

## “Ethnography in the First Person”

### Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*

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*Titicut Follies* (1967) is a powerful documentary that exposes the appalling conditions at Bridgewater, a state institution for the criminally insane in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. The first in a series of documentaries about American institutional life by Frederick Wiseman, it has also been one of his most controversial. Testifying to its power is the tangled history of litigation it engendered.<sup>1</sup> Wiseman began making films in the 1960s, working contemporaneously with such filmmakers as Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and David and Albert Maysles during the great period of American direct cinema. But he has developed his own distinctive style and vision, one already evident in *Titicut Follies*. Like his subsequent films, *Titicut Follies* not only explores the situation at Bridgewater, but deftly uses its subject metaphorically to explore broad social issues as well as the ethical implications of its own approach to documentary.

#### Observational Cinema and Personal Expression

Wiseman sees his films as a series of works that presents “a natural history of the way we live” (quoted in Eames 97), and, in a sense, his work constitutes a form of ethnographic cinema that looks at the filmmaker’s own culture rather than another.<sup>2</sup> Each of his films focuses on a different American institu-

tion. In the twenty-seven feature-length documentaries Wiseman has made in as many years, he has ranged from examining institutions concentrated within individual buildings (*High School*, 1968) to those international in scope (*Sinai Field Mission*, 1978), from specific government institutions of social service (*Juvenile Court*, 1973; *Welfare*, 1975) to those less tangible ones organized by principles of ideology and culture (*Canal Zone*, 1977; *Model* 1980). He has broadly defined an institution as “a series of activities that take place in a limited geographical area with a more or less consistent group of people being involved” (quoted in Rosenthal 69). Unlike the rich and famous individuals chronicled in the films of Leacock, Pennebaker, and the Maysles, Wiseman claims to want to make documentaries in which “The institutions will be the star” (Rosenthal 69).

Two successive five-year contracts with WNET, New York’s PBS station, allowed Wiseman to make one film a year, from 1971 to 1981, beginning with *Essene* (1972) without constraint as to subject matter or running time.<sup>3</sup> Generally, the WNET showings have been followed by national PBS broadcasts and, with the exception of *Titicut Follies*, all of Wiseman’s documentaries have been broadcast on PBS stations. As well, they have been shown on television in numerous European countries.

In all these films, Wiseman combines detached observation and expressive manipulation, merging observational cinema’s aesthetic of the seemingly “uninvolved bystander” (Barnouw 254–55) with an expressive use of mise-en-scène and montage. The result is what Jean Rouch has called “ethnographic cinema in the first person” (quoted in Eaton 23). This unique approach has garnered consistent praise from appreciative critics, who have called him “the most sophisticated intelligence in documentary” (Kael 204) and even “the most interesting of American directors” (Bromwich 508).

*Titicut Follies* was shot by ethnographic filmmaker John Marshall (*The Hunters*, 1958), a choice which suggests that Wiseman’s approach to Bridgewater is that of a detached observer. Yet the film is also carefully structured to advance its maker’s personal sense of moral outrage. Wiseman says he began making films out of an urge for social reform, and *Titicut Follies*, his first film, is in fact his most overtly didactic. Before becoming a filmmaker, he taught courses in criminal law, family law, legal medicine, and psychiatry and the law at Boston and Brandeis Universities beginning in 1958. Wiseman got the idea for *Titicut Follies* from visits he made with his students to Bridgewater, feeling that they should know where they might be sending convicted criminals later on when they became district attorneys and judges. He says that “the idea of the movie came out of the absolute sense of shock about what Bridgewater was about” (quoted in Robb 29), and the film works to evoke a similar response in most viewers.

In *Titicut Follies*, as always, Wiseman uses lightweight, portable 16mm cameras and sync-sound equipment, filming with a hand-held camera rather

than a tripod, and capturing events as they happen, without a script. The style implies a belief that life captured on film spontaneously—"life caught un-awares," as Dziga Vertov put it (41)—is more revealing, more truthful, to the complexities of experience than either fiction or documentary reconstruction. It requires the filmmaker to be particularly attentive to the nuances of profilmic events in order to catch material that "works" as cinema.

Wiseman operates the tape recorder and not the camera during shooting, but he determines where the camera goes through a series of hand signals worked out with his cameraman in advance or by leading the cameraman with the microphone. He claims this method gives him greater freedom to see what is around him than if he were looking at profilmic events through the viewfinder of the camera (cf. interviews with Halberstadt 19, and Levin 318). He tends to work consistently with the same camera operator—William Brayne for ten films, from *Law and Order* (1969) through *Sinai Field Mission*; John Davey since *Manoeuvre* (1979)—thus allowing for the communication between the two crew members to become well established. Certainly one of Wiseman's great skills as an observational filmmaker—a talent to which his first film, *Titicut Follies*, amply testifies—is that he knows where to look and how to capture images on film that resonate with meaning despite the uncontrolled circumstances in which he shoots.

Yet editing is also a crucial feature of Wiseman's cinema, both within individual sequences and in the structural relations between them. Wiseman edits his films himself, devoting a considerable amount of time to the task. For each film, he spends from four to six weeks shooting on location, but as many months or more in the editing room sifting through and giving shape to his footage. It is in the process of editing, this "thinking through the material," that Wiseman engages in a kind of second order looking. Wiseman readily admits the creative manipulation in his films in his own description of them as "reality dreams" or "reality fictions" (interview with Graham 35, Rosenthal 72). The individual shots themselves originate in the real world but, says Wiseman, in terms of cinema they "really they have no meaning except insofar as you impose a form on them" (interview with Graham 35). In this editing process elements of profilmic reality are compressed, reordered, and omitted, creating what Vertov called a "film-object" ("On *Kinopravda*" 45), an aesthetic construction that, like an essay, advances a rhetorical argument.

In all his films, while it is true that the profilmic events are always real, never staged, recreated, or rehearsed for the camera, the footage remains for Wiseman only a record of the events, textually meaningless until he structures it at the editing table. He claims that he enters an institution with some inevitable preconceptions or stereotypes about it, but the firsthand experience reveals to him a greater complexity there (interview with Westin 48); in the editing he works out a "theory" about the events, which is then reflected in the film's

structure. He sees the process as a "voyage of discovery," and the end result as "a report on what I've found" (interview with Graham 34).

By contrast, most of the practitioners of direct cinema have insisted that their work must be organized chronologically in order to remain as faithful as possible to the profilmic events. Leacock, for example, claims that the documentary filmmaker should avoid nonchronological editing "like the plague" (17), while Al Maysles has declared, "In the long run what works best—and we find ourselves coming back to it—is having it happen just the way it happened" (Maysles and Maysles 27). When chronology is violated, as Stephen Mamber has pointed out regarding the work of the Drew Associates, it is for the purpose of grafting onto the material conventional narrative structures, such as protagonists overcoming obstacles to achieve goals (140).

By contrast, Wiseman's films clearly are structured according to principles other than chronology and narrative. Rather, they are designed in a manner that Bill Nichols describes as a distinctive "mosaic" structure (*Ideology* 208–36). For expressive purposes, the chronology of profilmic events is shuffled in his work, sometimes drastically. As Nichols notes, while in each film the individual sequences, the facets or "tesserae" of the mosaic, are organized by narrative codes of construction, aiming for a smooth flow of time and space, the relations *between* these facets are organized by principles that are more rhetorical. Sequences in Wiseman's films may relate, for example, in terms of comparison, contrast, parallelism, inversion, irony, evidence, summation, and so on.

At the same time, Wiseman says he never pushes his point of view on the audience, for he abhors didacticism. Indeed, it is at this level of overall structure that the viewer must work to grasp the films' logic. Wiseman's cinema is therefore a dialectical one, always involving the viewer in teasing out meaning rather than documenting absolute truths. In *Titicut Follies*, as always in Wiseman's work, there is no narrator, either within the profilmic events or as voice-over. Neither are there markers of temporal relations between sequences—wipes, dissolves, titles. Thus, in a sense the viewer is forced to repeat Wiseman's own process by discovering the structural logic of the film's parts and exploring their implications. In Wiseman's words, viewers "have to fight the film, they have to say, 'What the hell's he trying to say with this?' . . . And they have to think through their own relationship to what they're seeing" (interview with Graham 37).

### The "Titicut Follies"

In *Titicut Follies* this engagement is taken a step further, for the viewer is not allowed to maintain the comfortable invisibility of the unacknowledged "fly on the wall." The film challenges our usual physical position as voyeurs as

well as our moral position as possessors of knowledge. This striking use of the observational approach is presented immediately in the film's opening sequence, part of the annual musical show performed by the inmates at Bridgewater. It begins by showing some darkened, at first indistinct faces; the camera pans from one to the next, momentarily bringing each face out of the engulfing darkness into the light, only to disappear into darkness again outside the frame. The light itself seems ghastly, its source harsh footlights emanating from below, as in the conventional lighting design of horror films. Wilfred Sheed's description of the production as "a travesty of the latest Ziegfeld, as interpreted by Trappist monks" (55) only begins to capture its eerie quality. These sickly faces sing the Gershwin's strident "Strike up the Band," announcing their presence with ironic pomp and circumstance.

In retrospect, it is also a call, asking us to pay heed to the social problems the film goes on to chronicle. This opening sequence reflexively expresses the filmmaker's awareness of the ethical issues surrounding observational cinema.<sup>4</sup> Because it depicts a performance, and one that is excessively marked as such, the sequence also addresses the debate about how the camera affects the profilmic event, and to what extent the people being photographed inevitably perform for it. For some, the presence of the camera makes people either self-conscious and inhibited, or conversely, allows them an opportunity to perform, but in neither case are people acting naturally. For Wiseman, though, as for Rouch, the camera is more an accelerator than a brake. Wiseman believes that people do not significantly alter their behavior for the camera, that if they are made self-conscious by its presence they will tend to fall back on behavior that is comfortable "rather than increase the discomfort by trying out new roles."<sup>5</sup> Thus, one of the implications of the opening sequence of *Titicut Follies* is that people may, and sometimes do, perform, but this does not necessarily invalidate the observational method. Indeed, the postmodern view would have it that the nature of our being in the world, our very identity, is more performance than essence.

The camera views the show from the physical position of the audience at the show, suturing our point of view into the space of the event as if the performance is put on *for* the viewer. We are even thanked at film's end, in the lyrics of the "finale," for being a spectator. But any sense of voyeuristic invisibility is methodically undercut in the film. Surveillance cameras appear periodically in the background, mirroring our own act of watching. Further, the film prevents us from maintaining a unified point of view when the television competes for our attention in the frame, pitting foreground against background, as one inmate attempts to sing "Chinatown, My Chinatown" while Nana Mouskouri sings on TV behind him. Also, Wiseman occasionally allows his camera's look to be returned by inmates. The most powerful instance occurs when the camera follows the naked ex-schoolteacher Jim, who goes into his cell and huddles in a corner trying to cover his genitals with his hands.

Jim's futile attempt at modesty signals his awareness of the camera's presence, as does his look, a direct return of the camera's gaze. The shot maintaining the lock of gazes between Jim and the camera is held for several excruciating seconds. Inevitably, we become painfully aware of the camera's (and of our) intrusive presence. One is reminded of Norman Bates's verbal attack on Marian Crane in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) when she euphemistically suggests he send his ailing mother to "someplace." His acknowledgment of her tactful avoidance suddenly makes us, along with Marion, feel ashamed, and we are made to respond similarly in *Titicut Follies*. The film's implication of us is wholly appropriate: because Bridgewater is our institution, created by us and our tax dollars, the film, as Richard Barsam notes, "exposes more about us than it does about Bridgewater" (274). And, more generally, Jim's discomfiting return of our look acknowledges the inevitable politics of documentary, wherein power belongs to the bearer of the look (Rabinowitz).

*Titicut Follies* ends, as it begins, by showing parts of the same musical show. This framing device serves several functions simultaneously. First, the concluding performance is a departing gesture (blackly humorous, with its lyrics "We've had our show / The best that we could do / To make your hearts aglow") reminding us that the film we have been watching is a constructed representation. As well, because of its emphasis on musical performance, we are invited to consider the film in the context of the fictional genre of the musical. But where the classical musical's vision, largely articulated through its performances, is of a harmonious, utopian community,<sup>6</sup> *Titicut Follies* presents a dystopian collection of alienated individuals. Finally, the film's structural symmetry, with performances at both the beginning and end, underscores the sense of entrapment that it elsewhere documents: the fact that the performance at the end "reprises" the one at the beginning—that it is, in fact, the same performance broken up with other footage in between—further suggests the timelessness, the infinite sense of alienation, that for Wiseman characterizes Bridgewater.

The concluding performance, moreover, structurally sums up the motif of performance that is manifest throughout *Titicut Follies*. The film suggests that the inmates are forever "on stage," as they are always under observation by the staff. As Michel Foucault has argued, in the mental institution (aptly described by Norman Bates as a place "with cruel eyes studying you") the behavior of people labelled insane is always being observed and judged by those in control, "a sort of invisible tribunal in permanent session" (265). This is made explicit in Vladimir's unsuccessful meeting with the staff. He argues (on good empirical evidence, it would seem) that he came to Bridgewater "for observation," but has been there for a year and a half, and that the institution's environment is harming rather than helping him. Much of his argument cannot help but appear sensible to viewers, given what we've seen to this point, but everything Vladimir says, even his talk of possible rehabilita-

tion, is interpreted as a sign of deepening mental illness to be dealt with by increased dosages of medication.

Elsewhere we see inmates in a variety of performances, some overt, others more subtle. Inmates declaim from soapboxes, play trombones, and sing; Albert, having his bath, seems to relate to his guards with playful teasing. Vladimir, trying too hard to convince the staff that he is sane and should be sent back to prison, ultimately overplays his role, with the result that his request is denied. Even Eddie, one of the guards, seems to define himself more as a performer than a guard, acting as host of the Follies revue and singing in several other scenes. After his song in the party sequence, he does an encore like a seasoned vaudevillian and then exits with a theatrical flourish.

The film's title, virtually alone among Wiseman's documentaries, gives us no indication of its subject, and its significance (it is the name of the inmates' annual revue) is never explained. Even if we happen to possess this information in advance, the opening performance is still confusing because it is impossible to know with any degree of certainty the status of some of the people we are shown: are these all inmates, or are some of the men guards? We do not discover that Eddie is in fact a guard until shortly thereafter, when



*Titicut Follies*: Eddie the guard performing.

in a later sequence he is glimpsed walking by the camera in his uniform. In his review of the film, Robert Hatch complained about the film's ineptitude because it raises but fails to answer so many questions: "is the show a part of their therapy, how does the audience respond (there is not a single shot into the house), is this a regular feature of the hospital life?" (446). But, of course, this is quite to the point, for the sequence attacks our comfortable position as spectators from several flanks at once.

After Vladimir is taken from the staff meeting, a social worker states their common view that "He argues in a perfect paranoid pattern. If you accept his basic premise the rest of it is logical but the basic premise is untrue." (Might not the same be said of the film itself?) When we hear the staff's interpretation and response, we are likely to wonder who, in fact, is paranoid. After the finale, Eddie, as MC, with unintentional irony asks, "Weren't they terrific?" These are the film's last words, leaving us with the question of determining the nature of our response to, and judgment about, the inmates and the conditions they endure.

### Institutions and Intertextuality

At the same time as the film forcefully confronts us with these particular people in this specific institution, we are also invited by the text to view Bridgewater metaphorically, as a social microcosm, what Wiseman calls "a cultural spoor." Wiseman says he is "interested in how institutions reflect the larger cultural hues," and that he is "trying to see if you can pick up reflections of the larger issues of society in the institutions" (quoted in Mamber 217). One patient (identified in Wiseman's transcript as Kaminsky) delivers a delirious monologue that explicitly makes an analogy between Bridgewater and America itself. The country's military aggression is, he says, a result of frustration, of being "sex crazy"—the same opinion Dr. Ross holds of the sex-offender Mitch. The courtyard debate between two inmates about American intervention in Vietnam is a crazy mirror of the "hawks and doves" arguments that at the time the film was made were dividing Americans everywhere.

The film also suggests its larger implications through intertextual references. Several writers have compared *Titicut Follies* to Peter Weiss's play *Marat/Sade* (1964), which had been made into a successful film by Peter Brook the year before Wiseman's and was shot in a pseudo-direct cinema style (Armstrong 29–30, Barsam 274, Gill). Both Wiseman's film and Weiss's play are set in a mental institution, both feature aspects of performance within the text, and both explore the nature of madness in the context of politics and the state. But an equally resonant comparison might be made to Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), as it shares with Wiseman's film a view of the mental institution as a metaphor for the "larger cultural hues" of contemporary America. Thomas Benson and Carolyn Anderson re-

port that, according to Wiseman, the cast and crew of Milos Forman's 1975 film adaptation of Kesey's novel watched *Titicut Follies* repeatedly before beginning production (331).

The book's self-conscious "American theme" is suggested by Kesey's narrator, a mute Native American, just as Wiseman refers to Native America in his film's title—"Titicut" being the Native American name for the Bridgewater area. Both texts focus on issues of emasculation through medication—in *Titicut Follies*, one patient imagines that the doctors are going to remove his testicles—and other severe forms of treatment as a way of maintaining social control. Both works, finally, question our very definition of madness and sanity. During their discussion in the yard, Dr. Ross startlingly declares that if he is wrong in predicting that if released Vladimir will return to Bridgewater immediately, then "you can spit on my face." Vladimir responds with the sensible question, "Why should I do that?" as taken aback as the viewer is likely to be. At this moment the doctor, like Kesey's Nurse Ratched, seems the mad one. At other times, the behavior of some of the guards, like the staff discussing Vladimir, also seems nothing short of "crazy."

In *Titicut Follies*, however, insanity is less the seething, controlled hos-



*Titicut Follies*: Vladimir arguing his sanity with Dr. Ross in the yard.

tility of a Big Nurse than the banality of common callousness, as in the taunting of Jim about his dirty room and the teasing of Albert in the bathtub. Vladimir, like the novel's Billy Bibbitt, can mount only a weak protest, the inevitable response to which is increased medication. His inescapable position is poignantly suggested by the brick wall behind him when he tries to reason with Dr. Ross (and for much of the shot, they are graphically divided in the frame by a dark drainpipe between them). In Kesey's book, McMurphy's lobotomy serves as a sacrificial act that redeems the Chief from his muteness; in the end, Bromden escapes the institution to return to his land—"I been away a long time," he says in the novel's last line (311). But the vision of *Titicut Follies* is considerably darker, for it seems that the only way out here is through death. Vladimir wants to leave, but cannot, while, as far as we are shown, only a corpse is allowed to depart; the funeral in a graveyard, just before the finale, is the only time the camera leaves the grounds. In Wiseman's vision of the American "snake pit" there is no boisterously physical embodiment of the life principle to equal Kesey's robust Randall Patrick McMurphy.

Nor is spiritual solace offered by religious belief. The film's two scenes of Christian ritual are of last rites and a funeral service—presumably for Malinowsky, the dying inmate who refuses to eat, although again, the ambiguity is richly suggestive. Wiseman introduces Christian elements rather sardonically, cutting from a physically dysfunctional inmate picking his nose to the hand of the priest, Father Mulligan, performing the last rite. Toward the end, one inmate stands on his head in the yard, singing of sacred glory; the upside-down close-up of the man's face suggests that the world—the world of *Titicut Follies*—is topsy-turvy, for it is a world where moral and spiritual values are inverted.

### Moral Indignation and Expressive Editing

The dark vision of *Titicut Follies* is clearly signalled from the outset by the word "Follies" in the film's title. Indeed, Wiseman criticizes the conditions at Bridgewater with a use of editing that is far from subtle. Immediately after the opening performance, there is a quick shot of a guard ordering an inmate to get his clothes. This is followed by Mitch's interview with Dr. Ross, who questions him in a blunt way that seems unduly callous. As the interview proceeds, Wiseman cuts suddenly to some guards strip-searching newly arrived inmates. The film then returns to the interview, where Dr. Ross's questions become more aggressive, perhaps even tinged with cruelty. Viewer sympathy here is more likely to align itself with the patient, who willingly admits his problems and seeks help, than with the doctor, who says weakly, perhaps even begrudgingly, "You'll get it here, I guess." Tellingly, in his review of the film Arthur Knight described him as "a German-accented doctor who licks his lips over every sex question," while Amos Vogel called him a

"Dr. Strangelove psychiatrist" (187). The inserted shot of the physical stripping of the inmates offers an obvious comparison between the two procedures: Dr. Ross's interview with Mitch, that is to say, is a psychological stripping down of the inmate, an impersonal, cold prodding that offers little compassion or comfort. As Foucault says of the science of mental disease as it developed in the institution of the asylum, it would always be observation and classification, never a dialogue (250).

Similar in tone to the treatment of the inmates in the strip-search sequence is Wiseman's presentation of Malinowsky, the inmate who is force-fed because he has refused to eat. Like them, the man is naked, a sign of his vulnerability and powerlessness. As the tube is lubricated and pushed through one of Malinowski's nostrils (on a wall behind the doctor hangs a calendar with an advertisement for "Perfection Oil"! ) and he is force-fed, Wiseman inserts six quick shots of the same man being prepared for his funeral at a later date. The shaving of the corpse connects the treatment of Malinowsky to the earlier rough shaving of Jim's face, which caused blood to trickle down his chin and, as Stephen Mamber notes, ironically suggests that Malinowsky receives more attention in death than he did when alive (219). Several of these shots draw precise ironic parallels between the two procedures: when the tube is put into his nose, there is an inserted shot of the dead Malinowsky being shaved; when Wiseman's camera pans to the watching eyes of the guards holding him down, there is a shot of the dead man's eyes being stuffed with cotton; when Dr. Ross removes the tube from Malinowsky's nose, there is a shot of the shaving process completed, both procedures concluding with a towel daubing; and when Malinowsky is led away, there is a shot of the body being placed in storage in the morgue. Finally, while force feeding the inmate, Dr. Ross smokes a cigarette, its long ash captured by the camera in close-up hanging precipitously over the funnel through which the patient is receiving his food. Like the cigarette and ruler in the hand of the coroner at the end of Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), the image is a powerful objective correlative of institutional detachment.

Wiseman further underscores the contrast here by his editing of the sound track, for the feeding procedure is accompanied by a clutter of ambient noise and voices while each of the embalming shots is starkly silent. Indeed, Wiseman always pays careful attention to his sound track, and *Titicut Follies* is no exception. Consider again, for example, the opening of the film. The first images are accompanied by an off-key performance of "Strike up the Band," its out-of-tune quality an indication that something is amiss. Later, when a guard talks about how they used to gas patients, making his eyes tear, a few notes of what sounds like Erroll Garner's "Misty" are heard coming from the radio in the room! Such instances, however, are often more significant than simply ironic. The lyrics to "Chicago Town," for instance, sung by Eddie and Willie, express the wish to be a child ("Oh, what a joy / to be only

a boy") who delights in amusements ("I want to ride on the shoot-de-shoot / And the merry-go-round") of the big city ("That's where I long to be"). Unfortunately, according to Vladimir, all that is available to the inmates of Bridgewater (and we see nothing to contradict this view) is "a ball and a glove." While the inmates are in fact frequently treated like children (cf. Armstrong), it is also significant that the wish of the song contrasts sharply with the stultifying reality of the institution. Most of the musical numbers feature lyrics about "elsewhere": like the irony of "Chicago Town," the trombone rendition of, for instance, "My Blue Heaven" in the yard contrasts pointedly with its purgatorial reality of people aimlessly milling about.

### Law, Ethics, and Politics

The stark, unsettling power of *Titicut Follies* embroiled Wiseman in a lengthy legal battle that severely limited its accessibility. Before the court's decision, however, *Titicut Follies* was screened as part of the "Social Change in America" program of the New York Film Festival in the fall of 1967, and then had a six-day commercial run. But generally the film received poor reviews. One critic saw the film as exploiting the inmates ("offering a vulture's-eye-view," Sheed 52), while another thought it violated "common decency" and even falsely accused Wiseman of shooting with hidden cameras (Knight). Yet a third claimed it "was a sickening film from start to finish," and that it "has no justification for existing except to the extent that it is intended to have legislative and other non-aesthetic consequences" (Gill 166).

Such response is not surprising, for *Titicut Follies* is perhaps the clearest example of what Nichols has called Wiseman's "tactlessness," his disregard for "the ideological constraints of politeness, respect for privacy, queasiness in the face of the grotesque or taboo" (*Ideology* 209). The force-feeding of Malinowsky and the insistent filming of the naked Jim are particularly vivid instances of this "tactlessness," so pronounced in *Titicut Follies* that the presiding judge in the initial case against the film, Harry Kalus, called the film "a nightmare of ghoulish obscenities" (quoted in Wiseman interview with Westin 63). The result of the extended legal battle was that the film itself became the focus of attention rather than the conditions at Bridgewater. The much-publicized litigation may have gained Wiseman some notoriety early in his career, but it did little to improve conditions at the institution. It was reported by the press in the spring of 1987, twenty years after Wiseman's film, that five inmates had died that year alone at Bridgewater, three of them by suicide, and later that summer (August 25) the institution was the subject on ABC-TV's *Nightline*, with Wiseman as one of the guests.

Wiseman's distinctive institutional emphasis in *Titicut Follies*, as in all his documentaries, reflects a social concern that follows in the tradition of

John Grierson. Like Grierson, Wiseman conceives of the documentary within the context of social reform and sees it as a potential source of information for the purpose of creating an informed and responsible citizenship. One of the primary functions of documentary, for Wiseman, is to provide public education and awareness. He has discussed documentary as analogous to the news, and considers his films as similarly protected by the First Amendment (interviews with Westin 60, and Levin 319). As he pointedly explained when asked by Ted Koppel on *Nightline* why he was opposed to a public screening of a censored version of *Titicut Follies*, "The censoring of *Titicut Follies* or any other film prevents people in a democracy from access to information which they might like to have in order to make up their minds about what kind of society they'd like to live in—it's as simple as that."

But if Wiseman's documentaries are news, they are also styled as editorials, as arguments about the institutions on which he is reporting. And it is at this level that his films work politically, for they democratically allow the spectator considerable "space" as textual readers. Wiseman's distinctive mosaic structure discourages empathy or identification with specific individuals, asking us instead to consider the logic of both institutional organization and cinematic construction. Even in those brief moments when we empathize with someone, as we are likely to with Jim, for example, the focus remains diffuse enough so that the possibility of sustained identification is thwarted. The absence of voice-over narration further obliges us to watch *Titicut Follies*, like Wiseman's other films, in this way. In short, we are offered no overtly obvious spectatorial position, but must instead be attentive to the text.

So, even without a robust McMurphy figure, *Titicut Follies* is not really as bleak as it might seem to be. For if it is significant, as suggested above, that while the camera does not leave the Bridgewater grounds (except in the case of death), the viewer of *Titicut Follies* does. Our perspective, as a result of the multiple points of view generated by the mosaic structure, is wider than that of any individual within the film. We are left to contemplate the film and its implications.

For Nichols, this aspect of observational cinema is a potential problem, for it "appears to leave the driving to us" and, therefore, one can respond to it as to a Rorschach test (Nichols, "Voice" 20, 21). Some critics have dismissed Wiseman's films because, they contend, their structural subtleties allow him to avoid taking a clear position, leaving it to viewers to interpret the films as they wish (Wiseman interview with Westin 49–50). But a close examination of most of them would show, as has this analysis of *Titicut Follies*, that they do have a definite point of view.

Wiseman's films have been seen as politically suspect in large part because they seem not to acknowledge their involvement or complicity in the act of documentation and so maintain the viewer's "imaginary" relationship to the images (Nichols, *Ideology* 235). Interestingly, in Thomas Waugh's im-

portant anthology on the "committed" documentary, *Show Us Life* (1984), Wiseman is treated only in passing and disparagingly—which is curious, given that his work fulfills all of the requirements the book's contributors put forth as necessary for progressive political documentary filmmaking, including the absence of an authoritative narrator and dominant individual "stars," a sense of structure reflecting the complexity of events, and their use value as a catalyst for discussion.<sup>7</sup> Certainly Wiseman does not endear himself to leftist critics with remarks that his politics are Marxist, but more Groucho than Karl. Yet I would argue that Wiseman's style in fact constitutes a profoundly political cinema because of the "open" way it engages viewers.

It is true that *Titicut Follies* typically shows us disillusioned and shattered people treated impersonally and disdainfully. In Wiseman's films, the culmination of institutional logic is to constrain individuality and to rationalize difference, as in the dismissive diagnosis of Vladimir ("They call that the Ganser syndrome"). The image of Jim being forcibly shaved metaphorically suggests the conforming pressures of institutional processing. Tellingly, variations on this image appear in such later Wiseman films as *Hospital* (1970), *Basic Training* (1971), *Primate* (1974), and *Meat* (1976). (*Welfare*, it is worth noting, was made between *Primate* and *Meat*: the films' chronological order is a further example of the larger mosaic structure of the series, as these films together chronicle the way institutions treat people as less than human—that is, like meat.) In a letter submitted as testimony in the *Titicut Follies* litigation, Wiseman said the film is "about various forms of madness" (quoted in Anderson 18). America, Wiseman's films suggest, is itself in some ways a social bedlam, no longer a dream of opportunity but a nightmare of conformity.

Yet despite the bleakness of the institution as presented in *Titicut Follies* and in some of his other films, Wiseman encourages democratic participation from viewers through his "open" style. If anything, his films have grown increasingly more subtle, showing even greater respect for viewers. (Significantly, *Primate* is the only other Wiseman documentary to have raised any substantial controversy; it, too, is tactless in its broaching of the sensitive issue of medical research on animals.) For Wiseman, "The true film lies halfway between the screen and the mind of the viewer" (quoted in "Talk of the Town" 32), and so he refuses to dictate to the viewer by assuming an authorial superiority. In the end, the film constitutes one person's "report"—no less than Vladimir's claims and the staff's diagnosis, it is an argument based on a perceptual premise. While it may be true that his tactlessness may invite misplaced controversy or voyeuristic pleasure (Nichols, *Ideology* 209), *Titicut Follies* does not allow us to innocently enjoy that pleasure—if indeed that is the right word, given the harrowing events Wiseman's camera shows—for it forces us to think about that "someplace" of which we are all aware but may prefer not to acknowledge.

## Notes

1. For a detailed account of the film's legal history, see Carolyn Anderson, *Documentary Dilemmas: Frederick Wiseman's Titicut Follies* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).
2. David MacDougall includes *Titicut Follies* in his list of ethnographic films about industrialized societies. "Prospects of the Ethnographic Film," *Film Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (winter 1969/70): 16. For a discussion of all of Wiseman's films through *Central Park* (1990), see Barry Keith Grant, *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
3. However, according to Wiseman's own account he had to battle with network executives over sequences in both *Law and Order* (1969) and *Hospital* (1970), and was forced to make cuts for the telecast of *Basic Training* (Benson and Anderson 351-52).
4. Dan Armstrong also discusses this aspect of the film in his essay, "Wiseman's Realm of Transgression."
5. Interview with the author, January 1989.
6. See, for example, Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie* 24 (spring 1977): 2-13.
7. See especially the essays by Chuck Kleinhans, "Forms, Politics, Makers and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary," and Julianne Burton, "Democratizing Documentary: Modes of Address in the Latin American Cinema, 1858-72," in "*Show Us Life*": *Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 318-42, 344-83.

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