

Hospital

By Barry Keith Grant

Filmmaker Frederick Wiseman has said that he is interested in how the institutions he films are “cultural spoors” that reflect the larger cultural hues,” and “Hospital,” his fourth documentary, is a perfect example of this approach. “Hospital” examines New York City’s Metropolitan Hospital as a symptom of larger social ills. In the film, Wiseman performs a cinematic exploratory – the cut of the scalpel he films analogous to his work as film editor. The malignancies Wiseman finds with his camera are unpleasant truths which he asks us to look at unflinchingly, like the interns we see examining the brains of a deceased patient.

“Hospital,” like the more well-known “Titicut Follies” (1967), is also a prime example of what documentary film scholar Bill Nichols has called Wiseman’s “tactlessness,” for in the surgery images or the lengthy sequence of the induced vomiting of a young man who had taken mescaline, the film deliberately violates “good taste” as it makes demands upon the viewer. The film’s structure works to grab and hold the viewer’s attention. As Brian Winston has noted, “Hospital” is structured around alternating sequences of mundane activities and emotionally charged sequences, the former becoming increasingly shorter as the latter longer. Still, despite the many undeniably unpleasant sights in the film, “Hospital” avoids sensationalism. Most importantly, the film does not condemn the hospital staff by showing them brutalizing patients in the manner of “Titicut Follies” or the way teachers are shown dominating students in “High School” (1968).

Indeed, the biggest gap revealed in “Hospital” is not between the ideology of the institution and its practice, as in many of Wiseman’s other early documentary films, but rather, between the rich and poor. The film emphasizes that this economic disparity – what one of the teachers in “High School” calls, after Michael Harrington, “the other America” – is but a symptom of an illness within the wider body politic. There is a gross irony in the fact that the horses in Wiseman’s “Racetrack” (1984) receive better medical attention than do many of the human patients in “Hospital.” Unlike the progressive Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in Boston’s Beth Israel Hospital, the subject of Wiseman’s later, magisterial, “Near Death” (1989),



A wheelchair-bound patient languishes in a corridor at New York’s Metropolitan Hospital. Courtesy Zipporah Films.

“Hospital” was filmed in a large, critically overburdened public health facility located near Harlem and Spanish Harlem in Manhattan.

The film concentrates almost exclusively on Metropolitan Hospital’s emergency room, where the need for immediate medical treatment heightens the sense of the place itself as a site of crisis. Many of the patients suffer from drug related problems, injuries received in fights, or from family or social neglect – problems not restricted to the poor but certainly more prevalent among the economically underprivileged. Class difference is therefore inevitably foreshadowed, since these patients are obtaining medical service at this hospital not by choice but because of economic necessity. Near the end of the film an ambulance driver and a policeman discuss a woman just brought into the hospital. The driver had searched several hours without success for a hospital to admit her, a problem that the policeman diagnoses as an economic one: “I guess that’s what happens when you don’t have no money at all. You have to take what comes,” he observes.

Perhaps the film’s most visually striking instance of this theme is the sequence of a psychiatrist’s interview with a young, gay black man. Throughout the interview the man is seated against a wall, during which the camera pulls back slightly to incorporate within the frame a photograph of then-mayor of New York John V. Lindsay hanging above him. The por-

trait, originally a cover from Life magazine, features the caption, "The Lindsay Style," referring to the politician's aura of youthful hipness. The gay man and image of Lindsay within the frame's image offer a striking contrast: one is black, the other white; one is poor, "freakish," and disempowered, unable to obtain welfare assistance and rejected even by his mother; the other is wealthy glamorous, and politically influential. The gay man describes himself as "not a normal human being," while the specter of Lindsay hovering above him expresses much of society's ideals of masculinity and success. The contrast between them is amplified by the fact that the gay man's body, arm, and head are arranged in a manner almost identical to Lindsay's pose in the photograph, drawing our attention to the visual irony. These two nevertheless radically different male images also graphically express the examining psychiatrist's diagnosis of the man as a schizophrenic. He can never attain the cultural ideal literally hanging over his head in this scene, because of his skin color, economic status, and sexual orientation.

To powerful effect, in its conclusion "Hospital" returns the cultural and social issues the film raises to the spectator, as Wiseman has frequently done in his work. The last sequence of the film, once of the most powerful in all of Wiseman's work, first shows patients praying in the hospital's chapel. Then there is a cut to a long shot of the hospital building taken from the far side of the nearby FDR Drive. The hospital seems to recede with the slow reverse zoom of the camera while cars traveling on the highway enter the frame and then fill it, moving across the image

between the camera and the hospital. The voices of the patients singing a hymn in the chapel can still be heard but they gradually diminish in volume and are replaced by the "whooshing" of the automobiles driving past the camera. The moving cars express the peripatetic rush of contemporary life. Their growing domination of the cars in the image over the hymn visually (they fill the foreground of the frame) and aurally (their sounds "drowning out" the hymn on the sound track) suggest how, in Wordsworth's famous phrase, the world is too much with us. We are preoccupied with material concerns rather than spiritual ones, like acceptable medical care for all citizens. While it is true that the sound track is here manipulated beyond the limitations of synchronization, like Wiseman's use of the Otis Redding song "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay" in "High School," the effect is consistent with the film's point of view and provides an effective summation of its social concerns

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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