

# High School

By Barry Grant

“High School,” Frederick Wiseman’s second film after the controversial “Titicut Follies” (1967), made clear that, while he began his career during the great period of American direct cinema in the 1960s, his style is markedly different from that of D.A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and Albert and David Maysles, among others. Wiseman heavily shapes his footage for “High School” through his editing, providing aesthetic shape and structure to the film that is distinctly different from the chronological approach favored by most direct cinema and cinema vérité filmmakers. Further, while other observational filmmakers tended to focus on charismatic or special individuals, Wiseman’s films, including “High School,” which was shot in Northeast High School in Philadelphia, examine instead social and governmental institutions.

On the surface, “High School,” photographed by Richard Leiterman, an important Canadian cinematographer, is loosely structured according to a conventional “day in the life of” approach. The film opens with the camera riding in a car, as if on the way to school in the morning. The first classroom shots contain daily announcements and the “thought for the day,” and about midway through the film there is a sequence of teachers having lunch. At the same time, the school’s approach to education is presented as being similar to a manufacturing process (there are several links between “High School” and, for example, Wiseman’s later “Meat” [1976]). Wiseman has said that when he first saw the school, he was struck by how much it resembled a factory, like a General Motors plant, and in the opening sequence from the car, the exterior of the school building, with its smokestack and fences, looks as much like a factory as it does a school. In short, “High School” views the American public school experience as a factory-like process, with the students becoming the socialized and standardized “products” it produces.

Wiseman’s canny editing quickly reveals the film’s scathing view of public education. After the home-room announcements, the first lesson shown is the Spanish class discussing existentialism. The content of the lesson seems unavoidably ironic in the context of its presentation, for the teacher’s approach is to have the entire class drone in unison everything she



*A wall display at the back of this classroom invites students to “Rock with Shakespeare.” Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

says about a philosophical worldview that is concerned with the question of individual will. Wiseman cuts from this lesson to a percussion lesson, with the music teacher’s conducting hand, emphasized by the framing of the shot, keeping the beat for the students. Here, as in the Spanish class and everywhere else in the film, there is no room for a different drummer.

Most of the scenes in one way or another emphasize depersonalization and ideological indoctrination. The similarity of the row houses glimpsed in the opening drive to school foreshadows the impersonal conformism that dominates the school’s activities and approach to education. One teacher explains to a girl who wants to wear a short dress to the school prom that “it’s nice to be individualistic, but there are certain places to be individualistic” – although we see no such places in the film), and the girl is forced to apologize (“I didn’t mean to be individualistic”). In the girls gym class the camera focuses not on their faces but on their bodies, clad in identical uniforms, making them indistinguishable from one another; their group calisthenics anticipates similar scenes of regimented exercise in “Basic Training” (1971) and “Juvenile Court” (1973). Bob Walters, a former student and author of the letter read by the principal in the last sequence, describes himself as “only a body doing a job.” He would seem to be the logical end of the process, the final product of the assembly plant, an unquestioning, and properly socialized subject.

Stylistically, “High School” also relies on framing, especially in the use of close-ups. Close-ups appear

throughout the film, beginning with the first teacher announcing the “thought for the day.” With few exceptions the close-ups are of teachers’ faces rather than students’. When the vice-principal speaks to a boy who does not want to take gym, for example, the camera zooms in to a big close-up of his mouth. The image of the mouth, isolated from the rest of his face and magnified in close-up, implies that he is talking at rather than with the boy. Moreover, the mouth’s unnatural bigness on the screen gives it a menacing quality; then the camera zooms out, as if recoiling, when the vice-principal rises from his chair and approaches the boy in a threatening manner. Wiseman has Leiterman zoom in to the wiggling index finger of the gynecologist who tells the assembled boys that nature has set up men to be the aggressors, comically emphasizes the doctor’s sexist perspective. The close-ups of the teacher wearing thick glasses and of the guidance counselor with extremely puffy eyelids suggest the school’s myopic, narrow vision. By contrast, close-ups of students’ faces are almost always accompanied on the soundtrack by a teacher’s voice, and so tend to suggest passivity. Twice teachers ask, “Any questions?” but the film shows us none, and we see nothing of promised discussion of Simon and Garfunkel’s appropriate “The Dangling Conversation.”

The film further suggests the implications of this specific school’s process of socialization by progressively connecting it to another national institution, the military – the subject of three subsequent Wiseman documentaries: “Basic Training,” “Manoeuvre” (1979), and “Missile” (1988) -- which had acute significance for students in 1968, many of whom were facing conscription following graduation. Wiseman’s strategy of showing the daily workings of Northeast High as a social microcosm begins early in the film with one teacher’s definition of manhood as being the ability to take orders. When the boy who has not

dressed for gym – who, that is, has refused to don his uniform – is suspended, we see a photograph of an American flag on the wall behind the teacher, underscoring the scene’s larger implications. In the second sequence in this office, in which Michael is forced to take a detention against his moral principles, the flag photo is again featured prominently in the frame directly above the vice-principal’s head.

The last sequence of “High School” shows a teachers’ meeting, which includes the principal’s reading of a letter from Bob Walters, the soldier about to face combat in Vietnam who describes himself as “only a body doing a job.” Walters would seem the ideal soldier, and successfully processed subject of the school as ideological state apparatus whose purpose is to serve the needs of the nation. After reading Walters’ letter, the principle says, “Now when you get a letter like this, to me it means that we are very successful at Northeast High School. I think you will agree with me.” The film ends abruptly after her remark, leaving viewers to contemplate their own politics and whether they agrees with her assessment of the letter or the film’s dismal interpretation of the high school experience at the time.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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