expertise in other methods of execution. He is especially concerned about gas chambers. If they are not constructed perfectly, the gas will leak from the chamber and endanger witnesses.

We are abruptly taken to Auschwitz. Leuchter now has an international reputation. He has been contracted by a neo-Nazi organization to find evidence that the Holocaust never occurred. In the words of their leader, Ernest Zundel, a German national living in Canada and author of *Did Six Million Really Die?*, Leuchter was contracted because “America is the only country which dispatches people with gas.... Fred Leuchter was our only hope.”

Accompanied by a videographer and translator from Zundel's organization, we see footage of Leuchter collecting “evidence.” Unbeknownst to Polish authorities, Leuchter chisels chunks of concrete from the crematorium where, in the words of a Holocaust educator later in the film, more human beings died at one place than at any time in history. Like an archeologist, he collects and bags concrete which he is sure will show no traces of cyanide. Leuchter muses as he works that the idea that millions were gassed is absurd; he wonders why they wouldn't have just shot or hung them.

Director Morris has informed film reviewers that at this point in the film he had to break with his usual technique. His past films allowed the film's subjects to speak with the viewers bringing their own knowledge and critical thinking skills to evaluate what they were seeing. To Morris's horror, when he tested a rough cut of the film at Harvard University, the traditional educator of many of America's political and cultural leaders, many students thought the film gave credibility to Leuchter's claims. No longer able to rely on the given historical awareness and critical thinking in the US, Morris had to include interviews to debunk Leuchter's “evidence.”

Historian Robert Jan Van Pelt retraces Leuchter's excursion in the crematorium. He shows us blueprints from the Auschwitz archive that detail the construction of the crematorium. He shows us the gas chamber maintenance records. He shows us correspondence ordering Zyklon-B for the gas chambers. There are photographs of lines of women and children wearing the Star of David.

Returning to Massachusetts, Leuchter explains he took the “evidence” to a chemical lab where tests for cyanide in the concrete are negative. Leuchter then testifies at a trial in Toronto where Zundel is on trial for violating a law against publishing false statements that

could cause racial intolerance. Also testifying is the chemist who performed the tests on the so-called evidence.

James Roth, the chemist, says in an interview in the film that it was only after his testimony that he learned the purpose of his tests. He was told the material was for evidence in a trial concerning an industrial accident. Had he known the context, he would have done tests differently. He explains that the lab pulverized the concrete and then put it in a chemical solution to test for cyanide. Since cyanide penetrates to only half of the length of a human hair in concrete, it had been diluted hundreds of thousands of times. Roth stated his tests were worthless, adding Zundel and Leuchter “see what they want to see.”

Interviewed after his conviction, Zundel says he considers Leuchter a hero. He boasts “The Leuchter Report” has been printed in dozens of languages all around the world, declaring, “We will not go down in history as genocidal maniacs. The historical truth will detoxify a poisoned planet.”

Leuchter on the other hand is not happy. After his testimony in Canada, state officials in the US suddenly will not speak to him. He enjoys his only happy moments when he is being applauded by neo-Nazi audiences, to whom he lectures on his evidence. Contracts are not being paid, no new orders are coming in. He manages a wan smile, saying he has a half-completed lethal injection machine if anyone wants to buy it. He states he has nothing against Jews, but he believes there is a conspiracy to prevent him from making a living.

As a supporter of the Bill of Rights, all he was doing, states Leuchter, was defending Zundel's right to believe and say what he chooses. He cannot understand why state officials who were so eager for his execution expertise are suddenly shunning him simply because he denies the Holocaust.



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