

Ship of Fools

The Films of Frederick Wiseman:

- Titicut Follies*
- Hospital*
- Law and Order*
- High School*
- Basic Training*

Edgar Z. Friedenberg

In 1967 Frederick Wiseman released the first in a series of films he has produced and directed which have realized new possibilities in the use of the motion picture in revealing and

ment in action, *Hospital* (1970) at Metropolitan Hospital in New York City, and, most recently, *Basic Training* (1971) at Fort Knox, Kentucky.*

Technically there is little about these films that is either novel or impressive. They are 16 mm. black and white films running about eighty minutes each. They were all made, of course, with the active cooperation of the institutions observed, over periods of weeks or months. The final version is made available to institutional officials before the film is released; there is



recording the functioning of social institutions. This was *Titicut Follies*, which was filmed at Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, an enormous old institution located on the banks of the Titicut River in Massachusetts. The film takes its title from that of an annual

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*All these films except *Titicut Follies* are distributed by Zipporah Films, 54 Lewis Wharf, Boston, Massachusetts. *Titicut Follies* is currently distributed by Grove Press Films, 53 East 11 Street, New York City.

October 21, 1971

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THE VIKING

This was notably true of *Titicut Follies*. The Bridgewater administration at first welcomed the filming as a way of literally dramatizing its need for increased financial support from the state. But shortly after the film was released they enjoined its further distribution on the grounds that it invaded the privacy of the patients who, being certifiably insane, had no legal power to consent to appear in it. Respect for privacy is admirable, and much too rare in our time, but this is a difficulty which, if it was to be raised at all, could obviously have been anticipated before allowing the film to be produced.

The delayed development of hostile reactions by the subjects of Wiseman's films is one of the more revealing social responses his work evokes. *Titicut Follies* is, indeed, a disturbing

document, but not for quite the reasons I, or presumably Bridgewater's directors, had expected. The hospital is overcrowded and squalid. The patients are neglected and treated with a contempt that sometimes slops over into physical brutality when such treatment as they get is administered. But this the staff must have known. There are also scenes of rough, hasty compassion and real concern for patients on the part of attendants, and of relationships among patients at least as genuine and deep as would be found in any normal segment of contemporary social life.

The most frightening scene in the film is also the most restrained and bourgeois: a staff meeting to consider the case of a young patient whose original commitment and presumed criminal insanity seem to have been largely attributable to his inability to make himself understood in English.

By this time his confinement has indeed nearly driven him mad, and the psychiatrists, self-important and self-confined in their obsessive preoccupation with the taxonomy and language of mental illness, are quite unable to see him as a person or ask themselves what they are doing to him. His confinement is continued, with the prospect of being interminable.

Having gone to see *Titicut Follies* expecting to be shocked by the exotic horrors of the snake pit, I emerged with a much sadder sense that what I had seen differed only in degree from everyday life. These patients were afflicted, certainly, but the nature of their disorder was clear enough, very common in America, and serious indeed. They suffered from disastrously low status compounded by poverty, which had drastically lowered their resistance to incarceration.

The people confined in Bridgewater simply appeared much too familiar and ordinary to justify the institution's existence. If the citizenry of the Boston area were able to sleep at night knowing that Henry Kissinger was at large among them, driven by who-knows-what fantasies, they could damned well have accepted the presence of these poor wretches. In view of its reasons for allowing Wiseman to make the film, the hospital administration was evidently prepared to have Bridgewater's deficiencies and inadequacies exposed. But *Titicut Follies* cuts deeper and suggests that the hospital's social function may be useless and occasionally monstrous. The film shows quite clearly that the primary consequence of defining, and confining, the patients as criminally insane is to justify keeping the hospital running; the question of improving its services hardly arises.