



Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman

By Thomas W Benson, Professor Carolyn Anderson PhD



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Providing in-depth accounts and close critical examinations of nine of Wiseman's films—*Titicut Follies*, *High School*, *Basic Training*, *Essene*, *Juvenile Court*, *Primate*, *Welfare*, *Canal Zone*, and *The Store*—this second edition features a new introduction, a revised and updated filmography, and an updated bibliography.

No book on documentary film has ever analyzed in such detail the work of a single filmmaker. In impeccable close readings of his films, Tom Benson and Carolyn Anderson explore how Frederick Wiseman has elaborated his widely admired sensibility.

A special feature is an extended chapter on the legal difficulties encountered by Wiseman's first documentary, *Titicut Follies*, an unflinching depiction of conditions in the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Bridgewater. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts took Wiseman to court, seeking to prevent the exhibition of *Titicut Follies*. In New York State, three judges refused to issue an injunction against the film. In Massachusetts, the film was the subject of a sensational series of legislative hearings and a court trial, in which the principals gave very different stories of the conditions and terms under which the film had been negotiated and produced.

Wiseman, himself an attorney, exchanged charges and countercharges with Massachusetts Attorney General Elliot Richardson, and the controversy split the civil liberties community. Judge Harry Kalus, calling *Titicut Follies* "a nightmare of ghoulish obscenities," not only ruled for the Commonwealth but ordered that the film be destroyed. On appeal, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court modified the Kalus ruling, allowing the film to be seen only by professional audiences. *Titicut Follies* became the only American film whose exhibition is restricted for reasons other than obscenity or national security.

After *Titicut Follies*, Wiseman went on to become a major independent documentary producer. Many of his films have been shown on public television in the United States and at film festivals around the world. The films are widely admired and often highly controversial. Wiseman has developed a unique cinematic rhetoric that draws from both the documentary and fiction traditions to

describe American institutions: a high school, basic training, a monastery, a juvenile court, a primate research center, a welfare agency, the Panama canal zone, and a department store. Benson and Anderson scrutinize each of these films, record the reactions of some of his subjects and audiences, and present the heretofore neglected contributions of his four cinematographers: John Marshall, Richard Leiterman, William Brayne, and John Davey.

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Editorial Review

Review

Review of the first edition...

"This is a rare marriage of film and rhetorical criticism, in which the authors pay intricate attention to cinematic technique, not for its own sake, but within the larger context of examining how the films work rhetorically. They are particularly concerned with how the audience is likely to interpret the films—with the various reading strategies that Wiseman seems to invite in each one. . . . This is a very fine book for the serious student. It is a complex, intelligent, careful and continually insightful treatment of an arresting subject and ranks as an important contribution to the scholarship of film and rhetoric."—*Quarterly Journal of Speech*

From the Publisher

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About the Author

Thomas W. Benson is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Rhetoric and Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at the Pennsylvania State University. His many books include the edited volume, *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*.

Carolyn Anderson is an associate professor and undergraduate program director in the Department of Communications at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. With Thomas W. Benson, she is the author of *Documentary Dilemmas: Frederick Wiseman's Titicut Follies*.

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