

Film review

The execution machine: Texas Death Row An HBO Film - Directed by Marc Levin

**By Steven G. Kellman
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If capital punishment were indeed the decisive deterrent to social mayhem that its proponents maintain, then Texas, where more than 400 men await imminent extinction by lethal injection, would be nirvana with freeways.

However, homicide rates in Dallas, Houston and San Antonio exceed that of New York, which only recently and reluctantly resumed executions. Since the 1976 reinstatement of the death penalty, Huntsville, the state's correctional capital, where 7,400 inmates are housed in seven facilities, has become the most active human abattoir in North America.

So far this year, the Lone Star State has terminated a record twenty-eight lives, more than six times as many as Alabama or Arkansas, its closest competitors in the slaughter sweepstakes. And the pace is being accelerated.

The average sojourn on death row used to be nine years.

But new federal and state regulations have dramatically abbreviated the appeals process. Life for most is short and precious, but for the temporary residents of Ellis Unit 1, vestibule to the Texas execution chamber, it is brief and cheap.

Director Marc Levin, who was granted unprecedented access to the state's death row, employs occasional fast-motion photography to convey the haste.

Few inmates ever return alive from Ellis Unit 1, but viewers of *The Execution Machine: Texas Death Row*, are permitted a short, safe visit. The fifty-minute film, produced by Levin and Daphne Pinkerson for HBO's *America Undercover* documentary series, was first shown by the premium cable channel on September 22.

Scheduled dates for repeat broadcasts included September 30 and October 8.

The title of Levin's film uses the metaphor of machine to suggest that the state dehumanizes the hundreds of men whom it prepares for sanctioned slaughter. (Seven women currently await execution in Texas, but

they are warehoused elsewhere, in Gatesville).

Prisoners are identified on screen by numbers but also, defying the state's mechanism of eradication, by name.

The Execution Machine portrays Ellis Unit 1 as a lethal assembly line whose tempo is brisk and getting brisker.

Every inmate lost to the lethal needle is rapidly replaced by another condemned felon. "If we execute two," says a guard, "we're gonna have four in next week.

That's how it is. It's gonna continue, continue, continue."

Yet Levin, who never steps in front of the camera or intrudes into the story with voiceover, does not sentimentalize the felons who are its principal subject.

Each has been convicted of committing at least one murder and one other serious crime, often in particularly heinous fashion. They speak for themselves into the camera, sometimes, as with Michael Johnson, a white supremacist who sports a swastika on his arm, slavering racist twaddle.

Jermarr Arnold recounts how he killed a fellow death-row inmate. Some are admirably articulate, as though the imminence of

extinction has served to concentrate the mind. "I'm not an animal," proclaims Emerson Rudd, who robbed and murdered a restaurant manager. "I'm not a horse. I'm not here to be broke."

But broken lives are another legacy to which the relatives of victims bear bleak witness. Others testifying about life on death row include lawyers, psychologists, and guards. Demonstrators for and against the death penalty hold vigil outside the prison doors. Reporters show up to note each execution.

Excell White, whose tenure at Ellis Unit 1 exceeds that of any other convict ever, credits optimism for his ability to endure twenty-three years on death row: "If you ain't got no hope, you ain't gonna survive in here." But Joe Gonzales abandons hope and then his life. "I can't see me living in a cage for twenty years," he explains. "It's just better to go ahead and get it over with." Convicted of robbery and murder, Gonzales refuses to appeal and welcomes execution. After a scant eight months, the shortest death-row stint in Texas history, he is put to death.

David Lee Herman, convicted of torturing and

murdering a topless dancer, meets death differently. On the morning of April 1, 1997, the day before the one scheduled for his demise, he tries to cut his wrist and slit his throat. Herman is treated in the prison hospital and then dispatched from the living as planned. Fellow denizens of death row express their sorrow over the loss of a cherished friend, whose horrid deed belies his gentle demeanor.

There are 400 stories in Ellis Unit 1 at any given moment, and the most memorable drama captured while Levin's cameras happen to be present is that of David Wayne Spence, who was sentenced to death for murdering three teenagers in Lake Waco in 1982.

Key witnesses recant their sworn affirmations that Spence was guilty, and a national campaign is launched to overturn his conviction.

However, he is denied his bid for a new trial and, ultimately, even for a stay. Spence goes to his death, on April 3, 1997, insisting on his innocence and resigned to being a martyr to the cause of abolition: "This might be the tool if I'm executed that people say: 'Wait-Something's wrong here,' and put a stop to this madness."

One of the condemned man's most enthusiastic backers explains that he supports the death penalty, though only for those genuinely guilty. Yet execution is irreversible, and the implication that David Wayne Spence died merely because it was inconvenient to halt the engines of official vengeance once they had been stoked is the kind of cosmic joke that a civilized society ought not abide. Hours before his death, Spence realizes that what is going to kill him is "society's view:

If we get nine out of ten right, that's OK."

That is feral mathematics, unworthy of a community that reckons itself humane. Is this Paris during the guillotine's Reign of Terror, or enlightened Texas at the end of the twentieth century? If we get one out of 100 wrong, that's not OK, and it is time to stop rolling the die.

When inmates die, the deed is now done, brazenly, at 6 p.m., no longer in the middle of the night. The willingness of the authorities to grant

Levin access-as well as Ken Light, who recently published a book of photographs called *Texas Death Row* -suggests a new callousness. Executions in Texas have

become so familiar and routine that the public has been benumbed.

The Execution Machine is an antidote to indifference, a reminder that, with our tacit collective consent, another human being is put to sleep almost every week. HBO, which has produced some of the most daring fare broadcast anywhere, deserves credit for taking on another troubling project, one not likely to please viewers who turn to TV for facile entertainment.

At the end of *The Execution Machine*, a schizophrenic inmate named Scott Panetti recounts a horrid dream about death row. "It wasn't justice but perverse entertainment," he concludes, which is surely a commentary on why leaders have thrived by staging public hangings.

Levin's cameras are absent from the scene of extinction, and he denies us the voyeuristic pleasure of watching condemned men select and consume their final meals.

But *The Execution Machine* is itself perverse entertainment, not justice-unless it can arouse its audience to get off the couch and stop the slaughter. "It's a hell of a thing killing a man,"

observes Clint Eastwood in the movie *Unforgiven*. Ellis Unit 1 is an infernal machine extremely efficient at killing a man, guilty or not, day after day.

After such action, what forgiveness?

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