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# Police Power Run Amuck



'LET THE FIRE BURN.' A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

Delbert Africa of the radical separatist group MOVE is arrested by Philadelphia police. The archive photo comes from the new documentary "Let the Fire Burn" by Jason Osder, a painful and riveting account of police power run horribly run amuck.

OPINIONATED  
JUDGE

BY JUDGE  
DARLEEN ORTEGA



## Documentary "Let the Fire Burn" painful and riveting

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

Sometimes it seems the most appalling episodes in history are the ones most destined to fade into obscurity. Only if we are lucky does some skillful writer or filmmaker find the means to bring such neglected stories to our attention.

Director Jason Osder spent a decade assembling "Let the Fire Burn," a documentary about a shameful event in 1985, in which a longstanding feud between the city of Philadelphia and a radical separatist group of mostly African Americans called MOVE culminated in a deadly stand-off. When the group's members defied attempts to evict

them from their home, police tear-gassed the group, fired into a house full of women and children, and then dropped a bomb. The resulting fire left 61 mostly African American working families homeless and 11 people dead, including five children. City officials' direction to firefighters to "let the fire burn" becomes a fitting title for Osder's riveting account of police power run horribly amuck.

The film, Osder's first feature, holds us in the grip of unanswerable questions regarding how such a thing could have happened. Having interviewed several of the protagonists, Osder found that even the passage of time did not provide them with illuminating

perspective, so he wisely elected (with the help of an exceptionally skilled editor) to tell the story using the wealth of archival footage of the escalating conflict, the final horrifying confrontation, and the hearings of a commission convened afterwards to investigate the events.

The result is appropriately painful and riveting. A combination of early footage and later testimony conveys a sense of how MOVE's antagonistic stance sent authorities into a tailspin. The group attempted to live off the grid right in the middle of an urban setting, eschewing electricity and sanitation service in favor of a technology-free, "anarcho-primi-

tivist" lifestyle. MOVE rhetoric (some of it impressively recited by the group's children) denounced "the system" and its attempts to subjugate them.

Police and city leaders—notably Mayor Frank Rizzo, making no attempt to temper the racism that fueled his aggression—quickly labeled the group a terrorist organization and set off an escalating series of arrests and confrontations. Even if you doubt MOVE's accounts of beatings in police custody (and the film doesn't give you any reason to doubt those accounts), the sheer number of re-

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