

Document Citation

Title	[Frederick Wiseman]
Author(s)	
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Wiseman, Frederick
Film Subjects	Law and order, Wiseman, Frederick, 1969 High school, Wiseman, Frederick, 1968 Basic training, Wiseman, Frederick, 1971 Hospital, Wiseman, Frederick, 1970

USA 1968
Produced, directed & edited
by **FREDERICK WISEMAN**
Photography **WILLIAM BRAYNE**
75 mins B&W 16mm

One of Wiseman's most highly praised documentaries, **HIGH SCHOOL** is a close-up examination of a typical middle-class school in Central America, the Northeast High School in Philadelphia. The film provides a fascinating picture of the boredom of school, the teachers, the petty tyrannies and the ultimate inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the institution — a situation, in fact, which is just as relevant here in Britain. The film was banned in Philadelphia.

"Above all else, **HIGH SCHOOL** is a deeply disturbing film. Consider this humiliation, one of many: 'Don't you feel guilty,' a guidance counsellor asks a girl 'for disappointing your father by not going to college?' The girl looks stunned. The counsellor and the girl's father, sitting next to the counsellor's desk, look as if they wished the girl really felt guilt. The girl, meanwhile, can barely mumble something while trying not to cry. And you get the message that **HIGH SCHOOL** so brutally transmits: high schools are prisons where the old beat down the young, where raw material runs through the machine and stamped **BLAND**.



HIGH SCHOOL

"**HIGH SCHOOL** was filmed entirely at Philadelphia's Northeast High, an almost all-white, suburban-type institution. Northeast is one of Philadelphia's best schools; it is not better and no worse than thousands of other middle-class high schools across the country. It does not have the problems of the ghetto, of white teachers and black pupils, of greatly overcrowded classes, of parents

who don't care. It cannot fall back on the excuses about 'disadvantaged children' and 'underachievers'. Northeast is thoroughly representative of the upper level of American public education... "What **HIGH SCHOOL** portrays most vividly is the different life styles in the war against the young. The students are eager to try new things — the school responds with rules and regulations; the students

want to participate — the teachers hurry to leave with the last bell. The most frightening thing about **HIGH SCHOOL** is that it captures the battlefield so clearly; the film is too true."

— Peter A. Janssen, **NEWSWEEK**

"... Wiseman extends our understanding of our common life the way novelists used to — a way largely abandoned by the modern novel and left to the journalists but not often picked up by them. What he's doing is so simple and so basic that it's like a rediscovery of what we knew, or should know. We often want more information about the people and their predicaments than he gives, but this is perhaps less a criticism of Wiseman's method than it is a testimonial to his success in making us care about his subjects. With fictional movies using so little of our shared experience, and with the big TV news 'specials' increasingly using that idiot 'McLuhanite' fragmentation technique that scrambles all experience — as if the deliberate purpose were to make us indifferent to the life around us — it's a good sign when a movie sends us out wanting to know more and feeling that there is more to know. Wiseman is probably the most sophisticated intelligence to enter the documentary field in recent years."

— Pauline Kael,
THE NEW YORKER



LAW & ORDER

USA 1969
Produced, directed & edited
by **FREDERICK WISEMAN**
81 mins B&W 16mm

LAW AND ORDER is a study of the Kansas City, Missouri, police department in action. It was shot over a six-week period and shows the police involved with prostitutes, vomiting drunks, outraged landladies, abandoned children and gun-toting kids. Wiseman has said that he watched the cops doing rotten things and good things, but

"what struck me wasn't so much 'police brutality' as the brutalities people in the street were committing against one another." During the film's five weeks of filming, Wiseman rode in police cars for some 250 hours in one of the city's highest crime districts, filming actual events as they happened.

"In no other film is Wiseman's concern with presenting a multiple point of view more evident and effective than in **LAW AND ORDER**, shot in Kansas City in 1969. The specific subject is the

daily routine of the police force, chiefly in the black district with one of the city's highest crime rates; the implied and broader subject is the dilemma of law enforcement in the United States. In a time of simplistic and hysterical slogans for and against the police, Wiseman has created a work that challenges superficial notions of law and order in society by again encouraging us to view the issue from numerous perspectives.

"Although **LAW AND ORDER** contains examples of police insensitivity and brutality, Wiseman has no special axe to grind against the police themselves. He does not see police behaviour as the root of the difficulty but as a



manifestation of a far deeper and more malignant sickness. The community that pays the police and prescribes the laws that they must enforce is infected with racism and blighted with poverty. At his best the policeman can temporarily ease the problems; at his worst he contributes to them. Yet as nearly every scene in **LAW AND ORDER** demonstrates, the police alone cannot cure the fundamental social ills. As Wiseman has said, 'The police are no different from the rest of us'...

"Much of the film is occupied with following the police through a series of actions that are, for them, ordinary and routine: locating a stolen purse, caring for a lost child, settling a dispute over a taxi fare. There are humorous moments — or moments in which humour and sadness are mixed, such as a policeman's attempt to remove an old lady's real teeth before taking her to the hospital. What makes most of these scenes so effective is the attention to small details, sudden intimate gestures that may reveal more than larger, more dramatic action..."

from an article on Frederick
Wiseman in **SIGHT AND SOUND**,
Autumn 1974,
by Thomas R. Atkins

USA 1970

Produced, directed & edited
by **FREDERICK WISEMAN**
Photography **WILLIAM BRAYNE**
84 mins B&W 16mm

HOSPITAL is a gripping study of one day's activities in the Metropolitan Hospital in New York City, from major surgery to the hospital chapel, patients and staff at the mercy of an institution incapable of fulfilling all the demands made on it. Wiseman feels that in this film you can see all of the larger of society's problems 'through a medical prism'.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of", a woman doctor reassures an elderly man who is crying in misery because he thinks he has cancer and is too deeply humiliated by his symptoms to discuss them. In **HOSPITAL**, the material does not appear to have been transformed in the editing process. Though Wiseman obviously selects, he does not select in terms of a prearranged structure or for a problem-solving approach, and so our responsiveness to what we see is not limited by an imposed point of view. You feel that the experience is totally naked, that there is no protective tissue between you and the people on the screen. It is as open and revealing as filmed experience has ever been. You look misery in the eye and you



HOSPITAL

realise there's nothing to be ashamed of. "The movie was made at Metropolitan Hospital in New York, but although the hospital conditions are not pretty, it is not an exposé of man's inhumanity to man. The revelation of **HOSPITAL** is the many surprising forms of man's humanity to man: the tenderness of a doctor as he examines an old man, or the

doctor's awkward attempt to straighten the covers to make the old man more comfortable; the Puerto Rican who fights hospitalisation because he's terrified of not being home to look after his children; the bewildered daughter of a woman who has had a cardiac arrest, trying to comfort her mother, bobbing up to peck her on the chin — the only part accessible for a kiss. It is a melting-pot

hospital, and the film demonstrates that the melting-pot dream has to some degree been fulfilled. There are so many human gestures within the misery, such as the solemn 'Thank you's of aged poor patients for whom speech is no longer easy . . . The doctors and nurses are not unctuous in that fake 'professional' fashion of private hospitals; they don't have time for fancy talk . . . Their occasional crudeness, even roughness, seems to be part of a recognition of the facts of life for the poor in a big city . . . "In allowing the material to retain its complexity, Wiseman seems to put us back in contact with our common experience. I say 'back in contact' because although a film like **HOSPITAL** deals with basic material of our lives, most of us have probably lost sight of that material. At the beginning, **HOSPITAL** seems almost a random view, but as the scenes and details begin to accumulate, the vision takes hold. By the end, we are so thoroughly involved — in a way I think we rarely are in conventional, guided documentary — that tears well up, because we simply have no other means of responding to the intensity of this plain view of the ordinary activities in Metropolitan Hospital. . . We've gone through the barriers of middle-class good taste, and it's better on the other side."

— Pauline Kael,
THE NEW YORKER

BASIC TRAINING

USA 1971

Produced, directed & edited
by **FREDERICK WISEMAN**
Photography **WILLIAM BRAYNE**
80 mins B&W 16mm



Wiseman's camera follows a group of US Army trainees at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and presents a picture of the US Army in the light it wants to be shown in — as a protective, perfectionist society that instills in its young the sense of responsibility, of regimentation, of obedience, of conformity, of professionalism, of no-nonsense teamwork that makes them into men. On the other hand, it also puts the Army in the light in which its opponents see it — a fascistic system that converts ordinary young men into accomplished craftsmen in the arts of killing and war through methods of intimidation, or tyranny, of a regimentation and conformity to nonsense values.

"**BASIC TRAINING**, the fifth film in Wiseman's remarkable series, is a sequel to **HIGH SCHOOL**, the film you cannot see here . . . Two scenes are relevant to his new film. An advisor chews out a student for not taking a detention — unfairly, the student insists, acting as his own lawyer. But justice is not the issue. 'We want to prove to you,' the advisor says, 'that you're a man, that you can take orders.' What young boy can resist proving 'that you're a man'? Consider the alternative. The other scene: The

school principal, who happens to be a woman, reads a letter from a former Northeast student. He is in Vietnam. He does not know if he

will survive. If not, he wants his \$10,000 insurance to be used as a scholarship. He has survived high school. He would sustain the system. He is a man. He takes orders.

'The best way to go through basic training is do what you're told as you're told and there'll be no problems'.

"They climb down off a bus, these survivors of high school, and troop into a building for processing. Their

bodies are measured, their heads shaved, their fingers printed. A strip of ID cards slides out of a machine. The image is a preview. Interviews. A boy is asked if he is a conscientious objector. No. They are lined up and injected. Another preview. The injections are shot

into their arms as if from a pistol. *'When you start trying to fight the system, that's when you get in trouble. So if you go along with the system, that's fine.'*

"... **BASIC TRAINING** is not without humour and ironic wit. A recruit is instructed, with sober efficiency, in how to clean urinals. Serious. You've got to get down there to clean them because 'the people try to shoot from way back.' Wiseman cuts from the urinal cleaning to a kid brushing his teeth to a film on the proper method of brushing teeth, complete with bouncing music. He conveys the effectiveness of that music by having his cameraman pan down to a kid's tapping foot. That music. It works . . . Frederick Wiseman, on sound, and William Brayne, camera, have now made three films together: they function together like two hands on the same body, directed by the same alert, sensitive intelligence. Wiseman's editing technique is that of a master of mosaic, carefully fitting pieces together to create a large, rich dense portrait of an institution that tells us what we honour and who we are . . ."

— Richard Fuller,
PHILADELPHIA MAGAZINE