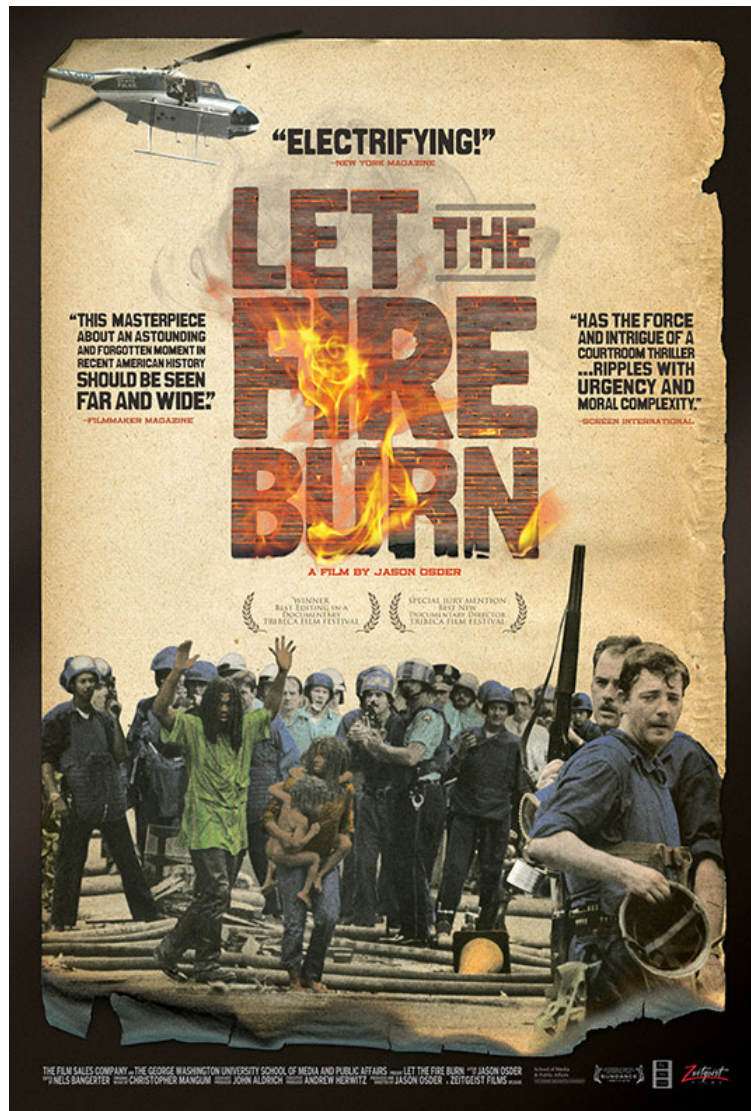


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# LET THE FIRE BURN

A film by Jason Osder

In the astonishingly gripping *Let the Fire Burn*, director Jason Osder has crafted that rarest of cinematic objects: a found-footage film that unfurls with the tension of a great thriller. On May 13, 1985, a longtime feud between the city of Philadelphia and controversial radical urban group MOVE came to a deadly climax. By order of local authorities, police dropped military-grade explosives onto a MOVE-occupied rowhouse. TV cameras captured the conflagration that quickly escalated—and resulted in the tragic deaths of eleven people (including five children) and the destruction of 61 homes. It was only later discovered that authorities decided to “...let the fire burn.” Using only archival news coverage and interviews, first-time filmmaker Osder has brought to life one of the most tumultuous and largely forgotten clashes between government and citizens in modern American history.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

*Let The Fire Burn* is historical documentary as epic tragedy. The artistic intention is to tell a dramatic story that poses essential questions about human nature and society. Viewers will be intellectually engaged, emotionally involved, and morally challenged by a story out of the recent past that still resonates today.

I was growing up outside Philadelphia in 1985 when the fire happened. I remember being truly scared. I was struck that the children killed in the house (burned alive) were my own age, living in my own town. Their parents and the police had utterly failed to protect them. Regardless of politics or race or whether MOVE was a cult, I knew even as a child that the children were not to blame for what happened to them and that a fundamental injustice had occurred. A film cannot bring justice to the deaths of eleven people, but an additional injustice is done when this history goes unremembered. This is too powerful and important a story to be forgotten.

—Jason Osder

## FILMMAKING APPROACH

*Let The Fire Burn* takes a unique approach to historical documentary that is experimental in a sense, while simultaneously classical. It was an early choice in the edit room to eschew the interviews that we shot in favor of a pure historical pastiche. Archival footage is presented so that each piece is an artifact placed in context with other artifacts to tell a story. The result is a narrative rich with multifaceted details and complex perspectives. This unique approach is possible because of the extraordinary archive of video footage that we have gained access to for this film. The collection spans more than ten years and has distinctly different points of view. There is news coverage, televised hearings, and public affairs programs. Some sources are more sympathetic to MOVE and its cause. This variety allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints and moments of stark juxtaposition. In the tradition of *Rashomon*, the very nature of truth is called into question.

When virtually all of the traditional methods of direct exposition and editorializing are removed, new opportunities for the audience to engage with the story emerge. The onus shifts to the viewer to make value judgments and contextualize events for themselves. This active experience of questioning and evaluating factual and moral issues is particularly appropriate for a complex story enmeshed in conflicting reports, inflated rumors, and manipulations of the truth. The approach is designed to provoke vibrant debate and moral introspection and about the events themselves and their meaning. As a dramatic narrative emerges from the re-contextualized archival footage, tense hearings, and first-person testimony, the authentic complexities that motivate events are revealed. Viewers must decide for themselves what to believe, who to hold accountable, and what lessons can be learned.

# THE FILMMAKERS

## JASON OSDER

(Director & Producer)

**Jason Osder** is an Assistant Professor at The George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs and a partner at Amigo Media, a color-correction, post-production, and training company. Jason co-authored *Final Cut Pro Workflows: The Independent Studio Handbook* with Robbie Carman, his partner at Amigo and he creates online training courses for Lynda.com. Jason received an MAMC in Documentary from The University of Florida. *Let the Fire Burn* is his first feature film.

## NELS BANGERTER

(Editor)

**Nels Bangerter** recently edited the Emmy-Award-winning documentary *Out in the Silence*, which has screened nationwide on PBS and was supported by the Sundance Documentary Fund. In 2008 he edited *War Child*, which premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival and won Tribeca Film Festival's Audience Award for feature films and the IDA's ABCNEWS Award for best use of archival footage. He received an MFA in film production from USC, where he was a Mary Pickford Foundation honoree.

## ANDREW HERWITZ

(Executive Producer)

**Andrew Herwitz** is the President of The Film Sales Company. Prior to establishing the Company, Andrew worked at Miramax for six years where he ran the Acquisitions department. He previously practiced entertainment law at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison LLP in New York City. Andrew is a graduate of Harvard College, Columbia Business School and Harvard Law School.

# MOVE TIMELINE

## Events Leading to the May 13, 1985 Confrontation

**Mid-Late 1970:** MOVE (originally The Christian Movement for Life, then The Movement) is founded by Vincent Leaphard (aka John Africa<sup>1</sup>), a black handyman; and Donald Glassey, a white social worker and instructor at the University of Pennsylvania. From John Africa's teachings, Mr. Glassey produces *The Guidelines*, which served as the foundation of MOVE's core beliefs.

**November 1971:** Frank Rizzo elected Mayor of Philadelphia.

**Early 1972:** MOVE purchases the house at 309 North 33rd Street in Philadelphia.

**1972–1975:** MOVE members stage profanity-laden protests at local events denouncing the American class system. Neighbors file complaints about intimidation and sanitation.

**March 28, 1976:** MOVE engages in an altercation with police when several members return home from prison. Life Africa, an infant, is later found dead although his body is not turned over to the medical examiner. MOVE claims police officer's excessive force was responsible for the death.

**July 1976:** Pennsylvania Supreme Court orders inspection of 309 North 33<sup>rd</sup> after receiving numerous complaints from neighbors. Mayor Rizzo does not respond to the order.

**Early 1977:** Donald Glassey is arrested on weapons charges and becomes an FBI informant. He advises on MOVE's cache of arms, leading to several arrests and confiscations of large amounts of explosives and guns.

**May 20, 1977:** MOVE members brandish what appear to be shotguns and rifles from the porch and roof of 309 North 33<sup>rd</sup>, stating they would "no longer will be beaten or intimidated by the police without a like response."

**Late 1977:** Mayor Rizzo orders 309 North 33<sup>rd</sup> blockaded, shutting off water and electricity. MOVE supporters defy the blockade to deliver aid.

**May 1978:** In an arrangement with Mayor Rizzo, MOVE agrees to hand over weapons and evacuate 309 North 33<sup>rd</sup> by August 1, in exchange for no formal charges and expedited hearings of other MOVE members. Weapons are relinquished and MOVE members submit to fingerprinting, but remain at their address.

**August 8, 1978:** Mayor Rizzo orders a raid and an evacuation of 309 North 33<sup>rd</sup>. After firefighters launch a water cannon, MOVE members open fire, injuring two firefighters and killing police officer James Ramp.<sup>2</sup> MOVE eventually surrenders and the house is destroyed. Nine MOVE members are arrested in the death of Officer Ramp and all receive sentences between 30–100 years in prison.

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<sup>1</sup> Nearly everyone agrees that Vincent Leaphard was John Africa but the organization refuses to publicly state that they are, in fact, the same individual.

<sup>2</sup> MOVE adamantly claims that Officer Ramp was killed by friendly fire.

**November 1983:** Wilson Goode is elected Mayor of Philadelphia, first black mayor of the city.

**Mid-1984:** MOVE sets up new headquarters at 6221 Osage Avenue, home of Vincent Leaphart's sister, Louise James Africa. The group tries to get the MOVE 9 case reopened.

**May 3, 1984:** A masked MOVE member appears on the Osage Avenue roof with shotgun. Concerned neighbors inform the police, who subsequently surround the house. No arrests are made.

**May 30, 1984:** Mayor Goode holds a meeting with concerned neighbors who cite issues of harassment, sanitation and child neglect. Goode informs the group that there was no legal precedent to evict the organization.

**Late 1984–Early 1985:** MOVE begins to construct a bunker on roof of 6221 Osage Ave.

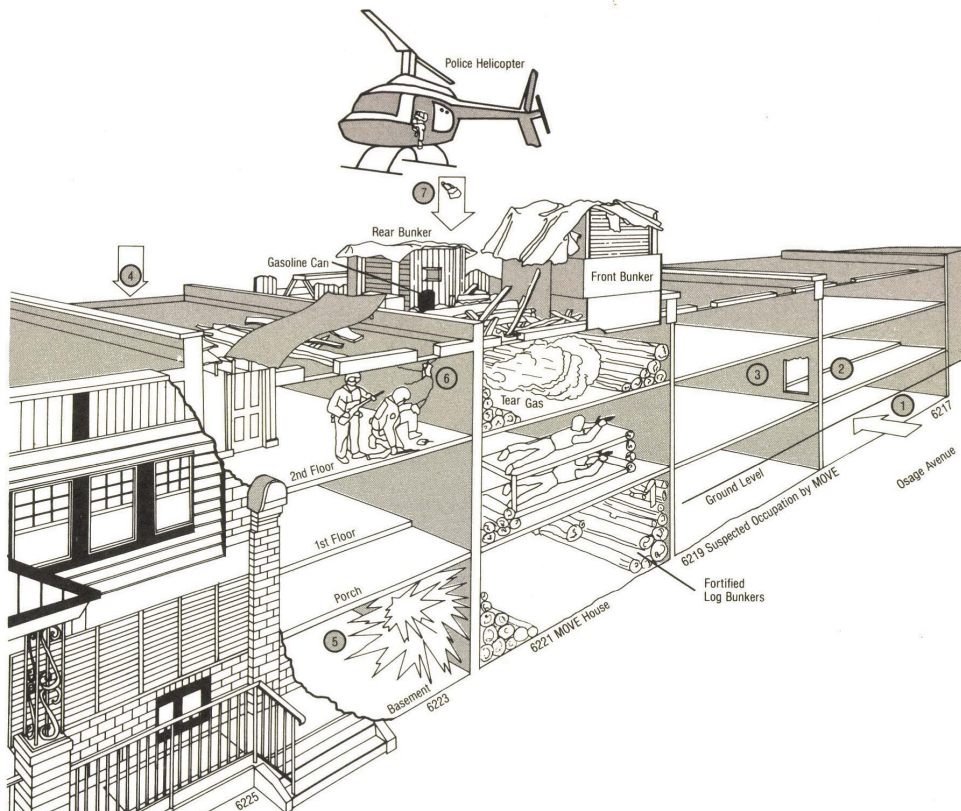
**Early 1985:** Philadelphia District Attorney Edward Rendell drafts charges against MOVE that include disorderly conduct, parole violation, and conspiracy to commit terrorist acts.

**May 12, 1985:** Police evacuate tenants of homes surrounding 6221 Osage Ave., telling them it will be for a period of 24 hours.

**May 13, 1985:** Police attempt to raid 6221 Osage Ave. After raid fails, police drop an “explosive device” that touches off a fire and destroys the surrounding neighborhood. The fire kills 11 MOVE members, including John Africa.

***See following page for detailed breakdown of the confrontation.***

# MAY 13, 1985 MOVE CONFRONTATION



1—Police enter 6217 Osage Avenue on the morning of May 13. Team B planned to enter 6219 and pump tear gas through the wall into the MOVE house (6221 Osage).

2—Inside 6217, Team B sets off a hatch charge through the wall of the sun porch.

3—Sergeant Ed Connor tries to enter 6219 Osage and is hit by gunfire from the fortified bunker within the front porch of the MOVE house.

4—At the same time, Team A entered the rear of 6223 Osage.

5—Team A first tried to blow a hole through the cellar wall but was unsuccessful.

6—The team then made its way to the second floor. After several attempts, the police were able to put tear gas into the MOVE house. After gunfire exploded through the walls, the police took cover in a closet in an upstairs bedroom.

7—In the evening, after the first assaults failed to drive MOVE members out of the house, Lieutenant Frank Powell dropped an explosive charge from a state police helicopter, intending to knock down the front bunker and blow a hole in the roof through which an assault team could insert tear gas into the house. The explosion touched off the fire that destroyed the MOVE house and the surrounding neighborhood.

**Source: *Let It Burn*, by Michael and Randi Boyette. Published by Endpapers Press, 2013.**

# LET THE FIRE BURN

A film by Jason Osder

Directed and Produced by **JASON OSDER**

Edited by **NELS BANGERTER**

Original music by **CHRISTOPHER MANGUM**

Associate Producer **JOHN ALDRICH**

Executive Producer **ANDREW HERWITZ**

Presented by **THE FILM SALES COMPANY** and **THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS**



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