

Making Documentary Film: Frederick Wiseman and His Collaborators

Frederick Wiseman is one of the most original, consequential, and productive documentary filmmakers of the past century. Winner of a MacArthur genius award, an honorary Oscar, and many festival awards, and the honoree at more than seventy-five international retrospectives of his work, Wiseman has continued to make films into his nineties, starting as producer of *The Cool World* (1963), then commencing his career as director with *Titicut Follies* (1967) and continuing through more than fifty years to *Menus Plaisirs—Les Troisgros* (2023). So far.

Wiseman's films have been examined in scholarly books and many academic and journalistic essays, all of which note his depictions of life in a variety of institutions—prison, hospital, school, research lab, public housing, courtroom, dance troupe, theater, abattoir, military unit, missile silo, monastery, zoo, racetrack, police department, research university, welfare office, and more. The films bring an incisive, patient, and inquiring eye and ear to the structures of power in modern society. The films are typically long, with patient attention to meetings and conversations and processes. Taken one by one, Wiseman's documentaries are elegant artistic constructions and incisive reflections on the exercise of influence, the contingency of choice and circumstance, and the contradictions of institutional maintenance.

There can be no doubt that the controlling force and intelligence driving these films are Frederick Wiseman's. He chooses the subjects, organizes the search for funding, gains institutional permission to bring camera and sound recorder to the institution, participates in the filmmaking as the sound recordist on the spot, and edits the films—usually a much longer process than the actual shooting and recording. For decades the films have been distributed primarily from his own production and distribution company, Zipporah Films; in the 2010s the films became available through the streaming service Kanopy. Wiseman is justly celebrated as the presiding genius.

And yet, of course, Wiseman does not work entirely alone. On the typical Wiseman location, Wiseman operates a sound recorder and a boom microphone, and a single cinematographer operates a camera. A camera assistant is usually present to provide fresh reels or other assistance. Wiseman's films were shot on 16mm film until he moved, with some reluctance, to digital recording and editing, beginning with *Crazy Horse* (2011). Wiseman then edits the resulting forty or so hours of film and sound into a film of two or more hours, sometimes many more hours—the numbers in each case varying from one project to another, amounting to a large quantity of film being very selectively reduced to the finished film. With rare exceptions, the films are shot with a single camera, but the editing of a single sequence often employs cutaways and interpolated shots of reactions, for example, while a speaker established as a focal character continues to talk. Such editing is necessarily not strictly literal, though, following the grammar of



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narrative films, it appears to be so, unobtrusively creating a dramatic space and time, allowing for narrative coherence and a range of thematic and ironic effects. The skill of the editor creates these complex effects in the finished film, but they are possible because an experienced cinematographer, who understands what Wiseman is going to need in the editing room and has taken care to supply a reservoir of such detail out of which an edited version can be created, with the illusion of continuity.

The films have been formally stable over the decades: institutional settings, lack of dominant temporal timeline in many cases, long takes, many extended conversations, single camera, primarily synchronous sound, available light, absence of authoritative offscreen narrators or onscreen talking heads. And yet there have been changes over the years. While working with John Davey, Wiseman began to use color, beginning with the visually stylized fiction feature *Seraphita's Diary* in 1982. Wiseman had often said that he preferred to shoot most of his documentaries in black and white, though for practical or aesthetic reasons he sometimes preferred color. His first color documentary, *The Store* (1983), filmed at Neiman-Marcus in Dallas, was filmed in color to emphasize the appeal of the expensive goods for sale. He said that he would have preferred to shoot *Ballet* (1995) in black and white but that the color stock then available was faster than the black and white and more suitable to the ambient light levels. Most of the films since 1982 have been shot in color.

Similarly, while many filmmakers were turning to video shooting and digital editing, Wiseman said that he preferred the tactility and pace of editing film stock and the quality of film compared to digital, though he did begin shooting in digital with *At Berkeley* (2013), owing largely to the increasing expense of shooting on film and the difficulty of finding film labs that would process 16mm film rushes quickly and the increasing necessity of conversion to digital for distribution.

Technological changes were occurring at the same time as ideological shifts that changed the cultural and historical contexts of the films. We have noted, as have some other critics, that over time Wiseman's films, which in the early days seemed scornful of the institutions he was observing, seemed in later years to be more mixed, and sometimes even celebratory in their attitude toward the institutions he was depicting. When Wiseman began his work in the late 1960s, his films, which were largely marketed on public television and university campuses, were produced and exhibited in the context of a country deep in the turmoil of the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the developing scandals of Watergate, and they spoke to the anti-institutional suspicions of many of the liberals in his audience. But even at the time, movement conservatism was gathering its forces, at first through the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater and the advocacy of William Buckley's *National Review*. That movement soon brought forth the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the presidential articulation of an anti-government ideology. Anti-institutionalism became largely a right-wing development, from Reagan to Newt Gingrich to George W. Bush to Donald Trump. In this changing context, Wiseman's films, without losing their critical edge and contemplative irony, began to make the case for the role of major public and cultural institutions.

In his first forty-three documentaries, from *Titicut Follies* (1967) through *City Hall* (2020), Frederick Wiseman worked with just four cinematographers. Two of the cinematographers, John Marshall (*Titicut Follies*) and Richard Leiterman (*High School* [1968]), worked on one film each.¹ From 1968 through 2020, Wiseman worked with only two cinematographers on the documentaries: William Brayne (*Law and Order* [1969] through *Sinai Field Mission* [1978]) and John Davey (*Manoeuvre* [1980] through *City Hall* [2020]). James Bishop was cinematographer for *Menus Plaisirs—Les Troisgros* (2023).

The brevity of John Marshall's association with Wiseman, and its premature truncation when Marshall withdrew from the project, indicate how tenaciously Wiseman has held to his control of the shape of his films, as he has later with their distribution and his public reputation. Although that first relationship ended in misunderstanding and some ill feeling, it appears that Wiseman's work with his other cinematographers has been congenial on both sides. Each of them, starting with a grounded understanding of what is in general meant by "direct cinema" or *cinéma vérité*, working side by side during the filming, and seeing over a long association what Wiseman as editor was doing as he shaped the material, was able to provide Wiseman with consistently distinguished camera work. Each of the cinematographers had his own observational, technical, and artistic skills, and each helped shape the films that Frederick Wiseman made of the hours of material they recorded and adapted his own work to Wiseman's editing style.

In the end, perhaps, the films speak for themselves. Insofar as they are important artistic, sociological, and in the broadest sense political documents, inviting us to examine how we interact with each other and our institutions, they deserve close critical attention. But the films, and hence our responses, are partly shaped by other processes that in turn shaped the films. For this reason, we have thought it important, in our own work with Wiseman's films, to engage in close textual analysis from a critical and cultural perspective, and also to inquire into the forces that shaped the films—from the process of seeking funding to negotiating with subjects, securing institutional consent to film, and navigating the artistic collaboration that goes into actual production.

As part of our own work in collaboration, as we prepared *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman* (1989, 2nd ed. 2002), *Documentary Dilemmas* (1991), and other works, we interviewed Frederick Wiseman's cinematographers, some of his subjects, and his sponsoring internal advocate at PBS, Robert Kotlowitz. We also attended some talks that Wiseman gave at university showings of his films, which we recorded and transcribed with his permission or in detailed notes. We included excerpts of the interviews in *Reality Fictions*. We have sometimes shared one or more of those interviews with other film scholars, and we have become convinced that the complete transcripts of these interviews are important enough to film and cultural history to merit stable publication, where they can be permanently accessible to interested students, scholars, journalists, and the public.

In the present work, we offer complete transcripts of our interviews with four of Wiseman's cinematographers and with Robert Kotlowitz. We have not interviewed Wiseman's most recent documentary cinematographer, Jim Bishop, whose assignment came after the completion of this

book. All of the interviews were recorded with the explicit understanding that we would use the transcripts in whole or in part in our published work.

The interviews open rich new avenues of research and criticism into the films of Frederick Wiseman, and, by extension, other documentary filmmakers: how collaboration is achieved before and during actual filming; the role of funding agencies and their interests in shaping the conception and execution of a film; how what amounts to authorial control is achieved (or not) in the editing process; the limits and affordances of film technologies, which are subject to ongoing change; the richly acute self-consciousness of experienced documentary cinematographers who are simultaneously taking into account their technical apparatus and the complex social world under their observation, any moment of which comes only once and must somehow be filmed so as to allow a finished film that is coherent, consistent with taken-for-granted rules of film grammar (without slavish adherence to those rules), and which allows for an honest view of the social drama they are filming. In these interviews, the cinematographers—John Marshall, Richard Leiterman, William Brayne, and John Davey—describe these processes with frankness, modesty, and generosity.

Among Frederick Wiseman's most important collaborators are his "subjects," the people we see in his films.² Our common language for documentary, and especially for *cinéma vérité*, is to see filmmakers as active agents and "subjects," those in front of the camera, as people simply being observed. It may well be true, as documentary filmmakers usually say, that people really are doing in front of the camera what they would be doing even if the camera were not there. Nevertheless, these are people who give their consent to be filmed, and to observe the fiction that the camera and microphone are not present. These actions are, in ethical and practical senses, acts of collaboration with the filmmaker.

The notion of collaboration is itself unstable, shifting, and uncertain. Frederick Wiseman's relation with his audiences is itself a sort of collaboration, as the films draw on shared, generic patterns of narrative and understandings of social power, and invite audiences to feel as if we are working out for ourselves what the films mean. A film, complete and of itself, is an inert object; only when it is seen does it come to life as a film on a screen and in the experience of an audience.

We have very lightly edited the interview transcripts to eliminate redundancies and irrelevancies, and to clean up the non-fluencies, hesitations, and repetitions that are characteristic of talk, but that make literal transcriptions difficult to follow. We occasionally insert paragraph breaks where they seem logical, to make the text more readable.

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Wiseman's primary contact at PBS, Robert Kotlowitz, were candid and gracious in explaining their working relations with Wiseman. Wiseman declined our request to include in this project a transcript of a talk he delivered at Bucknell University on November 12, 1985, which Tom Benson recorded with Wiseman's permission, subject to his review to be sure we did not "garble" his words. When he reviewed our transcription soon afterwards, he made no assertion that we had garbled his words but said that he did not want us to use the transcript. In 2021 we renewed our request to use the material for this project; he denied the request and we have honored his preference.

Over many years, colleagues, students, editors, librarians, technical specialists, and readers have offered us valuable observations, questions, and encouragement, and we thank them all. Our universities, deans, and department heads often extended special help, for which we are grateful—Tom to the Department of Communication Arts & Sciences, The College of Liberal Arts, and the Arts and Humanities Institute at Penn State University, and Carolyn to the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

In this work, we present each of the interviews with the cinematographers in the order of their association with Wiseman, followed by an interview with Robert Kotlowitz. Each interview is preceded by a brief introduction with some biographical and critical details. We were both present at all the interviews, and we both asked questions. In the interests of simplicity and readability, we present all questions without identifying whether they came from one author or the other. We include a filmography of Wiseman's documentary films, with primary production credits, and a select bibliography of some easily accessible Wiseman writings and interviews and our own earlier work on Wiseman's films.

Notes

¹ Richard Leiterman told us that he and Wiseman had begun work on a film with the Los Angeles Police Department in 1968 but that the LAPD withdrew from the project midway; Leiterman was not available when Wiseman arranged to film a police department in Kansas City.

² We interviewed Judge Kenneth A. Turner of the Memphis Juvenile Court in his chambers on April 8, 1988, where Judge Turner shared his recollections—and some documents—related to the filming of *Juvenile Court* (1973). We discussed the film and his court over a catfish lunch in his chambers and we observed him in action in his courtroom.

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