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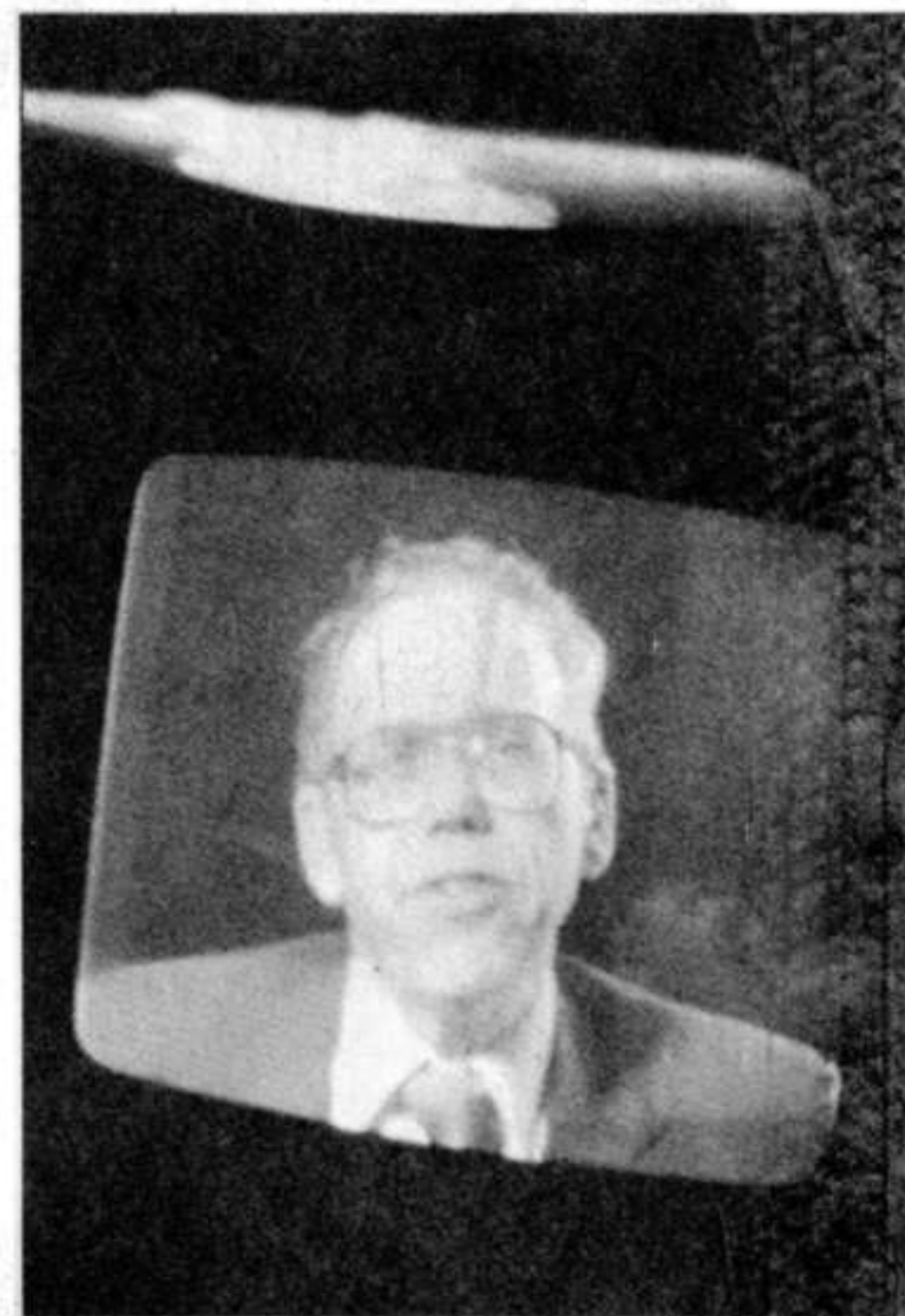
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"Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter, Jr.," was directed by documentarian Errol Morris, left. Leuchter, above, a self-described "gas-chamber expert," has become a fundamental source for the Holocaust denial movement.

On 'Death' and Documentaries

Errol Morris was asked to help revise Oscar rules but was too busy with his latest film to contribute much.

By ELLEN BASKIN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

A documentary filmmaker known for his ironic take on the world, Errol Morris no doubt was struck by the, well, irony of the situation.

Morris was asked this year to help change the rules for the Oscar documentary film category by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—the same academy that failed to even nominate some of his critically acclaimed films: "The Thin Blue Line" (1988), "A Brief History of Time" (1992) and "Fast, Cheap & Out of Control" (1997).

The academy's rules for determining documentary consideration have been revised, largely in response to the repeated exclusion of popular works by Morris and others. (Other documentaries that have been passed over in recent years include "Hoop Dreams," "Crumb" and "Roger & Me.")

If Morris' latest documentary, "Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.," is nominated—Morris doesn't take part in the voting—it will be a clear sign that times are changing at the academy's documentary branch.

As unconventional a film as any in Morris' oeuvre, "Mr. Death," which opened in Los Angeles on Wednesday, tells the story of Leuchter, an engineer and "execution technologist" who worked with state penal systems in designing and maintaining execution equipment, starting with electric chairs and moving on to gallows, lethal injection devices and gas chambers.

That's the lighter part. Leuchter's odd specialty won the attention of neo-Nazi Ernst Zündel, who once faced trial in Canada for violating hate crime statutes. Zündel hired Leuchter to investigate the use of poison gas at Nazi concentration camps during World War II.

Leuchter traveled to Auschwitz in the late '80s, accompanied by a Zündel-sponsored

video crew (some of the crew's footage is included in "Mr. Death").

Drawing on rudimentary tests and his observations as a self-defined "gas chamber expert," Leuchter concludes that no one was gassed at Auschwitz. His report has since become a fundamental source for the Holocaust denial movement.

Morris, 51, became interested in the story about a decade ago, after reading several articles that focused almost exclusively on Leuchter's work in execution chambers. At a recent screening of the film at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Morris told the audience that he was struck by the fact that "there were these two elements in Fred's story" but that none of the articles made a connection between "Fred as an execution guy and Fred as a Holocaust denier."

To Morris, an opponent of capital punishment, the two threads of the Leuchter saga were connected, despite the obvious disparity "between

Please see Morris, F8

Morris

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executions for due process of law and transporting men, women and children thousands of miles across Europe to murder them. The two do not sit together, except they sit together in Fred's head."

A thoughtful and thorough observer of the oddities of human nature who in person sometimes repeats his own words for emphasis, Morris asserts that Leuchter is not simply incorrect in his conclusions. Morris says Leuchter's printed report is "wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong."

Despite his opinion of the gas chambers at Auschwitz, however, "Fred is not your standard-issue bad guy," Morris said the morning after the LACMA screening, "even though the views that he holds are very, very bad."

In recent years, a number of documentary Oscars have been won by Holocaust-related films. Although a focus of "Mr. Death" is Leuchter's trip to Auschwitz, Morris is quick to point out that his film is not about the Holocaust.

"I am fascinated by the question of 'Who is this man?,' which is at the center of the movie," he told the LACMA audience. "To me, this is ultimately a story of a person truly deceived about himself."

Morris views his films as "mental landscapes" that tell stories using both journalistic techniques and created images. "We like to think of 'documentary' as just happening in front of the filmmaker's cameras," he notes. "But I like to think that while there are elements that are out of the filmmaker's control, there are also elements that are controlled."

Nevertheless, Morris was caught by surprise after screening an early cut of "Mr. Death" for a class at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., where he lives. At that point, the only "talking head" in the film was Leuchter's, and the students' reaction to his story came as a shock.

"There were members of the class who were convinced by Fred and started to wonder whether this ever happened," Morris recalls. "Then there was another group who knew

better, knew that the Holocaust had happened, and wondered why I believed Leuchter."

Morris, who is Jewish, was very disturbed by the students' response. When some in the audience at Harvard—"which is supposed to be a good school," he notes as a deadpan aside—began to believe Leuchter, Morris realized that his film posed a larger question. "Could I just make a movie with Fred Leuchter alone? The answer is, no, I could not. It would be irresponsible."

The finished film includes commentary from historian Robert Jan Van Pelt, from Holocaust deniers Zündel and David Irving and from James Roth, the laboratory manager hired by Leuchter to perform chemical analysis on the samples collected in Poland, who decisively repudiates all of Leuchter's claims.

The release of "Mr. Death" comes at the end of a very good year for Morris. In April, the filmmaker was named Career Award recipient at the Double Take Documentary Film Festival in Durham, N.C. Last month, New York's Museum of Modern Art held a retrospective of his work. And earlier this month, LACMA held a weekend "Spotlight on Errol Morris" retrospective that began with the screening of "Mr. Death."

Although his films, including "Mr. Death," consistently end up on critics' 10-best lists, Morris has never been nominated for an Academy Award. In a twist on the Groucho Marx line about not wanting to join any group that would allow him to be a member, Morris has been an academy member since the release of "The Thin Blue Line," his film about a murder trial in Texas that resulted in the release of death row inmate Randall Dale Adams. "So many academy members felt that the movie should have been nominated that I was voted in by a lot of outraged members," he says.

In a further twist, Morris' work in completing "Mr. Death" precluded any active involvement with the new documentary selection procedures. But he did make one recommendation. "I would throw the voting open to the entire academy membership," Morris says. "Documentary filmmaking is

not specialized filmmaking. It is just simply filmmaking, and the entire academy membership should be able to vote on both the nominations and the awards."

But that's not the way it's been and not the way it's going to be. In earlier years, any member of the academy could volunteer to help choose the five feature-length documentary nominees, as long as that member participated in a number of preliminary screenings. Under the new rules instituted this year, a group of approximately 80 documentarians will take part in choosing 12 semifinalists before a larger group of academy members decides on five nominees.

In order to cast a vote for the winning film, academy members will still have to show that they have seen all five nominated documentaries. (This is not the case in the dramatic categories, which do not require any viewing proof.)

Though he remains interested in the academy decision-making process, Morris' main concern these days is the release of "Mr. Death." In his initial interview with Leuchter in 1992, Morris for the first time used the so-called "Interrotron," a device he invented that removes the "third-person" aspect of most on-camera interviews. Using a two-way mirror, which is placed in front of the camera lens, the interview subject sees Morris' live image while the camera records what he or she is saying.

Leuchter appears to be looking right into the camera and speaking directly to Morris in "Mr. Death." In fact, Morris wasn't even in the same room. The Interrotron, Morris said, "turns me into a camera. If you just sit someone down and tell them to talk to the camera for two or three or four or five hours, no one will do that. You need someone there. My idea, very simply, is to make myself one with the camera."

The Interrotron, which Morris now uses for all his work, was given its name by Morris' wife, art historian Julia Sheehan.

"She liked the fact that it had interview, interrogate and terror all combined in one name," he said of his spouse's efforts at nomenclature. Clearly, irony runs in the family.