

# Modern life and modern tragedy

## Capturing the Friedmans, directed by Andrew Jarecki

By David Walsh  
31 July 2003

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“So long as man will not have mastered his social organization, it will hang over him as his fate,” wrote Trotsky. Tragedy arrives in contemporary society in a variety of forms, some more brutal and direct, some more lingering but nearly as annihilating. For the Friedman family of Great Neck, Long Island in the late 1980s social tragedy appeared in the form of an agonizing and apparently bogus prosecution for sex crimes, long prison sentences for Arnold Friedman (who committed suicide in prison) and his son Jesse (who served 13 years) and general psychological devastation.

Andrew Jarecki’s serious and sobering documentary, based on contemporary interviews and home videos shot by another son, David, sheds considerable light on the immediate circumstances of the family drama, although far less on the social and cultural conditions that made it possible.

Born in Brooklyn, Arnold Friedman made a name for himself as a Latin music pianist and bandleader in the late 1940s and 1950s before marrying, fathering three boys and becoming a popular teacher at Bayside High School in Queens. He also taught pioneering computer lessons at his home in Great Neck (in suburban Nassau County) in the 1980s, at which his youngest son Jesse assisted.

Friedman was also a pedophile, aroused by sexual images of young boys. His own family background and childhood had been seriously unstable. His purchases and sending of child pornography through the mail resulted in his arrest in November 1987. While at the Friedman residence, law enforcement officials spied lists of names of students from Arnold’s computer classes. It apparently did not require much for the authorities to convince themselves that they had a serial sex abuser on their hands. According to testimony in the film, the police approached the students in question and their families with the attitude that crimes had been committed, they already “knew what had happened” and that refusal to accuse Friedman and his son meant the children were “in denial.” Says one member of the Sex Crimes Unit, “If you talk to ... children, you don’t give them an option.”

The police effort created fear and hysteria in the community, and increasingly fantastic charges accumulated. In her *Village Voice* piece (“Complex Persecution”), author and journalist Debbie Nathan (who appears in the film) notes, “Within weeks, according to police reports, several little boys were accusing Arnold of priming them for sex by showing them dirty computer games, then raping and terrorizing them for months, even years. Jesse Friedman ... was also implicated.”

The two Friedmans were eventually charged with dozens of counts of sexual abuse. The sole testimony against them was provided by their former students. Despite extraordinary claims of orgies and mass rape, no physical evidence was ever produced. No student exhibited a single symptom of physical or sexual abuse. No parent ever found his or her child crying or even upset at the end of the sessions. One of the children who later accused the Friedmans of terrible crimes actually re-enrolled for

the computer class. Jesse Friedman, on his web site, notes that the room in which the classes were given was the “family room,” on the ground floor—not the basement as *Capturing the Friedmans* suggests—of a ranch house, and that “neighbors in the back could clearly look across our shared backyards into the family room.” (The “dirty computer games” turned out to be quite common in the suburbs at the time, frequently traded among friends.)

Significantly, Arnold Friedman had given private piano lessons for years, yet not a single one of those students ever came forward with an accusation. The names of the music students had never been written down and were not available to police. As Nathan notes ironically, this “might explain why none of them ‘remembered’ abuse.”

The only former student interviewed in the film who still asserts that he was abused by the Friedmans reveals that he remembered the episodes only when he was hypnotized. In her *Voice* article, Nathan notes that her suspicions about the case were aroused when she read a paper authored by David Pelcovitz, chief of child and adolescent psychology at Long Island’s North Shore University Hospital, concerning his therapy with the alleged victims in the Friedman case.

“Many of them, Pelcovitz noted, had no recollection of abuse, so he plied them with details about the Friedmans’ purported crimes. The paper implies that he used hypnosis to jog their ‘memories.’ By then, studies by researchers like Nicholas Spanos and Elizabeth Loftus were emerging that cast doubt on the reality of repressed memory, as well as suggesting that hypnosis can create false recollections, even for abuse. Among criminologists, concern about false confessions was growing.”

There seems little doubt that the police responded vigorously and aggressively to indications of “abnormal” sexuality. Their watchword seems to have been “Where there’s smoke there’s fire”—a cliché, in fact, invoked by Assistant District Attorney Joseph Onorato. The former chief of the Sex Crimes Unit, Det. Frances Galasso, with all the moral rectitude of a retired vice cop, tells the camera, “Everyone could see what was going on.” In fact, no one ever saw anything wrong. Galasso asserts that there were piles of pornographic material sitting around the Friedman home. This is refuted by police photos taken during the raid revealing a perfectly ordinary suburban home.

Following the arrest of his father and brother, David Friedman purchased a video camera and began shooting scenes of the family nightmare. These are remarkable documents. They naturally reveal extraordinary anger and trauma and bitterness—how could they not!—but, all in all, the videotape footage captures a group of people bearing up remarkably well under the hideous circumstances, literally besieged by the authorities and media. Confronting charges and a scandal intended to humiliate and destroy him, Arnold Friedman in particular reacts with extraordinary dignity.

That Friedman ultimately “confessed” and pled guilty can only confuse those unfamiliar with or naïve about the workings of the judicial system in America and every other contemporary society. The 20th century

witnessed more than its share of tragic and improbable confessions, and individuals have implicated themselves in far more preposterous crimes than Friedman's. With sufficient physical or psychological pressure brought to bear, nearly every human being can be reduced to a state in which he will acknowledge whatever his tormentors ask of him.

In Arnold Friedman's case, much of the pressure involved the fate of his son. If he could separate himself from Jesse and take full responsibility for the alleged crimes, perhaps the latter would be treated more leniently. We see scenes of Friedman's wife, Elaine, begging her husband to "save Jesse" by pleading guilty. "Do it for Jesse," she painfully implores. As well Friedman was undoubtedly consumed by shame about his own desires and sexual urges. He may very well have felt morally "guilty" of the charges. (Friedman told a therapist and his family that he had committed sexual acts with two neighborhood boys decades before, although this cannot be verified.)

Unable to produce a single defense witness (although two of the computer students, now grown up, refute the charges against their former teacher in Jarecki's film), short of money for experts, faced with the prospect of his son going to prison for decades as an accomplice to his alleged crimes, Arnold Friedman pled guilty. One of the most remarkable video sequences was shot the night before Friedman began serving his term in prison, which was, in effect, a life sentence. There is something heroic about his demeanor, as he quietly jokes and laughs, plays the piano.

Jesse Friedman also "confessed" to the sex abuse, in the hope of receiving a reduced sentence. His lawyer advanced the theory, rejected by his client in an interview conducted by Jarecki, that Arnold had molested Jesse and that he too was a victim. The state went about its ruthless business, and Jesse Friedman was sentenced to 16 years in prison. He served nearly his entire term, seven years beyond his eligibility for release on parole, because he refused to repeat his confession during required sex-offender classes.

This was clearly a remarkable family (the middle brother Seth declined to take part in Jarecki's film). Nathan calls them a "collection of neurotic but gentle eccentrics, at once brilliant and doomed." Each of the four becomes a distinct tragic character in the film: Arnold, repressed, sensitive and tormented; David, brooding and aggressive; Jesse, overwhelmed, adoring his father; and the much maligned Elaine.

David expresses understandable anger at his mother for refusing to "stand up" for her husband. Her contention throughout was that she didn't know what had really happened during the classes. On the other hand, one can hardly criticize this woman for being appalled and devastated by the turn of events, finding out that a man she had lived with for decades had a fantasy life, a private world, that entirely excluded her. The image of Elaine embracing Jesse on his release from prison in 2001 is one of the most moving in the entire film.

What is modern tragedy? The conflict between the individual or individuals and a hostile social environment. By this definition, the Friedmans' story is a genuine tragedy. Of course it lacks a "striving for great aims." The conflict was entirely one-sided; the family was simply laid to waste by the authorities. Jarecki's film, however, begins to set the matter right.

*Capturing the Friedmans* has generated widespread interest in part because it provides one of the few glimpses to be found in the contemporary cinema of present-day life in America, with all its complexities and enormous contradictions. Instead film studios doggedly and ignorantly produce one empty "action-adventure-police-sex-chase-psychological-comedy" after another, works which affect no one deeply and which no one recalls longer than the drive home.

The director has been criticized in some quarters for not arguing more forthrightly or openly for the Friedmans' innocence. There are different

sides to this. In the first place, Jarecki was not in possession of evidence that conclusively cleared the two. A certain caution was therefore appropriate. Admittedly his tendency, in interviews and publicity, to present the film as a *Rashomon*-like work which demonstrates that objective truth about events can never be attained is not particularly helpful. Nonetheless, the relatively objective presentation is, in the end, more devastating than a simple brief for the Friedmans would have been.

Jarecki does not spend a great deal of time attempting to explain the phenomenon of the sex abuse witch-hunt. This is unfortunate. Here was an opportunity to shed some light on a critical period in recent American life, the Reagan years.

Debbie Nathan has written extensively about the "ritual sex abuse hoax." In the early 1980s children and parents made the most outlandish allegations against a southern California daycare center, resulting in four members of the McMartin family and three other women being charged with hundreds of counts of sex abuse. "During the investigation," Nathan writes, "some parents would claim that hundreds of Los Angeles-area children were brutally molested in several day-care centers, over a 20-year period, by a conspiracy of Satanic child pornographers. Children would talk about playing the 'Naked Movie Star' game, about being photographed nude, about sexual assault in hot-air balloons, on faraway farms, on the shoulders of busy highways, in cemeteries, in tunnels under the school yard."

The McMartin case was followed by others. Nathan describes "a national and international panic," noting that from "1984 to 1989, some 100 people nationwide were charged with ritual sex abuse."

Nathan writes: "Moral panics—the Salem witch trials and McCarthyism, for example—have often run rampant through cultures in flux, and 'ritual abuse' is today's mythic expression of deep-seated worries over sweeping changes in the family. Since the 1970s, the number of working women have risen, and so have the divorce rates and female-headed households.... All these changes spell anxiety. For conservatives, they are literally sinful, and since moral traditionalists hate public day-care, a right-wing impulse to demonize childcare workers is not surprising. But many feminists and progressives have bought into the hysteria, too: ritual abuse panic has become an outlet for women's rage at sexual violence and harassment. While this anger could hardly be more justified, it has increasingly been articulated through an anti-sexual current in the feminist movement."

Reaganism, the program of unrestricted free market capitalism introduced in the early 1980s—which was, in fact, a bipartisan agenda—involved a concerted attack on the jobs, living standards and social conditions of the working population, accompanied by a ferocious ideological assault both justifying and concealing the vast transfer of wealth to a tiny elite. Every form of backwardness—anticommunism, religious bigotry and fanaticism, homophobia, racism, militarism, chauvinism, the worship of money, markets and greed—was given a new life and encouraged on a daily basis by the political and media establishment.

Political and social life was recast in quasi-religious and Apocalyptic terms. Reagan ranted against the "Evil Empire" (the USSR). Christian fundamentalists gathered in and around his regime. As governor of California in 1971 Reagan had publicly repeated the fantasies of the fundamentalists about Armageddon and the Second Coming. The pouring of this filth into the ears of the public, in the absence of any mass-based progressive political alternative, had consequences. This was the general atmosphere in which paranoia about child-torturing devil worshippers flourished within certain social layers and in the tabloid media. (In the midst of the sex abuse hysteria, one prominent "pop psychologist" claimed that many of the women in his practice were escapees from cults organized like the "Communist cell structure.") In the Friedman case, this paranoia took a slightly different form.

Nathan refers above to “cultures in flux.” This needs to be interpreted from the socioeconomic point of view, if only briefly. The end of the postwar boom in the early 1970s ushered in a period of *increased economic insecurity* that affected wide layers of the population. The global recession of 1975-76, the most serious since the Great Depression, was followed by a recovery which did not bring about a return to the conditions of the 1960s.

Slumping profit and growth rates eventually obliged capital to devise new methods of production. Companies began to outsource production or establish offshore facilities, manufacturing processes were broken up and dispersed worldwide. The historic process which we know today as “globalization” had seriously begun. Living standards in the US came under pressure, stagnated or declined in absolute terms. The relatively stable economic conditions that had persisted for nearly 40 years were disrupted. (It is coincidental, of course, but nonetheless suggestive that the Wall Street crash of October 19, 1987 occurred only four weeks before the Friedmans’ arrest.) The increased vulnerability of sections of the population to irrational currents, hinted at in Jarecki’s film, remains largely incomprehensible unless these facts of social life are grasped.

*Capturing the Friedmans* unwittingly raises another issue, the utter incapacity of existing institutions in the US to cope with cases of dysfunction except as police matters. Friedman, innocent or guilty of the charges, was a man in need of help. Even if one were to leave aside the elements of hysteria and witch-hunt in this particular incident, the universal response of the authorities in such situations is simply to lock the individual in a cell and let him rot there. This implacability is not a symptom of strength or self-confidence. It indicates rather the extreme fragility and brittleness of the political and legal structures in America, which are more and more irrational and out of touch with social and demographic realities.

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