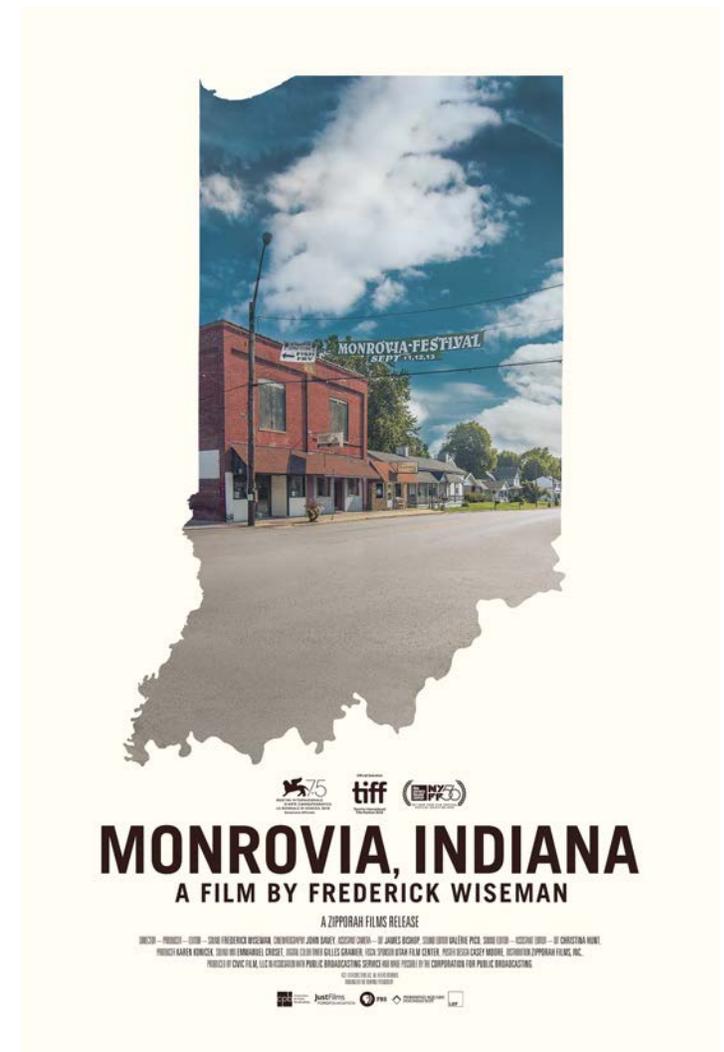




DIRECTOR Frederick Wiseman
PRODUCED BY Frederick Wiseman
CINEMATOGRAPHY John Davey
EDITING Frederick Wiseman
SOUND EDITOR Valérie Pico

FREDERICK WISEMAN (b. January 1, 1930 in Boston, Massachusetts) is an American documentary filmmaker (47 credits). His work is "devoted primarily to exploring American institutions." He has been called "one of the most important and original filmmakers working today" (*New York Times*). After graduating from Yale Law School in 1954, Wiseman served in the military before taking a teaching position at Boston University Institute of Law and Medicine. It was at this time that he also began pursuing documentary filmmaking. He has received honorary doctorates from Bowdoin College, Princeton University, and Williams College, among others. He is a MacArthur Fellow, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has won numerous awards, including four Emmys. He is also the recipient of the Career Achievement Award from the Los Angeles Film Society (2013), the George Polk Career Award (2006), the American Society of Cinematographers Distinguished Achievement Award (2006) and the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement from the Venice Film Festival (2014). In 2016, he received an Honorary Award from the Board of Governors of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

The first feature-length film Wiseman produced was *The Cool World* (1963). This was followed by *Titicut Follies* in 1967, which he produced and directed. He has both produced and directed all of his films since. They are chiefly studies of social institutions, such as hospitals, high schools, or police departments. Wiseman and his cinematographer collaborator John Davey work between eight and 12 weeks in the institutions Wiseman portrays, with almost no preparation. He spends the bulk of his time on a film editing the material, trying to find a rhythm to make a movie. All his films have aired on PBS, one of his primary funders. Discounting the classification of his films as operating in "observational mode," Wiseman counters that his goal is to "edit the films so that they will have a dramatic



structure." The notion that he is interested in finding a narrative angle also complements his view that it is impossible for a documentary filmmaker to be completely objective or unbiased in relation to his or her subject. Of his method, Wiseman says: "[My films are] based on un-staged, un-manipulated actions." However, he asserts, "The editing is highly manipulative and the shooting is highly manipulative . . . What you choose to shoot, the way you shoot it, the way you edit it and the way you structure it . . . all of those things . . . represent subjective choices that you have to make" (Aftab and Wertz, Interview with Frederick Wiseman). He has also acted in 4 films.

Wiseman also works in the theater. In Paris he directed "The Belle of Amherst," the play by William Luce about the life of Emily Dickinson, and two plays at La Comédie Française—Samuel Beckett's "Oh Les Beaux Jours," and "La Dernière Lettre," based on a chapter of Vasily Grossman's novel, *Life and Fate*. He also directed "The Last Letter" (the English version of "La Dernière Lettre") at the Theater for a New Audience in New York. The French publisher, Gallimard, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, jointly published the book, *Frederick Wiseman*, which offers a comprehensive overview of his work through a series of original essays by distinguished critics and artists.

These are the other films he has directed, produced, and edited: *High School* (Documentary) (1968), *Law and Order* (TV Movie documentary) (1969), *Hospital* (TV Movie documentary) (1970), *I Miss Sonia Henie* (Short) (1971), *Basic Training* (Documentary) (1971), *Essene* (Documentary) (1972), *Juvenile Court* (Documentary) (1973), *Primate* (Documentary) (1974), *Welfare* (Documentary) (1975), *Meat* (Documentary) (1976), *Canal Zone* (Documentary) (1977), *Sinai Field Mission* (Documentary) (1978), *Manoeuvre* (Documentary) (1980), *Model* (Documentary) (1981), *Seraphita's Diary* (1982), *The Store* (Documentary) (1984), *Racetrack* (Documentary) (1986), *Multi-Handicapped* (Documentary) (1986), *Deaf* (Documentary) (1986), *Adjustment & Work* (Documentary) (1986), *Blind* (Documentary) (1987), *Missile* (Documentary) (1988), *Near Death* (Documentary) (1989), *Central Park* (Documentary) (1990), *Aspen* (Documentary) (1991), *High School II* (Documentary) (1994), *Zoo* (Documentary) (1994), *Ballet* (Documentary) (1995), *La Comédie-Française ou L'amour joué* (Documentary) (1996), *Public Housing* (Documentary) (1997), *Belfast, Maine* (Documentary) (1999), *Domestic Violence* (Documentary) (2001), *The Last Letter* (2002), *Domestic Violence 2* (Documentary) (2002), *The Garden* (Documentary) (2005), *State Legislature* (Documentary) (2007), *La danse* (Documentary) (2009), *Crazy Horse* (Documentary) (2011), *At Berkeley* (Documentary) (2013), *National Gallery* (Documentary) (2014), *In Jackson Heights* (Documentary) (2015), *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library* (Documentary) (2017), and *Monrovia, Indiana* (Documentary) (2018).

JOHN DAVEY is an English cinematographer (37 credits). He began collaborating with Frederick Wiseman as his cinematographer starting with Wiseman's 1980 *Manoeuvre*. In an interview, Wiseman recounts about working with Davey: He was a friend of a friend of mine, who'd been a cameraman on my early movies. I met John, we hit it off, and I've worked with him a long, long time. These kinds of shoots are very intimate. You're working together all day, you're watching rushes at night. You're together for six weeks, so you have to really get along.... When we shoot, I need a cameraman comfortable with changing positions frequently. We have to move as if the camera and microphone are parts of our bodies. John's very steady. He likes working hard, I like working hard. We have to be obsessed and slightly crazed in the same way"

(*Documentaryisneverneutral.com*). After Wiseman has been granted access to film an institution, Wiseman and Davey will work "six- or seven-day weeks, upward of 12 to 16 hours a day, shooting footage on location for anywhere between eight and 12 weeks." Davey works very closely with Wiseman, reviewing "rushes to see what they missed or to review technical problems of light and composition." The two have developed "an informal style and collaborative intimacy . . . over the years, relying on facial expressions and subtle movements to signal positioning for the camera and microphone" (*Tablet*). These are the films Davey has done cinematography for: *World in Action* (TV Series documentary) (1975-1980), *Box On* (Short) (1980), *A Question of Leadership* (TV Movie documentary) (1981), *The Body Show* (TV Series) (1982), *Blind* (Documentary) (1987), *Missile* (Documentary) (1988), *Near Death* (Documentary) (1989), *Central Park* (Documentary) (1990), *Aspen* (Documentary) (1991), *Death Zone* (TV Movie documentary) (1993), *High*

School II (Documentary) (1994), *Zoo* (Documentary) (1994), *Ballet* (Documentary) (1995), *La Comédie-Française ou L'amour joué* (Documentary) (1996), *Public Housing* (Documentary) (1997), *Belfast, Maine* (Documentary) (1999), *Nature* (TV Series documentary) (2000-2003), *Domestic Violence* (Documentary) (2001), *Land of the Mammoth* (TV Series documentary) (2001), *The Last Letter* (2002), *Taboo* (TV Series documentary) (2002), *Domestic Violence 2* (Documentary) (2002), *National Geographic Explorer* (TV Series documentary) (2004-2005), *The Garden* (Documentary) (2005), *Is It Real?* (TV Series documentary) (2006), *State Legislature* (Documentary) (2007), *Apache Indian: The Reggae Revolution - Time for Change* (Video documentary) (2007), *One Love: Word Sounds and Powah* (Video documentary) (2008), *La danse* (Documentary) (2009), *Boxing Gym* (Documentary) (2010), *Crazy Horse* (Documentary) (2011), *The Bear Whisperer* (TV Series) (2011), *Kathleen Ferrier* (Documentary) (2012), *At Berkeley* (Documentary) (2013), *National Gallery* (Documentary) (2014), *In Jackson Heights* (Documentary) (2015), *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library* (Documentary) (2017), and *Monrovia, Indiana* (Documentary) (2018).



A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis: "Frederick Wiseman: The Filmmaker Who Shows Us Ourselves" NY Times, 6 April 2017

One of the most important and original filmmakers working today, Frederick Wiseman has been making documentaries for 50 years. His movies are about specific places — institutions, organizations, cities and communities: the New York neighborhood of Jackson Heights; the coastal town of Belfast, Me.; the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind; American Ballet Theater; the National Gallery in London. What interests Mr. Wiseman is how these institutions reflect the larger society and what they reveal about human behavior.

His documentaries can be long. The three- and four-hour running times might seem forbidding, but there is rarely a dull moment, in spite of the absence of conventional narrative.

Very quickly, you find yourself absorbed in patterns and details as meaning emerges mosaic-like, surfacing moment by moment, encounter by encounter, in bodies and faces alone and in groups. In “Basic Training,” men become soldiers order by order and step by step. In “Deaf,” students learn to speak through sounds and gestures, repeating words and sentences with their teachers until communication is achieved.

There can be an abstract, mechanical quality to the way bodies function in these institutions, but even as people can look like moving parts in a large machine, the camera registers their individuality. Mr. Wiseman’s great subject is human beings, in all of their — of our — variety and uniqueness.

On Friday, April 14, the first half of a complete retrospective of his work begins at [Film Forum](#). It’s a fitting tribute and arrives at a particularly productive moment for this prolific director, who in November received an honorary Academy Award.

A ballet based on his 1967 film, “Titicut Follies,” opened last month in Minneapolis, and he has completed a new documentary, “Ex Libris,” about the [New York Public Library](#), due later this year. “What’s kept me going,” Mr. Wiseman, who is 87, [said](#) upon receiving his Oscar, “is that it’s fun and an adventure. Constantly working also keeps me off the street, or at least on the streets that I like.” What follows is a very partial introduction to some of the highlights and defining themes of his distinctive and capacious body of work.

‘Titicut Follies’

“The ideas of the movie came out of the absolute sense of shock about what Bridgewater was about,” Mr. Wiseman once said of his most notorious film, which takes place in the state prison for the criminally insane at Bridgewater, Mass. A principled and gravely disturbing look into the void, it remains an appalling inquiry into penal abuse. What Mr. Wiseman found was too much for Massachusetts, which sought to ban the film for, as a trial judge put it in 1967, an “unwarranted” intrusion into the “right to privacy of each inmate.”

The legal wrangling centered on the inmates’ rights versus the public’s right to know and opened a constellation of issues involving documentary ethics and thorny questions of informed consent. Unlike Mr. Wiseman, the film’s opponents were uncomfortably silent on the prison’s barbarism and basic human rights, and at times seemed more concerned with the reputation of Massachusetts than with the inmates’ welfare. In 1969, its Supreme Court suggested as much: “There is a collective, indecent intrusion into the most private aspects of the lives of these unfortunate persons in the Commonwealth’s custody.” The ban on public screenings remained in place until 1991.

Now, 50 years later, the film can be seen for what it was: a work of political art and moral outrage. (Manohla Dargis)

Rank and File

Mr. Wiseman’s documentaries are about institutions — the bricks, mortar, endless meetings and all the moving parts — including all the moving, walking and talking people who go into making them. A consummate dialectician, he likes to toggle between the general and the specific, creating a kind of accordion effect as images of buildings give way to images of people inside those buildings and longer views oscillate with close-ups of faces and body parts. In “[Blind](#)” (1986), fingers trace Braille dots; in “Boxing Gym” (2010), the focus turns to fists and fast-moving feet.

In his 1971 film “Basic Training,” Mr. Wiseman followed a company of drafted and enlisted men at Fort Knox, Ky., as it is put through its paces. He shot the movie in the summer of 1970, after the first Vietnam draft lottery was instituted, and it is populated with aching young men as they become a marching, shooting, “Yes, sir”-ing unit. It’s a stark, dehumanizing process filled with bracingly human moments, as when a black

soldier accused of not following orders tells a white soldier: “Let’s be frank with each other, now you know this is not my country.”

One of the film’s most haunting moments takes place during a combat exercise. By then, the soldiers are marching in sync — chanting “Mr. Nixon drop the bomb/Cuz I don’t want to go to ’Nam” — and seemingly ready for war. With their faces smeared in camouflage paint and leaves stuck on their helmets, they practice their moves, silently raising and lowering arms and legs to the sounds of buzzing insects. As one man lifts his arm, the camera follows the upward motion and then pauses on his delicate hand poised against the sky. It’s a near-holy image: With fingers as thin as a Gothic Jesus, this hand was made to kill and belongs to a man who might die. (M.D.)

Meetings

Political activists in the ’60s used to joke that “freedom is an endless meeting.” Mr. Wiseman, who began his career as a filmmaker in that decade, has a preoccupation with process that may be a generational characteristic. Or it may just be that he’s a sensitive chronicler of modern life, an enormous proportion of which consists of committee work.

A meeting — formal or informal, routine or hastily gathered, tedious or contentious — amounts to a Wiseman signature, like a shootout in a Tarantino movie or a dirty joke in a Judd Apatow comedy. When a group of people gather in a room, the business of the world is being done (or postponed or discussed or avoided, which amounts to the same thing). More crucial, it is being witnessed, by the camera and the audience, so that essential information can be imparted about the workings of law and order, art and politics, knowledge and power.

If you listen closely, you can glean useful insights into such matters. But you also gain a kind of ecstatic anthropological insight into rituals that are both banal and outlandish, and an initiation into the mysteries of human psychology. You notice



Frederick Wiseman at UB, 2012. Photo by BJ

posture and gesture, who talks too much and who stays silent, who is passive and who is aggressive. Meetings are the most quotidian moments in a Wiseman documentary, but also, often, the most intriguing. They are nuggets of real life and eruptions of pure theater. (A.O. Scott)

Discipline and Resistance

Action leads to reaction, and sometimes a push earns a well-deserved shove. That’s true throughout Mr. Wiseman’s work, which is filled with people — teachers, guards, bureaucrats, choreographers — telling other people what to do and how to do it, as well as where, when and why. Some of this can seem benign, as when executives in “National Gallery” (2014) meet to discuss the London museum of the title. When that talk turns to branding, though, and voices start to sharpen, a meeting about prestige, publicity and populism evolves into a larger debate about survival — as well as one very civilized power struggle.

In other Wiseman films, power is brutal and blunt. That’s particularly true in the earlier films, in which the black-and-white images are sometimes matched by a startling Manicheism. The harrowing “Law and Order” (1969) follows a mostly white police force in Kansas City, Mo., as its members go on patrol, answer calls and, in one case, bring a lost, weeping toddler back to the station. It’s a moment of serve-and-protect gentleness amid more difficult, at times violent encounters between cops and civilians, as in a horrifying scene in which a white plainclothes detective puts a chokehold on a black prostitute, an action so harsh her tongue juts out of her mouth.

It’s a dreadful, terrifying moment and, for this filmmaker, unusual in its viciousness. Generally, violence in Mr. Wiseman’s work remains implied and attenuated, and more a matter of ordinary domination. Few images will seem as familiar to viewers as the scene in “High School” (1968) when an official — the camera tagging behind — patrols one of the school’s concrete-block halls, demanding passes and ordering students to class. As he shoots out questions — “What are you doin’ here?,” “Where you goin’?,” “Pass?” — this disciplinarian isn’t just corralling kids, he is, of course, also preparing them for lives of 9 to 5 submission. Woe to the resisters! (M.D.)

Sound and Meaning

One of modern cinema’s great observers, Mr. Wiseman is also a prodigious listener, a visual artist who thinks like a musical composer. He harvests sounds along with images — in many of his films he operates the recording equipment as well as the camera — and shapes the material with an eye and ear for patterns and counterpoint, themes and variations.

In most documentaries, human speech is explanatory and expository: Much information is conveyed by means of voice-over narration and talking-head interviews. Mr. Wiseman avoids these techniques entirely. When people talk in his movies, they aren’t explaining themselves to us; they’re expressing themselves to one another. We eavesdrop not only to figure out what’s happening, but also to attend to idioms and rhythms, to the musical qualities of speech. We tune in to the ways language is used by deaf and blind children as well as by judges, politicians and teachers, and also to the different ways it sounds.

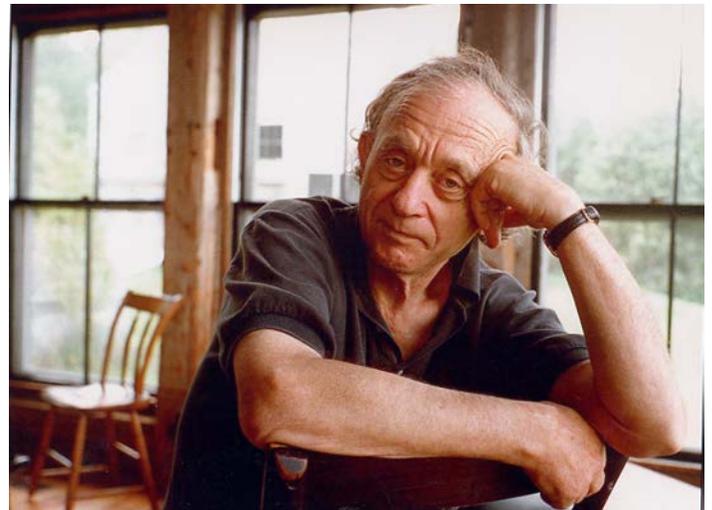
But words aren’t all we hear. We hear the cadence of boxers’, dancers’ and soldiers’ feet; the lapping of waves on the side of a boat; the whooshing of skis on an Aspen slope; the sighing of the wind in the trees of Central Park. (A.O.S.)

‘In Jackson Heights’

The boundaries of New York neighborhoods are determined more by local custom and real-estate industry hype than by law or charter. This makes “In Jackson Heights” — about a polyglot, lower-middle-class section of Queens — an anomaly in the Wiseman canon. Its setting is not a town or an institution, but something with a less definite shape and a more informal reason for being. Jackson Heights is an accident of demography, geography and zoning. Or maybe it’s a community, a place given coherence by the rough serendipity of strangers adjusting to one another’s presence.

Who are they? How do they live together? How do they make it work? (“It” being that elusive thing we like to call democracy.) One answer, hardly surprising in a Wiseman film, is through meetings. We observe gatherings of senior citizens, gay and lesbian residents and recent immigrants. Their conversations are by turns personal, practical and philosophical, and they revolve around the fundamental issues of civic order, which are shown to be at once mundane and grand. How do we keep our streets safe? How do we balance rights and obligations? How do we pursue prosperity without trampling our cherished traditions and common spaces?

The wonder of “In Jackson Heights” — Mr. Wiseman’s most Whitmanesque film — is that it grounds a vision of America in the particulars of daily life. It discovers a hero in the person of [Daniel Dromm](#), a New York City councilman who tackles the job of representing his neighborhood with shambling, inexhaustible good cheer. Some of the most moving scenes take place in Mr. Dromm’s office, where members of his staff answer phone calls from constituents who need to talk to someone in government. They don’t always have the right branch — their concerns include constitutional law and United States military policy — but the courtesy and patience with which they are treated provide a timely and permanent lesson in democratic values. (A.O.S.)



Philippe Pilard: “Frederick Wiseman, Chronicler of the Western World” (*La Sept/Arte*)

Fred Wiseman is probably one of today’s greatest living documentary filmmakers. For close to thirty years, thanks to the Public Broadcast Service (PBS), he has created an exceptional body of work consisting of thirty full length films devoted primarily to exploring American institutions. Over time these

films have become a record of the western world, since now more than ever as we approach the century's close, nothing North American is really foreign to us.

The institutions that Wiseman examined early in his career – a hospital, a high school, army basic training, a welfare center, a police precinct – have “problems” that the filmmaker uncovers. His approach reveals the profound acknowledged and unacknowledged conformity and inequality of American society. Wiseman's films are also a reflection on democracy. What do his films portray, the “American dream” or the “air conditioned nightmare”? Both, but also a questioning of the world and of existence.

Occasionally, his films describe less circumscribed institutions – the world of fashion, a public park, and a ski resort. In addition to examining the social and ethical questions he is not afraid to confront the “big” metaphysical questions particularly in the films about handicapped children and dying patients. The filmmaker is trying to encompass all of human experience in his films.

In the past, Wiseman had already made movies outside the borders of his own country, in the Sinai, in Germany, and in Panama. In each of these films, however, his subject was Americans abroad.

In 1993, in his film *BALLET*, he followed the American Ballet Theatre rehearsals in New York and performances in Europe. For a long time Wiseman had wanted to make a film in France and in 1995 he tackled that most French of institutions, The Comédie Française. Both in *BALLET* and *LA COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE* Wiseman raises questions about the conditions necessary for artistic creation: how to create those conditions which allow a director, an actor, or a dancer to achieve the goal of a perfect even sublime performance; how the specific dialect for the theatre works, the dialect which both places in opposition and transcends the solitude of individual creation and group collaboration.

“Documentaries, like theatre pieces, novels or poems are forms of fiction,” claims Wiseman. Over the years his films have become more a skillful mix of observation, testimony, reflection, an absence of prejudice, and courage, and humor. A complex body of work, as great works of fiction (novels, drama, music, and film) can be, with the same profundity, contradictions, and questions without answers.



Kaleem Aftab & Alexandra Weltz: “Interview with Frederick Wiseman” (Film West 400)

Fred Wiseman is one of the most influential and prolific figures in documentary filmmaking. He started filming in the mid

1960s when advances in camera technology revolutionised the documentary method by enabling the synchronised recording of image and sound. Since then he has directed over 25 documentary films, mainly for WNET Channel 13 in New York and one fiction film, *Seraphita's Diary* (1982). Wiseman is very much the silent auteur. His films are marked by an absence of commentary or music and there are no direct interviews to camera. This style, being an observational approach, was picked upon as marking a distinction between the boundary of reality and fiction on celluloid, and was placed in the emerging school of Direct Cinema or Cinema Verite.

In his films Wiseman tends to look at American society and its functioning, as it is portrayed or mirrored in state institutions. Some of the best-known subjects he has tackled include *High School* (1968), *Law and Order* (1969), *Hospital* (1971), *Welfare* (1975), *Multi-Handicapped* (1987), *High School II* (1994), and *Public Housing* (1997). The films display a void between the administrators of the institutions and the populous in need of the service. This is perhaps best illustrated in the 'High School' films in which several months of school life are compressed into one day, with the imaginable comic results. Here the official ideology in which public schools are proclaimed the embodiment of an egalitarianism ideally designed to level the differences between rich and poor is contrasted to images of bored, un-enthused students rebelling against the pomposities of their instructors. Yet character portraits do not preoccupy the films, which slice through the authoritarian mannerisms of state institutions with a systematic critique. The refusal to sensationalise through direct questioning, voice-overs and numerous cuts of the subject matter only adds to the idea that what is being presented holds an inner truth. His latest film, *Belfast, Maine*, takes on a broader scope, yet it is definitely a Wiseman film carrying all of his usual characteristics. The film is a reversal in that it shows how the community deals with institutions rather than the vice versa, exposing how one of Maine's poorest towns deals with high unemployment and low aspirations through an arbitrary lens. The work of Fred Wiseman will be the subject of two retrospectives in the UK this year. The first being at the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival followed in October by an appraisal of his work by the NFT.

KA & AW: You have been described as a 'master of observational cinema' most recently in the programme for the London Film Festival. Do you think that this is an apt title?

FW: I started making these movies just a few years after technical advances made it possible to shoot synchronised sound documentaries with available light. It seemed to me that America was an undiscovered country from the point of view of documentary film. There are a lot of good subjects, in fact millions of them and the effort was to make movies about common, everyday experiences. If I was lucky enough and hung around long enough you can get some very funny things, sad things, benign things in ordinary experience that if they were scripted you'd think that the script writer had an amazing imagination. Not that I thought it through that completely at the time and I guess it's now a process of retroactive rationalisation. What I try to do is edit the films so that they will have a dramatic structure, that is why I object to some extent to the term observational cinema or cinema verite, because observational cinema to me at least connotes just hanging around with one

thing being as valuable as another and that is not true. At least that is not true for me and cinema verite is just a pompous French term that has absolutely no meaning as far as I'm concerned. The effort is to be selective about your observations and organise them into a dramatic structure. Why do you think that America, given its film history, was an untapped market in terms of documentary films? I was not the first one to make documentaries in America; there are lots of documentary makers who were before me. Leacock, Pennebaker, They all started a bit before I did some in the '30s in America and as old as I am I can't say that I am the father of American documentary. There were documentary filmmakers interested in making films not about the same subjects but using the same technical facilities. What separates me from others and them from me is our choice of subject matter. A lot of American documentary filmmakers before me made films where people got followed around but they made them about one person, or a small group of people. What I chose to do was to make the place the star rather than one person.



KA & AW: How did you see yourself being different and developing documentary in America?

FW: It's partially related to the fact, and I still think it's true, that America is largely unexplored. What I chose to do was make films about institutions, not because I had a specific interest in an institution but rather because an institution provided a boundary. It served the same function as the lines of a tennis court. I simply saw whatever went on in the confines of that building or that limited geographical location as appropriate to the film and anything outside isn't. Rather than have a diffuse look at a wide area, it is to have an intense look at one place.

KA & AW: How much of a grip on reality can you get when you make documentaries? By having a dramatic structure, do you feel that the cutting and editing process makes you create some sort of fiction?

FW: Of course. The final film resembles fiction although it is based on un-staged, un-manipulated actions. I don't manipulate the events, but the editing is highly manipulative and the shooting is highly manipulative, not in the sense that people do things differently from what they will ordinarily do, but the way that people are shot. First of all what you choose to shoot, the way you shoot it, the way you edit it and the way you structure it.

KA & AW: Doesn't the fact of a camera being at the scene change the filmed situations also?

FW: That's another issue because I don't think that the camera really changes the way that people behave. All of those things that I just mentioned represent subjective choices that you have to make. Particularly the organisation of a film is arbitrary not in the sense that you throw the film up the stairs and wherever it lands is the order of the film, but arbitrary in the sense that it represents deliberate choices. For instance in the Belfast movie I had 110 hours of material. I was there for eight

weeks and of the 110 hours I shot, I only used 4 hours - near nothing. The compression within a sequence represents choice and then the way the sequences are arranged in relationship to the other represents choice.

KA & AW: Why do you think the camera doesn't affect people's behaviour when surely their sensibility changes?

FW: How do you know that? I don't know about your experiences, but people who have been in my movies - because I have asked them about this - they may be conscious of the fact that their picture is being taken. If they change their behaviour, they change it in the way of saying I don't want my picture taken. If they agree to have their picture taken... most of us in life don't have the capacity to act differently. I mean when your friends are taking a picture and you don't like it, you feel self-conscious and may clown around but that in my experience or at least with the people I have been dealing with in my movies they don't do that. If they do, that is a way of saying don't take my picture.

KA & AW: Do you think that people get used to the camera being there?

FW: Well often the first time you see them is the moment of shooting. It depends on the situation. For example, I made a film about a welfare centre a long time ago and while the workers in the centre knew that there was a movie being made, the clients just walked through the door. There are some extraordinary things in that movie and I did not create the events but the fact is that the clients were not bothered and it did not interfere with what they said. All this of course is subjective, but there is a variety of checks that at least I think confirm my view of it. When you are making one of these movies most of the time you are hanging around, you're not shooting. But the camera is always there because you have to be ready to shoot. Part of the technique is to be able to go at least at a second's notice and the mike is always prominent. It's quite funny to watch and it's amazing - people will do anything. Often you see a lot of the same people you have shot in a previous sequence or you will subsequently shoot, and you are listening, observing, what they are saying and doing. Their behaviour is not different, whether the camera is on or off.

KA & AW: How do you get the subjects to reveal aspects of their lives in front of your camera?

FW: Because I don't ask them to do anything. All I ask permission for is to be present when they are going ahead doing what they ordinarily would be doing when I'm not there.

KA & AW: You don't feel that you have to be there for a certain amount of time before the subject is comfortable with your presence?

FW: In a few instances I have been there before filming. For example when I did a movie about the 'Comédie Française' I was around for a couple of months before the shooting. Not to get people accustomed to the idea of the movie but to get permission to make the movie. More often I'm only at the place a day or at most two days before the shooting starts. Even then I generally only meet the staff because often the other characters are not there. For example my film about the welfare state was in

New York. It would have been hard to notify all the people on welfare that I was going to film a movie.

KA & AW: When you watch the films, you can see that they are intended to speak for themselves, there is no voice-over or other distorting technic, as if they try to stay as objective as possible. A lot of these films were an insight look into government institutions and the way they work. Surely you had some intentions or pre-assumptions about showing such an insight into American society?

FW: For sure the films are comments, but whatever the comment is, is the film. If I can make the comment in 25 words or less then I should not have made the movie. A lot of the movies have been about the relationship between the individual and the state as has been expressed through public institutions, but I hope that I don't make whatever the comment is a simple one.

KA & AW: What was it about High Schools that made you go back and shoot another one. Was this because you felt you missed something the first time around?

FW: No. You always miss something. It is a completely different kind of high school. The first high school was all white, with 4,000 students in Philadelphia. There were 12 black students. High school 2 was done in Spanish Harlem in a high school where there were only 225 students. It was 45 percent black and 45 percent Hispanic and 10 percent white and other. The educational philosophy was completely different. It was much more orientated around the ethnic backgrounds of the students. It's really two different worlds. It was not a question of seeing where High School education was at 25 years later. It was just looking at another experience.

KA & AW: Do you not feel that the change in emphasis on what you wanted to shoot was evocative of a change in American society?

FW: I'm a bit weary of that, because I'm not too good at cultural generalisations. I mean it is up to other people who know a lot more about education than I do, because really what I know is my own experience having gone to school and having been to various high schools. I was struck by the fact that the first high school movie was made in 1968 and I still meet people who have seen the film saying it's just like their high school. They have graduated from high school any time from the 1920s to the 1990s. Which I find sort of sad, and funny and amazing. In the second high school film the school had a more experimental curriculum. I have no idea how common that kind of curriculum is. I would guess that similar kinds of things are being tried in other major American cities where there are substantial minority populations.

KA & AW: How do you try and represent the relationship between the individual and the state?

FW: That is perhaps a pompous and abstract statement that I made. Just in the ordinary sense that a High School is a state institution. When you see what goes on in a high school, presumably the teachers in a high school feel that they have...its not that the abstract of the state is imposing on themthe

teachers have a certain view of what their moral, ethical and educational responsibilities are toward the students. Since they are employees of the state... I don't believe in the state in the big brother sense... that is necessarily... that God sends out a message that you have to do this or other thing, but there are certain guidelines that the Board of City Education or the Federal department sets out, which may or may not be conflicting and the teachers all have a sense of what there responsibility is toward the young minds and helping people get an education. In the sense that high school is a state institution and one of the things that I'm interested in and was interested in, in both high school



films, is the values that are expressed on the assumption that those are common values. At least common to the high school and at least to other places.

KA & AW: You are very prolific in your filmmaking, finishing one film and moving onto the other. As you're filming do you develop ideas for your next project and are they always institutional based?

FW: I always have a list of films I want to make.

KA & AW: And the institution?

FW: I don't have a very precise definition, because almost every limited subject can qualify, by my definition.

KA & AW: So what made you choose to have an observational look at a small town like Belfast, Maine?

FW: Well because small towns and small cities are very characteristic of American life. It is something I wanted to do for a long time. It seemed to me to be a natural extension of the things that I have been doing.

KA & AW: What was it that was specific about Belfast, Maine that made it a place that you wanted to choose, rather than another similar town or city. Was it a random choice?

FW: It wasn't random in the sense that I rolled dice. I happen to spend three of four months a year near Belfast, so I knew the town and it's a beautiful old town near the water. It was shot in the fall.

KA & AW: You made one fiction film and no more, why was that?

FW: I have written some scripts for other fiction films, but I haven't got the money to make them. You need a lot more money for these films. I did not try to raise the money independently like when I make documentaries. I went right to traditional industry sources and they were not interested because the films were not very commercial. I did not have the stomach to go looking around at individual investors as I would have needed two or three million dollars 15 years ago

KA & AW: How much does it cost to make one of your documentaries?

FW: When I first started it was about \$60,000. Now it is about \$400,000 or \$500,000. The change is only due to inflation.

KA & AW: Are you government funded?

FW: The money comes from a variety of sources and not always the same source. Some of it comes from Public Broadcast Service (PBS), some of it comes from Corporation of Public Broadcasting which is another entity of PBS. For Belfast

it came from those two sources plus the National Endowment of the Arts. Sometimes I get money from foundations. There are three or four foundations in America that give money for film. But it is still hard to raise the funding. It takes a lot of time and effort to get the money. As long as I can get the money I make the film.

KA & AW: Direct Cinema came about because of technical innovation. How do you feel about the possibilities offered by the digital medium, especially cost wise?

FW: You almost answer your own question... because it is a lot cheaper. The quality is not quite as good, but it is going to mean that a lot more people have an opportunity to make their films. It remains to be seen whether a lot more good films will be made, because the technical advances don't necessarily mean quality.

KA & AW: Does it have any influence on your films?

FW: Not so far. It depends what you mean by influence. If I cannot raise the money to continue shooting in 16mm the fact that I cannot raise the money will mean that I will have to go to one of the newer technologies. To the extent that I can get money to continue doing what I have previously been doing it will not have an effect at all. I still edit on a Steenbeck, I don't use an Avid. I can't afford an Avid and also I don't need all the things that an Avid has because I don't do fades or dissolves. I don't mind taking the time to find material or rewinding. I like handling the film as it gives a chance to think about the material. I know guys who used to edit on Steenbecks or the 16mm equivalent who switched to Avids and some say its great and others they don't like it.

KA & AW: But you never thought of changing your style of work by adapting to these new technologies?

FW: I'm not sure how it would change it. In terms of access to materials I'm not sure that it will change it at all, in terms of how it was shot, maybe, but not really because there are certain stylistic things that I like and I don't know if I would change them if I had a camera the size of my hand.

KA & AW: Do you think it will change the way documentaries or films in general are shot, since historically changes were often brought about by new technologies?

FW: I think all films are shot differently depending on the point of view of the persons doing it. Depending on your point of view you could say that it would make a difference to democratisation of cinema. Or you could say that a lot more mindless movies are going to be made or a few good ones. It depends if you want to be snotty or not. It remains to be seen. I would not predict it. Certainly a lot more movies will be made.

KA & AW: Talking of greater democratisation of cinema, what do you think of the Dogma '95 movement?

FW: I think that those guys have a great sense of humour. They have hit on an idea that got them an enormous amount of attention and publicity. It is a masterstroke of PR.

KA & AW: Rather than a film doctrine?

FW: If they really believe it... I don't see why people should not use whatever technology is available to make as good a film as they can. It's true that because of the fast film stock and because of the available light you can shoot under any circumstances and that's great. But since film is about light, if you can augment the light and get better quality I don't see why you shouldn't do that. I think that the whole notion about having rigid rules to filmmaking is ridiculous. As far as I'm concerned, film is about what the picture looks like. The ideological roots of the film I really don't care about. When I read their pronouncements I assumed that they were comedians...

KA & AW: Do you not think that the Dogma '95 manifesto makes movies more like Direct Cinema, using similar

techniques and mimicking a documentary style?

FW: If by movies you mean traditional things like script and cast. They are adapting documentary techniques to movies. If you think that a movie is anything that works on celluloid then it makes no difference what the technique is.

KA & AW: You say that you don't like the term observation cinema or Cinema Verite, so how would you coin your own

films?

FW: Movies... documentary movies... whatever that means.

KA & AW: What do you think about docu-soaps and their increasing presence on Television?

FW: I've never seen any. I have heard of them.

KA & AW: How come?

FW: Because I don't live here.

KA & AW: They have them in America...

FW: You're right, I don't watch television.

KA & AW: Why not?

FW: Because one, it's a matter of time, because I work a lot and two, because when I have the time, I would rather read. If I watch TV it is usually to watch Basketball or Tennis. I don't even watch other documentary films.

KA & AW: Is there not a curiosity to watch a docu-soap and see how they use reality to create drama using a far greater fictionalised editing process than in your films?

FW: I suppose maybe I'm not curious. I did not even know they were on in America.

KA & AW: Don't you think that there might be a change in the view on documentaries and how much reality they are really representing by creating a confusion between the documentary and fiction format. Does the crossing over of the genres make a difference to this?

FW: Difference in what sense? It does not make a difference in that I have an interest in controlling it. The idea that it can be controlled is ridiculous. It will be up to the viewer to sort their way through it. I guess that I have a sense that most people know when they are being conned and they can tell the difference between staged and un-staged events. It's not that



some really good filmmakers can't do things that appear to be unstaged but are staged, ultimately they will give the game away because they want to take credit for it. I don't think people are that stupid.

KA & AW: It's not really about being stupid though. For some people how they perceive the world is through television...

FW: How do you know that? Television is seen as impartial, but how do I know that things I see on television are really happening as I see them?

KA & AW: Does that mean your experience of what the world is like is by watching television and not your own experience?

FW: In some parts of the world...

KA & AW: Do you not measure the perception of people you meet against what you are told on television?

FW: Some parts of the world I have never been to. For example the Gulf War is an example of how people's consciousness happened on the television.

KA & AW: But the Gulf War was also covered by print journalism? FW: For sure but the first source of information is television for a lot of people. So what is the point you are trying to make?

KA & AW: It gets back to the distortion of fact and fiction. By showing something as real and not acknowledging the auteur, does that not bend peoples perceptions as an audience?

FW: I don't know how anybody ever knows what the audience are thinking. Everyone talking about audience... maybe if they are doing focus groups or using marketing techniques that are being used in television and the movies, they may have some idea. When I'm editing I can't think of the audience, I have a hard enough time making up my own mind and figuring out what I think. How can I possibly anticipate what you are going to think of Belfast, Maine, without knowing if you are ever going to see Belfast, Maine. If I'm sitting in Maine or Boston editing the movie, how can I possibly know what the spectators' reaction is going to be, what there view is going to be if they come from outside America, what they know about America and what they know about small town America. It's impossible. So the only standard I can have is my own judgement, whether it be good or bad.

KA & AW: You said you chose Belfast, Maine as it was a representation of small town America?

FW: Again, I don't even know that. I said that I hoped it would be like other towns. I haven't spent time in these other towns. Other people who have spent a lot of time in other small towns might say, oh yeah this is very common.

KA & AW: You have to admit that going through four or five hours of footage is quite challenging to the spectator. Why do you not make your documentaries more accessible to the general public by making them a bit shorter?

FW: It's because I feel that I have an obligation to the people who have given me permission to make the film. To make a film that accurately reflects what I am feeling about the subject matter. Belfast is a complicated place and even four hours fails to suggest the complexity of it. If somebody thinks it is boring and too long they are not obliged to stay. If they are interested they will stay. Again, it is part of the whole issue of not knowing how to calculate or assess the interest of the audience. Should I cater to an audience that has been brought up on MTV and video

games? Why? I was not brought up that way and it does not particularly interest me. I think that it's ultimately condescending because if I assume that the audience only wants something like MTV or video games that assumes that they are all idiots. Or more or less idiots. It's not necessarily idiots who watch MTV.

KA & AW: Does the form control the content?

FW: Again I have a limited experience. I can't think of anything that I have seen, and again that is very limited, that has been any good in that style. What I have seen has always been extraordinarily superficial and basically mindless. If I were to adapt my interests to that technique with the idea of reaching people who are only interested in that style, it would be condescending and it will not be fair to the people who has given me permission to use their life experience in the movie. A life experience is not like MTV. Even Belfast has a lot more cuts than my other films, it has something like 3,600 cuts which is an enormous number for a documentary film. So in one sense it is my MTV movie because there are so many cuts.

KA & AW: Are your films shown on TV?

FW: Yes. Belfast was shown on prime time in America on February 4.

KA & AW: All at once or in parts?

FW: All at once.

KA & AW: Were there breaks for commercials?

FW: No. It's on public service television and there are no commercials. So it started at 9pm and finished at 1am. I did a longer film called Near Death which is six hours and that was shown in one show in America and France and Germany.

KA & AW: Do you stipulate that you want your film shown in one sitting?

FW: I have complete editorial control. In that I have the right to turn down the broadcast. I insist on that contractually so that they can't split the film even if they wanted to. I fight very hard for these rights and I ask for it. It's important because it screws up the film. Even here at the London Film Festival there is a half hour intermission that did not appeal to me very much. It is a risk that people will get out of the movie.

KA & AW: Will knowing that you are in the cinema for four hours straight change your experience?

FW: To the extent that your mind is in the movie and you don't go out and have a coffee and escape from the film.



Peter Travers: "Monrovia, Indiana' Review: Small Town U.S.A., Frederisk Wiseman Style" (Rolling Stone)

You may expect sparks to fly in a [documentary](#) about an Indiana town whose citizens voted 76 percent in favor of the liberal punching bag who now occupies the White House. But

nothing as simplistic as Trump-bashing — though that would be so satisfying — would ever occur to Frederick Wiseman, a master chronicler of American institutions (a hospital, a zoo, a racetrack, public school, a boxing gym, a police department). In more than a half-century of filmmaking, Wiseman, now 88, has always put journalistic integrity at the forefront of his documentaries, from the controversial 1967 work *Titicut Follies* (about a state prison for the criminally insane) to last year's [Ex Libris — The New York Public Library](#). The elderly verité statesman has admitted that bias can show up in the editing, but he refuses to rely on narration or similar signposts to tell audiences what he's thinking ... or more importantly, what they should think.

There's no fake news in a Wiseman documentary. *Monrovia, Indiana* is his 42nd nonfiction feature and it's rigorously non-judgemental. The farming town of Morovia (population 1,063), a part of Morgan County, is mostly white, aging, Republican, pro-gun and pro-God, but not necessarily in that order. A gun lobby ad states: "Welcome to Indiana, home to a million concealed carry permits; enjoy your stay." Notice is taken of fields sprouting corn and soybeans, of cattle being numbered for sale. Wiseman's camera follows the good folks

into church at weddings and funerals. He listens to them in barber shops, beauty parlors and restaurants, follows them into town council meetings where the lack of workable fire hydrants is seriously and lengthily considered. Trump is never addressed directly. Monrovia don't talk politics, or at least Wiseman doesn't show them doing so. When a group of Hells Angels vrooms past on their hogs, it's like a thunderclap. And another scene, with a vet, amputating the tail of a dog, plays like a horror film in this context.

What is he aiming to show us in this impressionistic look at business as usual in our aging republic? Recent Wiseman docs, such as *At Berkeley* and *In Jackson Heights* bustled with activity on a culturally diverse landscape. In this rural American town, citizens don't advance growth — they worry about it, expressing concern about letting too much of the outside in. At two-and-a-half hours, *Monrovia, Indiana* often feels static and low-key to a fault. As always, Wiseman is working hard at being fair, refusing to condemn or even condescend to what his camera sees. Still, the thought persists that just maybe this portrait of a closed-off and threatened heartland is indicative of what goes on in the polling booth where folks vote their fears in silence. And that is a scary proposition, indeed.

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Frederick Wiseman at UB, 2012. Photo by BJ