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**A Game Changer: How Frederick Wiseman's *The Titicut Follies* Changed the Way  
Film Reflects Mental Illness and Injustice**

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## **A Game Changer:**

### **Abstract**

It has become evident that film has the ability to invoke changes in a society. The social issue of the treatment of the mentally ill has always been the subject of films, although many films of past appear exploitative, sensationalist, crude, and ignorant of the realities of the issues being represented. In 1967, Frederick Wiseman's film, *The Titicut Follies*, despite winning numerous awards, created such controversy that it became the only film to be banned in the United States for reasons other than obscenity and national security until 1991. The film revealed gross mistreatment of the mentally ill in a state psychiatric facility. This essay posits that the influential and groundbreaking work was a major step not only in filmmaking but in the way filmmaking can reveal and reflect truths, and invoke social change. In a sense, Wiseman changed the paradigm of filmmaking and the documenting of reality.

### **Introduction**

“For those whom God to ruin has design'd, He fits for fate, and first destroys their mind,” wrote the poet, John Dryden and for many this seems like a reality. Over the years, the treatment of the mentally ill has ranged from the problematic to the inhumane. One of the most notable institutions that have been exposed for deplorable treatment of those in its charge in the second half of the twentieth century was the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Bridgewater, an abuse scandal that was brought to light by visionary filmmaker and documentarian, Frederick Wiseman in 1967.

Wiseman's film *The Titicut Follies* is not an expose' per se. It takes a clinical and objective approach to the material. The film pushes the limits of documentary, the elements of video, role of media in social justice, and ultimately reveals the power of the image. It challenges the relationship between reality and reproduction of reality thus forcing new perceptions of the nonfiction film.

### **That is Close Enough**

Indeed, it is evident that the mistreatment and the cruel mocking depicted in the film present an unsettling experience for the viewer as some critics have pointed out such as Jillian Smith. The viewer is allowed to breach propinquity, yet remained detached as if in a horror film. In the way *Follies* is a true horror film with deep sociological impact.

The moving image has the ability to invoke tactile responses in the viewer. The visceral content of *Follies* amplifies the disturbing sensation the viewer might feel. The feeling of disgust and shock generated by the film, in this particular case, evokes tactile as well as emotionally jarring processes within the viewer that elevates the film above exploitation by serving as a revelation of injustice. The film forces the viewer to confront

the morally corrupt paradigm of the institution by unflinchingly emphasizing raw physicality in its images to alarm the viewer's subconscious and conscious.

Snyder and Mitchell comment on the restrictive nature of the institution as they explain Wiseman's films "demonstrate the ways in which institutions, by their very nature, coerce acceptable behaviors and restrict bodily movement as their primary tactic" (291-292). The institutionalized restrictions are captured with immediacy and a sense of malice and the viewer may actually feel the restrictions of the inmates in viewing the film. The restrictive quality of this work becomes dually effective as it elicits primal, emotional response from its audience.

Using Walter Benjamin's theories on film, Jillian Smith argues in her essay on *Follies* that the film discomforts and generates its effect "by way of a tactile viewing, a viewing that removes the distance enjoyed by the observer, replacing it with an intensified sensational connection between viewer and viewed." Smith asserts, "By denying descriptive devices and contexts, Wiseman pushes the viewer from the transcendental position of knowing subject into an uncomfortably close-up relationship with the viewed." The ability to remain close yet detached from reality has always been an element of the moving image, yet in this case the proximity of the viewer to the subject matter is disturbingly close. There seems to be no entertainment value here, yet the film is artistically interwoven.

### **Political and Social Implications**

Critic Vineberg called *Follies*, "a legendary muckracker of a picture," though questions whether the reforms brought about by the film have held up. Regardless of the

actual political and social implications, the film's affect on viewers has been unquestionable.

Wiseman's film was banned "on the basis that Wiseman violated inmates' privacy. Yet, what strikes viewers is that there are few examples of objectifying film methods. In interviews Wiseman famously responds that the Bridgewater institution engaged in systematic violations of privacy-not his film," as Snyder and Mitchell explain (291-291).

The New York Times explains, "It was banned by a state court here six weeks before the debut" and "The United States Supreme Court has twice refused to hear the case. But Mr. Wiseman contends that state officials objected to the film because it was politically damaging. He added: 'The state has a conflict of interest. It asserts that it wants to protect the inmates' privacy rights, but it really doesn't want the public to know how these people are treated.' Two years after the initial ban, the state's highest court modified the prohibition by permitting screenings for journalists and professionals in the legal, human services, mental health and related fields."

Jillian Smith contends that in many ways *Follies* redefines the characteristics of a society in progress. Wiseman has interwoven the fabric of history of progress with what appears to be a regressed and dysfunctional institution. Smith explains that Wiseman reframes the paradigm of passive observation and supplants it with a new paradoxical dynamic- one of being passively active. Additionally, she asserts that Wiseman abandons technical innovation for one of a more effective montage as she states:

*Titicut Follies* demonstrates that documentary, as a genre, can be the Benjaminian historical fragment par excellence - the concretization of history that allows it to collide with the present in shocking montage to break the insidious ideology of progress. Bringing Benjaminian ideas of cinema and history together allows us to posit dialectic as relentless horizontal montage, rather than teleological progress, and further to show *Titicut Follies* as a rare instance of a film that threatens to reorganize the perceptual field and even to reorganize subjectivity. Indeed, the singular response by the law, witnessed in its lashing and contorted efforts to contain the force of the film, speaks most clearly to this threat” (103).

Is the film medium as a whole an invasion of privacy? There seems to be a voyeuristic aspect of any recorded moving image. Certainly to reframe the way viewers take in the suffering of other individuals by viewing a film such as *Follies*, an inevitable loss of privacy may become apparent. Perhaps in films that present social issues, the invasion of privacy may be unavoidable, but for perhaps for a more ethical treatment overall. *The Titicut Follies* pushes the limits of the social film, thus evoking social change through being *intrusively unobtrusive* and by adhering to a certain aesthetic while employing objectivity.

Previously, mental illness had been portrayed in films with sensationalism and gross misinterpretation. For example fictional films like *The Snake Pit*, *Three Faces of Eve*, *Spellbound*, *Psycho*, and myriad other representations of schizophrenia, personality disorders, neuroses, and for the purposes of this essay, institutions distorted the image of

humans with thinking and emotional disorders and demonized them as well. When *Follies* was made there were still many misunderstandings of the mentally ill. The Bridgewater Institution took the most violent, sociopathic and low- functioning members of society and housed them. As the film would show, the patients at this institution received cruel and unusual punishment for which the American Constitution defends against.

Kevin Hagopian explains that “Wiseman’s observant eye has always deconstructed the public sphere and its spatial emanations, exhibiting deep cynicism about the pretensions of public institutions to serve their constituents in a benevolent and humane fashion”(77). Obviously Hagopian’s observation can translate into one of a mistrust of authority. After all, Wiseman’s film appeared right at cusp of counterculture. Hagopian explains that “Wiseman’s analysis of a state mental hospital, ostensibly a site of healing, was so corrosive that it brought to mind a portrait of Bedlam, a place where the mentally ill were doomed to engage in a parody of care guaranteed to infantilize them and render them permanently susceptible to state power” (77). As it is, Wiseman seems to be commenting, though in a subtle fashion, on Bridgewater and institutions like Bridgewater’s capacity for constructing an environment that is not of a therapeutic nature, or even a structure of justice, but that creates childlike dependency on the state. This childlike dependency is a manifestation of a system of control that state seems to be extending into the lives of citizens. Thus, *Follies* challenges that system, but be subversive without overt intentions. In a sense, Wiseman has created an anti-authority counterculture film that would seem to fit with the zeitgeist of the mid to late nineteen sixties.

As aforementioned, Wiseman does not appear to have a political agenda. He explains, “My movies are more novelistic than journalistic or ideological in their approach. I always try to reflect the complexity and ambiguity of the place that is the subject of the film, rather than have ideological blinders on and try to present a particular political or social point of view”(qtd. In Williams 72). Yet, Wiseman’s film has been challenged by politicians and the legal system. Therefore, Wiseman must consider the implications of his images, which he does inevitably when he alternates between art, journalism, and social muckraking.

### **Truth Versus Distortion**

When *Follies* ends, the viewer is left with distinct images that disturb to the core. Images such as a inmate being force fed with a greased tube and a doctor dangling a cigarette from his mouth over the tube mockingly gesturing for the inmate to “chew your food.” Perhaps, it is the harrowing and bizarre *Titicut Follies* annual talent show for inmates and guards, from which the title of the film title is derived that sums up the chaos that ensued within these walls.

What *Titicut Follies* is really about is the truth and the avoidance of a distortion of the truth by all means necessary. All film in some form or matter is a distortion of the truth, yet paradoxically it may be the strongest weapon against misrepresentation of truth. The systematic recreation of reality and the unflinching gaze into injustice once again evokes a reaction in the viewer. Therefore, film proves to be not only a weapon against lies, but against injustice.

Wiseman’s style is said to have used cinematography that is “deceptively passive” and “deceivingly objective.” Wiseman’s agenda is to disguise his agenda and

appear to have none (Williams 70-73). What differentiates Wiseman from a documentarian such as Michael Moore is that Moore is somewhat disingenuous in presenting the facts and placing decidedly one sided judgment of fact. Wiseman's work is far more sophisticated and appeals to the primal fear that individuals harbor in the darkest recesses of their minds about society and the abuse of power.

“Asked how his films serve as a window on American culture, Wiseman replies, ‘My films are subjective, impressionistic accounts of some aspect of American culture. It’s impossible for me to calculate what effect or impact a film or group of films may have’”(qtd. In Williams 293). Evidently, Wiseman's work has had profound impact in getting viewers attention. Traditionally the idea of documentary was to inform and document a subject ala' *Nanook of the North*. There is a fine line between informative filmmaking and artistic filmmaking and Wiseman's film *Follies*, seems to bridge that gap. *Follies* redefines what it means to reveal truth with image. When the viewer sees the cruel mocking of the guards, the indifference of the psychiatrists, the deplorable conditions, the humiliation and degradation of the human spirit prevalent throughout the film, the impulse of the viewer may be to turn away. Yet in Wiseman's film, the viewer cannot look away. There is something strangely and morbidly captivating about the imagery.

### **Pioneer of Cinema Verite' and Direct Cinema**

Rapold of Sight and Sound notes that Wiseman's documentaries are unique in that there is: “no voice-overs, text, or score; no clear protagonists, no simplistic narrative or chronological spines, bounded locale, etc...He has achieved his own form of realism in

work of consistent richness and variety to produce films which are both social documents and great art” (42-45).

Cinema verite´ can be used to describe Wiseman’s work in this film; the ultimate gritty and realistic form of cinema where truths are illuminated through a naturalistic marriage of image and subject being documented. Wiseman’s films are said to have been a part of the “direct cinema” movement utilizing bare essentials and simplistic cinematic technique devoid of trickery or gimmickry to establish the points being made.

Rapold calls Wiseman’s camera technique “a measured gaze” and comments that people construe it as “hands off objectivity” (42-45) When the reality is that Wiseman may be more calculating than the viewer thinks. He suggests that Wiseman’s camera technique “is notable for its attunements to faces and hands and body language” (Rapold 42-45) There are some unforgettable faces and gestures of *Follies*. The mocking psychiatrist, the prisoner forced to sleep without a bed- these elements all leave a burning imprint on the subconscious and may incite anger on the part of the viewer over the injustice. It is a human element that Wiseman’s touches the core through the technically limited medium that is film.

Many documentary films are full of didacticism, pretensions, and comprehensive political agendas. Wiseman’s agenda is that he has no agenda, overtly that is, and he succeeds in being political only by being apolitical. This gritty and subversive film works as subversive because it is earnest in its attempt to capture life for these inmates as is. Had Wiseman used commentary to instruct the viewer, the only result would be of obstructing the viewer’s ability to filter the events for his or herself. Also, a more didactic approach would neutralize the perception of Wiseman’s faith in his subject matter,

suggesting that the footage, itself, is not enough to communicate a message. The communication of a message through semi-chaotic means is the impetus of direct cinema or cinema verite.

The way Wiseman captures the truth with his unobtrusive photography, his minimalist technique demonstrates a mastery of technique that pioneered the reproduction of reality in film. Ultimately, this pioneering methodology makes the film simultaneously effective as art, as social reform, as cinema verite, and as an illumination of truth.

### **Manufacturing Absences**

Alfred Guzzetti discussing representation and the non-fiction film explains that “When I view what I have filmed, I enter into a double relationship. The film is present to me while the event is re-presented. The representation is not simply a reprise, for while the event is present to me, I am no longer present to it” (263). Such is the case with *Titicut Follies*. The viewer becomes witness to the events without being there physically. Such is the paradox of all film and especially evident in non-fiction filmmaking. Yet how is it that Wiseman’s effect is so visceral and so “real”. Upon screening the film today, it will have appear as “freshly” disturbing as when it was screened back in 1968.

Guzzetti explains that film is “the business of manufacturing absences” (264). The fictional film will present reality seamlessly and present the illusion of the whole story. Whereas, as Guzzetti points out, this is not true in the nonfiction film. Within the nonfiction film there are a great many absences and the viewer will intuitively want to know more. He suggests that the viewer will wonder whether what is being represented is typical and common or if there is a significant gap in what is being represented versus

what reality is (Guzzetti 264). It seems that in Wiseman's work, because it is not manipulative regarding technique, the common day at Bridgewater comes to light with stark realism. The *routine* at Bridgewater is of horror and depraved indifference to humanity, yet because Wiseman's film is so subdued and is a "nonfiction" film the audience fills in the gaps or "absences" with the complete picture- a picture Wiseman merely scratches the surface of. Guzzetti explains that these absences are prominent in film and the only aspect that can compensate is "an apprehension of the principle linking what the film preserves to what it consigns to oblivion. The fabric that film must sample is poor in patterns and repetitions" (Guzzetti 265). This fabric is called "life" or "reality." There seems to be power in what is absent in *Follies*. Certainly, the slices of reality this documentary offer are powerful, but the suggestion that the events in this film occur with regularity on a daily basis is the most powerful tool in Wiseman's arsenal.

### **Conclusion**

It has become evident that the moving images have the ability to serve many purposes and can be used for a variety of reasons. They can entertain. They can enlighten. They serve as a form of art. They may also raise social awareness. Or they can do all of the above. *The Titicut Follies* by Frederick Wiseman, serves in all of these capacities and quite often unintentionally.

From the beginning frames to the last frames, the film is uncomfortable and restrictive to the viewer. It is because the subject matter is uncomfortable and restrictive as is the environment chosen for the subject of this film. The institution at Bridgewater reminds its audience of what the trajectory of the abuse of power is should it go unchecked.

Wiseman's intrusively unobtrusive camera style and his measured gaze work effectively at capturing the day to day abuses that occurred in this facility in 1967. The role of the non-fiction film also manufactures absences in the viewers mind wherein the viewer "fills in the blanks" by weaving together a tapestry of the undocumented segments.

*The Titicut Follies* is effective on many different levels. It challenges the ubiquity of injustice and also the complacency in relationship to the abuse of institutionalization. The film serves as impetus of change, hence its muckraking quality. It also touches the individual viewer on a viewer on a primal level and taps into the basic fears of imprisonment and institutional control. The film also works a form of art. It actually reveals an aesthetic that is so subtle as to very often go unnoticed. This aesthetic consists of a naturalistic and unobtrusive methodology. From the measured gaze to the deceptively subtle camera technique, the film straddles the line between art and journalism.

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