Frederick Wiseman's documentary series constitutes a project of considerable importance toward the development of a politically effective cinema in America. To begin to appreciate the value of his films as instruments of serious political interrogation, however, it is essential to see his difference from other filmmakers with whom he is usually indiscriminately lumped in the cinéma vérité and direct cinema movements. Unlike the films of Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, the Maysles brothers, and Allan King, Wiseman's are not a celebration of exceptional individuals—with all the ideological baggage that that carries within bourgeois culture. Instead, he has followed the more fruitful, critical line of investigating subjectivity as it is processed (and sometimes resists processing) by the institutional and ideological machinery of the state and marketplace. The main thrust of his documentary project has been to delineate the relations of power between the state and individuals through an interconnected and comprehensive examination of the decisive bureaucratic institutions regulating social life in America. The first ten films, from Titicut Follies in 1967 to Meat in 1976, display a particularly interesting coherence as a series within the larger documentary series, revealing an institutional matrix and political technology strikingly similar to the "carceral archipelago" that Michel Foucault has described. Wiseman thus shows in these films a continuity of institutions, spreading out from the prison to the larger society; an extensive rationality and economy of power at work shaping, normalizing, and objectifying subjects for the purposes of social utility and control.

The normalizing forms of institutional power revealed in Wiseman's "carceral archipelago" correspond closely to Foucault's notion of "dividing practices"—methods of observation, classification, and objectification in which the subject is divided (both within himself or herself and from others) and regulated in some way. Institutional space is thus organized to permit a field of maximum visibility, where hierarchical surveillance and careful documentation allow relevant information to be compiled about individuals through examinations, reviews, case histories, interrogations, inspections, consultations, interviews, and other investigatory procedures. At the heart of that visible space, and further defining the political relations of looking in operation there, is a moral-juridical apparatus that seeks out anomalies, defects, delinquencies, or other deviations from the
norm and renders judgments that affect the lives (often profoundly) of those who must submit to it. The normalizing power here works through some privileged knowledge and discourse (generally one of the social sciences but also, sometimes, religion) that facilitate and legitimate the judgments rendered. And the institution usually employs a full panoply of disciplinary procedures (exercise, drills, timetables, and regimens of diverse kinds) to train, correct, or otherwise eradicate any anomalies.

The purposes of this disciplinary technology in Wiseman’s carceral society are various and by no means entirely negational or repressive, encompassing not only confinement and punishment but also forms of assistance, therapy, and improved performance and production. Seen in this way, Wiseman’s “carceral archipelago” is divided into three clusters of films, each investigating a different political dynamic: confinement and punishment in Titicut Follies, Law and Order, and Juvenile Court; assistance in Hospital, Primate, and Welfare; and the productive disciplines of school, the military, religion, and work in High School, Basic Training, Essence, and Meat. The common denominator—the objectification of the subject in order to produce docile and useful individuals—is evident throughout Wiseman’s carceral society. But equally evident is the incomplete nature of this political project to instrumentalize the subject. The individual in Wiseman’s America has (to appropriate a phrase from Louis Althusser) a “relative autonomy” along with that of the various ideological state apparatuses. Wiseman’s institutions are thus shown to be sites of struggle and contradiction in which subjects participate in a “war of signifying practices,” not always fully accepting the subject positions preferred.4

Titicut Follies, Wiseman’s prison film, initiates and epitomizes his carceral archipelago. As the “discipline-blockade” at the edge of the market society, the prison is the “model” institution that more completely and emphatically dominates its subjects than other institutions in the carceral city, where the “discipline-mechanism” operates in a more portable and diffuse manner.5 As its name suggests, the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane is also a kind of institutional microcosm and portmanteau in which the politics of confinement, punishment, assistance, and discipline can all be glimpsed. However, the implication of assistance, embodied in the designation “hospital,” is a complete mystification. A thoroughly medicalized space, Bridgewater nevertheless employs the therapeutics of psychiatry merely as an instrument of confinement and punishment. And the discipline here is of a wholly negative sort, intended neither to cure nor to train the inmates as useful individuals. Standing at the beginning of a sequence of films that culminates in a study of productive, if alienated, work discipline (Meat), Titicut Follies reveals a micro-society apparently outside the instrumental rationality and morality of the bourgeois work ethic. Totally without use-value in the larger market society, the inmates at Bridgewater are not being rehabilitated as useful and docile bodies to be reinserted into the productive apparatus. Indeed, Bridgewater is a realm of absolute uselessness, a dreary society of forced leisure that darkly parodies the larger society of leisure outside the

Cinema Journal 29, No. 1, Fall 1989 21
walls of confinement. Functioning as a kind of modern day leper colony, protecting the “moral city” of the bourgeoisie from the diseases of mental illness, criminality, and social failure arising from the lower classes, Bridgewater exists as the negative potential of the market society, an Other world of perfect strangers and nearly absolute unfreedom.

Despite the fact that Titicut Follies has already become a classic of the documentary genre, existing criticism has failed to describe adequately how the elaborate textual system of the film operates. Critics have preferred instead mostly to address the rather silly business of the censorship battle surrounding the film, frequently falling into the empiricist fallacy common in documentary criticism while debating the epistemological issues of “accuracy” and “objectivity” in Wiseman’s representation of reality. But as his rejection of cinéma vérité as a “bullshit phrase” and his coinage of the term “reality fictions” to describe his films suggest, Wiseman’s documentaries do not naively pass themselves off as objective and transparent reflections of pro-filmic reality.7 Like all of his films, Titicut Follies combines modernist and postmodernist formal strategies with a significant political perspective to create a dialectical construction of reality that places the spectator in a position to understand contemporary history, producing meaning rather than merely pretending to reveal it, and frankly acknowledging its own status as art.

Initiating Wiseman’s formal and political concern about the ideology of the camera and the politics of cinematic spectatorship, Titicut Follies anticipates such later films as Manoeuvre and Model,8 employing various self-reflexive strategies to distance the spectator and to defeat the ideologically conditioned impression of reality that is most strongly present in the cinéma vérité form. In a film about containment (in the madhouse), Wiseman challenges the spectatorial containment that is so much a part of this cinematic impression of reality as he foregrounds and deconstructs the voyeurism operating so forcefully in his film, encouraging us to move beyond the perverse pleasures of forbidden gazing and to see with fresh eyes the politics of madness and confinement. And this wedding of form and content is also furthered by Wiseman’s importation of mass cultural forms of entertainment (“quoted” in the Follies sequences) to structure his presentation of daily madness and its confinement, producing a postmodernist pastiche marked by a schizophrenic discontinuity of form in which the illusions of art can be seen to speak dialectically to the illusions of madness and those of the institutional ideology.9 The result is a textual system that makes no claims to transcendence and no pretense of being a transparent reflection of reality, but instead fulfills Bill Nichols’s description of “documentaries with a more sophisticated grasp of the historical realm”: “The film is thus a simulacrum or external trace of the production of meaning we undertake ourselves every day, every moment. We see not an image of imaginary unchanging coherence, magically represented on a screen, but the evidence of an historically rooted act of making things meaningful comparable to our own historically situated acts of comprehension.”10

22 Cinema Journal 29, No. 1, Fall 1989
Among the very few interesting and useful theories of Wiseman’s textual strategies, Bill Nichols’s notion of the “documentary mosaic” is still the operable metaphor for the structure of many of Wiseman’s films. However, Titicut Follies, along with a number of other films by Wiseman, has a stronger narrative component beyond the “local” level of the classically edited sequence than Nichols’s mosaic theory allows for. The broadest and most basic narrative structure in the film is the complex temporal juxtaposition that Wiseman uses to investigate the social relations of confinement within the asylum. At this level Wiseman conflates a loose chronology of a typical day in the life of the institution with the history of the typical inmate’s institutional life (from admission and initial processing to “liberation” through death) in a realm of absolute transgression and guilt and unrelenting punishment. The hierarchical relations of domination here resemble malignant family relations, a parody of the parent-child relations of the bourgeois family, in which the discourse of the Father (particularly in the forms of psychiatry and institutional religion) is hegemonic. Next, beneath the social tensions and contradictions of this familial narrative, Wiseman reveals symbolic eruptions of the collective repressions that unconsciously structure sociality within such phallocentric cultural settings—the Freudian/Lacanian narrative of the Oedipus complex. Arising organically out of the privileged knowledge and discourse of psychoanalysis that mediates reality in the asylum, this narrative subtext is fed to us in allusions and fragments out of chronology, an allegory in which social tensions are given a symbolic outlet. Finally, superimposed upon the previously discussed levels of narrative, Titicut Follies presents itself as the progress of an entertainment as Wiseman structures his film at the beginning, middle, and end with sequences taken from the inmate-staff variety show that gives the film its title. In these three Follies sequences, I shall argue, Wiseman is able to “respeak” the social contradictions and tensions within the institution in a utopian discourse and narrative of mirror reversal, providing an imaginary, positive resolution of those tensions and contradictions. Moreover, as if they were a part of the Follies, many of the sequences of daily life that come between these three Follies sequences take on the quality of staged performances of song, dance, and acrobatics, constituting the spectacle of daily madness and its absurd treatment, and subverting the institution’s power of secret punishment.

Perhaps the most fundamental and emphatic narrative in Titicut Follies is the story of daily institutional life stretching into a lifetime “career” of guilt, confinement, and punishment escapable only through death. The unfolding of this diachronic trajectory involves two narrative levels that are mixed and equated so that the progress of a single day comes to stand metonymically for the duration of an inmate’s incarceration—a kind of institutional long day’s journey into night. Much of the powerful emotional undertow of this depressing story derives from the highly ritualized nature of social life in Wiseman’s madhouse. Thus, we follow the course of a typical day’s rituals (from rising and morning toilet through all the daily routines of feeding, bathing, courtyard exercise, and social exchange between staff and inmates) as these overlap with the temporal milestones and
rituals of the typical inmate's institutional life (from strip-search and uniform-issue to initial psychiatric interview, incarceration in a cell, birthday celebration, death, and finally burial).

The tone and central pattern of this dismal story of institutional life is established in the extended initiation ritual that immediately follows the Follies overture, its ritual quality heightened by the hieratic gestures of a schizophrenic patient (the "Prophet") who "presides" over it. Intercutting between a group strip-search of new inmates in the admitting room and the psychiatric intake interview of Mitch (a sex offender), this sequence indicates the nature of these inmates' careers—to expose their bodies as well as their psyches to a perpetual objectifying gaze in visual rituals of nonreciprocal observation. The dominant instrument of this moralizing visual order, providing a discourse of acknowledged guilt and transgression, is psychiatry, which is ever in search of the guilty signs (a slip of the tongue, an inappropriate gesture) that will reconfirm the status of an inmate as a deviant, the appropriate object of institutional "correction" and continued confinement. The dilemma of the subject in a totalizing social structure, the persistent focus of Wiseman's "carceral archipelago," is especially urgent in Titicut Follies. Inhabiting a realm of Transgression, the subject here is constituted in everlasting guilt and overwhelming punishment, so that the routines of daily life become rituals of humiliation, and the career of the subject is to be canceled out or disqualified as a self, reduced either to naked animality or the status of a pure object.

As Wiseman tells us this bleak story of prison life in the madhouse, he reveals much about the social relations of confinement in such an institution. We are shown a sharply divided social hierarchy with three major categories of subjects (inmates, guards, and psychiatrists), that is further divided by racial and class antagonism between guards and inmates. It is a social order defined by relations of domination that mimic, with emphasis, the social relations outside the institution with all their attendant tensions and contradictions. For the most part, inmates seem merely resigned to their status as despised objects in this social order or even, in the case of Mitch, to positively embrace it. In the sequences involving Vladimir (the "Sane Patient"), however, Wiseman presents us with a dissenting subject who refuses his status as object of psychiatric knowledge and discourse, arguing convincingly that he is sane and even providing a cogent critique of psychological testing and his "treatment" at the hands of his obviously incompetent psychiatrist, Dr. Ross. But as with all instances of resistance or rebellion within the institution, Vladimir suffers at his "sanity hearing" the fate of all patients at Bridgewater, regardless of their sanity. Trapped within the juridical apparatus at the center of the asylum, Vladimir is meted out what appears to be a life sentence as the head psychiatrist rejects his request to return to the regular prison with the objectifying psychiatric judgment that confirms Vladimir's career as a mental patient: "Diagnosis: schizophrenic reaction with prominent paranoid overtones."

The only escape for the inmate-subject in this institutional realm of "no
exit,” Wiseman convinces us, is through the complete submission and docility exhibited by Mr. Malinowski in the infamous force-feeding sequence. Cutting back and forth between Malinowski’s ghastly feeding and flashforwards of preparations of his corpse for burial, Wiseman associates the inmate’s docile body (as he patiently submits “like a veteran” to the “assistance” administered) with the object-status of death—fulfilling the career that the institution intends for all its inmates as he becomes a pure object. Indeed, Malinowski is a “veteran” of the strange wars fought at Bridgewater, and the triumph of his will to die over the institutional attempts to thwart it (the only successful inmate resistance in the film) is a Pyrrhic victory that suggests the extent of the totalizing and objectifying power operating here.

There is much detail of storyline and role-playing that suggests that Wiseman’s chronicle of institutional life in Titicut Follies is a family narrative, mirroring in the hierarchical relations of domination the parent-child relations of the patriarchal nuclear family. Though all are adult males, the inmates are like small children: they never work, and their various degrees and states of madness often render them dependent upon “parental” assistance in such simple acts as undressing, bathing, eating, and (anachronistically) shaving. Moreover, the inmates over and over come as delinquent “children” before a paternal institutional authority that punishes in the family mode: inmates are slapped for “sassing,” sent to their room (cell), rebuked for not eating, and obsessively chided for not keeping their rooms clean. And a number of patients become rebellious sons before a powerful and punishing father figure: Jim screams at the guards who taunt him and stamps around his room after being sent there; Malinowski refuses to eat his supper and is punished with a force-feeding; Vladimir argues with his authoritarian “father,” Dr. Ross, who accuses him of wanting “to spit in my face,” before confronting a second “father,” the head psychiatrist who rejects Vladimir’s heated arguments and in the tones of a reasonable parent sends him back to his room. Of course, the “children” are sometimes good and treated to privileges like playing outside (in the courtyard) or celebrating that durable family ritual, the child’s birthday party, complete with games led by a motherly volunteer who addresses inmates as “son.” Like the modern asylum that Michel Foucault has described in his genealogy of madness in Western civilization, Wiseman’s madhouse displays a “parental complex,” a world in which the social structure of the bourgeois family has been symbolically reconstituted.¹⁵

Beneath the family narrative of guilty, rebellious sons and powerful, punishing fathers, Titicut Follies displays a second level of narrative meaning, a latent and more primitive narrative register deriving from the Oedipal scenario, which is played out in various phases of sonhood, incest, primal scene fantasy, and castration. Michel Foucault’s description of the modern asylum as a “simulated family” marked by the “old family profanations, the forgotten signs of incest and punishment” suggests the narrative meaning in operation here.¹⁴ As a subtext of the manifest family narrative, the textual system assimilates a psychoanalytic script that can most usefully be understood through Jacques Lacan’s

Cinema Journal 29, No. 1, Fall 1989 25
appropriation of Freud's Oedipus complex to describe the constitution of the subject in the symbolic realm of language and the rule of the paternal signifier. Especially useful here is Lacan's notion of a "phallocentric" cultural network in which this paternal signifier—which Lacan, borrowing from Roman Catholic liturgy, calls "the-Name-of-the-Father"—is inscribed into the society's institutional practices. A Lacanian script of the Father as interdictor and legislator, whose authority and power maintain the cultural order beyond the family, thus unites various layers of Wiseman's textual system. It simultaneously helps to describe the film's reconstruction of the triadic Oedipal paradigm of sexual transgression and Wiseman's representation of the social relations of confinement within the institution that are defined by the reigning ideology of phallocentrism and its rule of the Father's law, an unrelenting discourse conducted by the psychiatrists and the prison's chaplain, Father Mulligan.

A number of sequences in Titticut Follies develop an extended, albeit oblique, allusion to the Oedipus narrative. The sequence that initiates this narrative line is the one with Mitch, the first inmate we are presented with as an individual and the only one whose crime we ever learn about, suggesting the paradigmatic nature of his crime. Mitch, we discover, is a child molester who confesses to Dr. Ross that he has had sexual relations with his own daughter. Immediately following Mitch's confession and his desire to stay behind bars, Wiseman cuts to a patient in the admitting room as he poses before the camera with his head down and hand over his eyes in a "social gest" of guilt, thus extending Mitch's feeling of guilt (and perhaps his crime as well) beyond the psychiatric interview room to the larger institution. Wiseman thus establishes at the outset that the realm of transgression at Bridgewater is sexual and, specifically, involves a breach of the incest taboo. And the punishment for the crime is clear enough too. In one brief and abrupt cutaway to the admitting room during Mitch's confession, Wiseman makes concrete and explicit the fear and threat of castration we sense in operation here, showing us a violently stuttering inmate who explains: "They was gonna take my balls outa me. I told the doctor before I come here... I didn't want my balls taken outa me, so they took the chords out instead." Again using an inmate from the admitting room interchangeably with Mitch to illuminate his feelings, Wiseman again suggests a larger structure of feeling operating within the institution. Mitch's story of Oedipal crime and punishment comes to define Bridgewater as a realm of transgression under the authority of the Father, with the threat of castration as punishment for those who fail to resolve the Oedipus complex.

The next major sequence that resonates with the Oedipal structure of feeling is the force-feeding scene, which carries a strange echo of Mitch's crime and punishment. The "son," the passive and subordinate Malinowski, submits to what seems (if not a castration) a ritual violence and punishment at the hands of an aggrieved and aggressive "father," Dr. Ross, whose act of forcing the immense tube down the patient's nose also comes across, excruciatingly, as an image of sexual violation of the child by the father (à la Mitch and his daughter).
the ritual, even mythic, quality of this episode derives partly from a careful ordering of images and events that suggests the central mythic narrative and iconography from the culture of phallocentrism and its law of the Father: the Christ story with its triadic Oedipal relationships of the sacrificial Son who is sent by the all-powerful Father's command to ritual death to atone for a sin against the Father by a seductive woman, Eve, the Mother of all mankind. Malinowski's status here suggests much about the status of all the inmates at Bridgewater. As social detritus and outcasts, they are the designated scapegoats of the "moral city" outside the prison walls, taking on their heads the "sins" of madness and criminality.

The Christian iconography of the crucifixion story in this sequence is unmistakable. After silently refusing to comply with his persecutors, an emaciated and passively suffering Malinowski is led by guards (soldiers) to his place of suffering, to which he is bound by his hands and feet and where, his nakedness covered only by a loin cloth, he is eventually pierced—not of course by a soldier's lance but by the physician's hose. Furthermore, through Wiseman's complex flashforward, intercutting the preparations of Malinowski's corpse for burial, we are able to experience the death and resurrection of this Christ figure. After the force-feeding is finally completed, Wiseman briefly cuts to a shot of the corpse (fully prepared and reclining in his casket, not unlike Christ in his tomb prior to the Resurrection) before abruptly cutting back to Malinowski as he arises from his reclining position on the feeding table, seeming to arise from the dead. The Oedipal paradigm at Bridgewater is thus played out in a larger pattern of meaning, suggesting the originary mythos of patriarchal authority and phallocentric law.

To this point in the film there have been only glancing references, at best, to the Mother of the Oedipal triad. But these very distant allusions give way to a full-scale symbolization of the Mother in the birthday party sequence that immediately follows the force-feeding sequence—a primal scene fantasy of sexual union between Mother and Son. That the birthday sequence extends the concerns of the preceding sequence (taking up the Oedipal narrative at a different point) is partly signaled by their common link to the Christian death-rebirth myth through the juxtaposition of images that provide the transition between them. A shot of the cooler door being closed on Malinowski's corpse in the morgue is cut to a close-up of a festive sign that reads "Congratulations and a Happy Birthday!"—recapitulating the death-resurrection motif presented in the earlier sequence and propelling the new one along the same psychic and symbolic narrative register despite the marked shift of mood between them. And the sudden reinsertion of the subject (through the birthday sign) into life at birth and the maternal symbiosis that precedes the Father's interdiction helps to modulate the ensuing mood of dreamy wish fulfillment so far removed from the painful "castrating" mood of the force-feeding scene.

The central symbolic event in the birthday party sequence is an erotic game of "darts" led by an elderly female volunteer and played by several inmates as a kind of Oedipal mating ritual. The scene begins with the volunteer, in a distinctly
motherly voice, encouraging a bashful “boy” to come forward and participate. She stands at the front of the room with a crudely drawn target of concentric circles held directly in front of her pelvis, inviting the “fellows” to approach with eyes closed and to place a piece of tape (the asylum substitute for a dart) in the bullseye. As the episode develops, the vague suggestion of coitus inherent in the game of “darts” is considerably developed by the content and excited manner of the woman’s speech:

Come on, boy! Don’t be bashful. You standing there, come on! How’s about showing us how good your aim is? Oh, come on. Why so bashful? Come on now. We’ve got a fellow who’s going to aim right in the middle. Right up the middle. Stick it on. . . . [And after he finishes, she continues.] Alright, come on, come on, come on! We need someone else. . . . Here we are. Here’s the fellow that’s going to put it right on the bullseye. Right on the bullseye. Now line it right up with it. It’s coming. Bangoh! We need it! Come on, hit it! Coming right at it. That’s boy, stay right ahead. You’re coming right for it. Come on a little further. That’s the way. Now run up that bullseye! Run that bullseye! Now, that’s perfect, very good. You’re inside the ring.

The age difference between the woman and the men, the competitive nature of the activity, the seductive language and sexually charged rhythm of her speech, the hesitant and then eager response of the inmates, her frequent expressions of pleasure—all of this helps to convey (in the context of the film’s ongoing Oedipal narrative) that, at some symbolic level reaching into the collective primal repression, the participants are acting out the incest wish forbidden by the Father.

Unable successfully to negotiate the Oedipus, the “sons” thus ritually reenact their rebellion against the Father’s law. This symbolic fulfillment of the Son’s desire illuminates and retroactively “motivates” Wiseman’s earlier allusions to and representations of the Oedipal scenario, particularly the “castrating” Father’s role. And it helps to set the stage for the final climactic sequences, in which various figures (through a complex of religious references and rituals) alternately invoke and contest the power of the Father’s law.

Much of the force of the Father’s law in the film’s closing sequences is expressed by Father Mulligan, the prison chaplain who repeatedly invokes the Father’s name. Immediately following the Son’s ritual fulfillment of the forbidden incest wish in the birthday party sequence, Father Mulligan is shown administering Last Rites to a dying patient, appropriately forgiving his sins and blessing his “sinful” body with the sign of the cross. And this restoration of the Father’s law through patriarchal religion is repeated in the final sequence before the closing Follies sequence. Presiding at the burial rites in the cemetery for Malinowski, Father Mulligan again blesses the “sinful” body of a fallen Son, proclaiming the authority of the “Heavenly Father” over all, thus extending phallocentric power into the realm of death. But in between these two religious sequences, Wiseman places a powerful sequence with the “Prophet,” whose highly ritualized discourse is a challenge to Father Mulligan and the patriarchal law for which he stands.
As Wiseman abruptly cuts to the prison courtyard following the Last Bites sequence in the infirmary, the first words we hear from the "Prophet" are about Father Mulligan. The "Prophet" is made to seem omnisciently aware of the preceding events in the infirmary and calls into question the priest's power and the law he represents, neatly fusing in his paranoia what he sees as an oppressive religious and secular authority at Bridgewater. "What is indulgences? Father Mulligan, with his confessional there, exposes us and calls us down to Warden Johnson." Then, assuming the dual identity of Jesus Christ and Borgia (the sixteenth-century Pope who fathered several illegitimate children), he goes on to denounce a host of representatives from patriarchal religion other than Father Mulligan: "Not only the rabbi but the Christian Scientists and the minister. We know all about them. I'm psychic and can read their fucking minds. They're no good, they're dangerous, they're Jews! No, I'll tell you one thing. Even him, the Cardinal.... Even Pope Paul is not without sin.... They crucified the man named Pope Pious.... The rightful vicar of the Church is Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin. I announce that the rightful Pope is now Archbishop Fulton Sheen and the other one, Cardinal Spellman.... I, Borgia, say so." Condemning religious leaders, deposing the Pope (the Holy Father) and announcing his replacements, bringing Christ the Son (himself) and the Blessed Mother together to share the vacated power of the Father—the "Prophet" in his madness seems obliquely to illustrate Lacan's notion of psychosis as "foreclosure" or repudiation of the paternal signifier and law. The "Prophet's" contestation of the Father's law is thus a sign of failure, an inability effectively to enter into the discourse community of the larger society where genuine resistance can take place. Wiseman reminds us here that in their madness the resistance of the inmates can effect no real change, no matter how egregious their treatment may be at the hand of the patriarchal authority and phallocentric power in operation at Bridgewater.

The final diachronic layer that structures and complicates the textual system in Titicut Follies comes from the sense that we are watching everything as the progress of a staged entertainment, an effect implicit in the film's title. On the simplest and most obvious level, Wiseman achieves this by placing at the beginning, middle, and end of the film segments of an inmate-guard variety show: songs, dance numbers, chorus lines, and stand-up comedy routines—the stuff of "show biz" associated with the first three decades of the twentieth century when many of the inmates in the film were young; particularly the world of vaudeville and the music hall but including the theatrical and cinematic extravaganzas represented by the Ziegfeld Follies as well. Less obviously, Wiseman presents the daily events of the institution that take place off stage—madness and its confinement—as if they were performances on stage, as if they were part of the spectacle that the three Follies sequences constitute. Inmates and guards are thus shown in their daily routines singing, dancing, making histrionic speeches, playing musical instruments, and performing acrobatics. The spectator-effect of this Follies framing device is infinitely complex. Recalling Peter Weiss's extravagant play
within a play in *Marat/Sade*, Wiseman provides a mad spectacle within the larger spectacle of the film, creating a cinema of the absurd in which, I shall argue, a variety of alienation effects distance us from the events represented and force us to acknowledge our position as cinematic spectators, thus ultimately defeating the empiricist ideology of documentary cinema.

The three Follies sequences work dialectically to set up the film’s alienation effects, producing a complicated and contradictory spectatorial response. On the one hand, at times we feel as we watch them all that is depressing at Bridgewater. This is particularly true in the opening sequence in which inmates form a zombie-like chorus line (made all the more grotesque because their stony faces are heavily shadowed by harsh bottom lighting) as they mechanically shake their pompons and sing an off-key accompaniment to the band’s playing of “Strike Up the Band.” On the other hand, this musical overture to the film tries insistently to be upbeat, and the glittery costumes, lively music of the band, and good humor of the “Star Guard” all provide a sharp contrast to the drab uniforms and unrelieved dreariness and sadness of daily institutional life that follows. And in the second and third Follies sequences, this upbeat quality builds, creating a realm of fun and harmony distinctly at odds with the daily life of the institution off stage. In the middle Follies sequence, for example, the “Star Guard” who serves as MC sings “I Want to Go to Chicago Town” in harmony with a black inmate, leaning his head on his partner’s shoulder and exchanging warm smiles. This scene contrasts utterly with a sequence of daily life several minutes earlier in which the same guard (along with others) taunts with racial slurs a naked black inmate who kneels before them, asking him to give them “that watermelon song.” The Follies finale (with jokes, a lively rendition of “So Long for Now,” a humorous chorus line “can-can” by women volunteers, and much camaraderie among the guards and inmates) concludes the film with an air of spontaneous amusement and mutual affection.

In sum, all three of the Follies sequences suggest that those things denied or repressed in the actual daily life and social relations of confinement at Bridgewater are here expressed in a kind of imaginary, symbolic wish fulfillment. Borrowing the mood of the old songs and other forms of mass entertainment performed by the inmates and guards, the Follies sequences display the Utopian sensibility or structure of feeling that Richard Dyer and others have seen as a component of mass cultural texts and performances. We see played out in these sequences liberating notions expressed in a Utopian discourse that runs counter to the repressive discourse of the Father heard elsewhere in the film. The phallocentric social relations of confinement are suspended and we are ushered into a wishful social world of autonomy, intensity, openness, community, and transcendence of self, as the guards and inmates temporarily overturn the hierarchical relations of domination. That this Utopia stands in contradiction to everything we have seen at Bridgewater confirms its status as an imaginary realm. It is the Utopian realm, precisely, of Fredric Jameson’s notion of ideology—affirming a collective unity and harmony, the absence of which in social reality requires
such an affirmation, an inversion of real relations that creates a place for subjects outside the reality that excludes them. And, of course, it is just this ideology that Wiseman strips bare in the spectacle of madness and confinement that takes place in the cells and courtyard rather than on stage.

The quality of spectacle that Wiseman bestows on the daily rituals of madness and its confinement at Bridgewater oddly fulfills Michel Foucault’s description of Bentham’s Panopticon, the “ideal” prison of maximum prisoner visibility in which the cells are “so many small theatres.” And on the stage of those small theaters, Wiseman displays the illusions of madness and the illusory ideology of confinement in a way that reminds us, forcefully, of the illusions of art—the larger spectacle of cinematic illusion and representation. On this level the film works like a Hollywood musical in which (to quote Dana Polan on this latter kind of “cinema of spectacle”) “the world is transformed into a good show.” The list of performances in Wiseman’s musical is long, and the cast numerous. After the musical overture of “Strike Up the Band” in the opening Follies sequence and the histrionic performance of the “Prophet” (as Christ) in the admission room, an inmate plays a ragged version of “Blue Heaven” on his trombone from an improvised stage in the courtyard while other inmates perform extravagantly—the “Prophet” striding with long steps and gesturing wildly, and another patient masturbating “soulfully,” as if in accompaniment. This sequence is cut to one in which an older inmate stands next to a television, where we see and hear a woman singing, “I Love Johnny.” In counterpoint he sings a respectable tenor version of “Chinatown” and, briefly turning to eye the singing woman, bursts into a snatch of a sentimental love song as he returns his gaze directly into Wiseman’s camera, grinning and wiggling his ears for a finale. Following this love song duet, a black inmate is asked by guards to “give that watermelon song” and another naked inmate angrily performs a rhythmic dance on the floor of his cell and is asked by the guards if he plays the piano (he says he does). After the duet rendition in the middle Follies sequence of “I Want to Go to Chicago Town,” we return to the courtyard where a manic declamation against the Vietnam war by one inmate elicits amused smiles and laughter from an audience of inmates and triggers an impromptu song from one, who patriotically produces an off-key version of “Ballad of the Green Berets” in rebuttal.

Following a long intermission—the distinctly unentertaining force-feeding sequence—the musical review continues with a vocal and guitar version of “Have You Ever Been Lonely” performed by a trio of inmates at the birthday party. The lyrics of the song provide an ironic counterpoint to the “gaiety” of the party and come to the spectator, poignantly, as a direct challenge to reflect on all the sadness and suffering we have seen at Bridgewater: “If you knew what I’ve been through/Then you’d know why I ask you/Have you ever been lonely/Have you ever been blue?” The birthday party ends with the Star Guard giving an impromptu reprise of his earlier duet in the Follies sequence, singing, “I Want to Go to Chicago Town,” and a sneak preview of a song that will appear in the final Follies sequence—“It’s Do or Die for MCI” (Massachusetts Correctional
Institute). The latter he sings to applause as he dances from the room, leaving
the spectator to ponder those words in the light of the force-feeding and death
of Malinowski in the preceding sequence. Finally, shortly before the concluding
Follies sequence that provides a lively choral finale (“So Long for Now/We’ll
Take a Bow”), we are treated in the courtyard with the memorable version of
“For the Glory of Father Mulligan,” performed acrobatically by an inmate stand-
ing on his head in accompaniment to the “Prophet’s” final dramatic performance.

This “follies vérité” in which madness and confinement are put on display
allows Wiseman to achieve a number of strategic political effects. Most important,
it allows him to confront on its own grounds the repressive system of gazes that
operates at Bridgewater. Within the nonreciprocal relations of observation in the
institution, as we have noted, the power of seeing is bestowed on the guards and
psychiatrists, leaving to the inmates the position merely of being seen. Part of
the disqualification of the inmates as subjects is to deny them the power of
returning the gaze, reducing them to the status of pure objects—hence the
inmate-blindness motif, epitomized by the image of the cotton-stuffed eyes of
Malinowski’s corpse. On this level Wiseman’s transformation of institutional life
into a spectacle is a politically motivated parody of this objectifying institutional
gaze, reducing the inmates in their madness and confinement to fetishized and
exhibited objects of our voyeuristic gaze.

On another level by re-presenting the daily madness of institutional life as
if it were a Hollywood musical, Wiseman begins to subvert the political relations
of looking that so victimize the inmates. One vehicle of this subversion is Wise-
man’s exploitation of the more frankly exhibitionist regime of showing (in
addition to the dominant cinematic regime of voyeuristic seeing) that John Ellis
notes characterizes the musical, among other cinematic spectacles.22 Wiseman is
thus able to strategically reposition the spectator into a fetishistic looking in which
the objects of our gaze organize and present themselves to be seen (or seem to),
actively aware of themselves as visual display, no longer pretending not to be
seen, and, in effect, returning the gaze. And the political effect of this exhibi-
tionistic strategy is clear enough. Cutting through the ideological constraints of
the dominant cultural codes that would enforce the inmate’s “rights of privacy,”
Wiseman makes a spectacle of their situation. If the culture of phallocentrism
in the carceral archipelago finds its purposes served by excluding madness, by
punishing it secretly and ritually within the walls of confinement, then Wiseman
bursts open the gates that separate madness and criminality from the “moral
ity,” offering them in an ostentatious display that says, in effect, “Look Here!”23
Along with the excesses of madness, the practice of exclusion and its secret rituals
of excommunication and debasement are put on exhibition.

While importing the objectifying fetish of the spectacle as he mimics the
conventions of the Hollywood musical, Wiseman nevertheless defeats the ideology
of spectacle, which, as Dana Polan observes, normally works as a strategy of
containment to render the world as surface images and “to convert the critical
into the merely watched and watchable.”24 One way Wiseman places the spectator

32 Cinema Journal 29, No. 1, Fall 1989

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in a more critical position is to make us aware of our position as voyeurs, a frontal assault on the dominant cinematic regime of voyeurism, which he simultaneously constructs and deconstructs. An instance of this occurs early in the film as we peep, uncomfortably, through the peephole in a cell door at the child molester, who by this time has been stripped both literally and psychically. Wiseman seems very obviously here to parody the voyeuristic scopic register of the "primal scene and keyhole" that Christian Metz and others have associated with the cinema.\textsuperscript{25} The scene is shot and edited in a way that forces us to acknowledge our illicit gazing at the keyhole: We watch the guard's hand as he throws open the peephole cover on the door and Wiseman thrusts his camera into the opening, bringing into sharp focus the naked inmate as he stares out his window, but revealing as well the edges (out of focus) of the peephole through which we are looking. The immediate effect here is to foreground the voyeurism that has been so strongly present throughout this long initiation sequence, in which Wiseman has enlisted us as voyeurs to watch the stripping of prisoners in the admitting room and the highly voyeuristic cross-examination of Mitch about his sexual habits and preferences.

At other times in the film we are made to feel uncomfortable in our position as unseen gazers at forbidden sights when the objects of our looking return the look, in effect watching us watch. Though instances of people looking into the camera are extremely rare in other of Wiseman's films, there are numerous and striking examples in \textit{Titticut Follies}, usually in emphatically "forbidden" scenes of looking, which intensifies the startle-effect when the object of our gaze returns the gaze and we feel "discovered." This first happens during Mitch's confession, when Wiseman abruptly cuts from the admitting room to a close-up of two apparently paranoid patients who stare long and accusingly into the camera. It happens for an extended time again when we watch the naked Jim as he performs his dance in the "theater" of his cell, stopping periodically to stare at us staring. And it happens more briefly but with even more startle-effect in the force-feeding sequence when, many minutes into the scene, one of the guards restraining Malinowski slowly turns to gaze placidly into the camera, leaving us to feel suddenly like accomplices in the obscene ritual.

The interplay of all these repositionings of the spectator in \textit{Titticut Follies} creates a formidable battery of alienation effects. In a variety of ways, the spectator is made uncomfortable, forced out of a "safe," self-absorbed voyeurism with its illicit pleasures and into a more distanced, self-aware kind of looking that demands that she or he deal with the conflicts that arise from watching. And by turning his representation of daily life in the asylum into a kind of dark musical comedy, Wiseman acknowledges the artifice and illusions of his own documentary art, refusing to conceal the textual production of meaning and to bewitch us with some transparent illusion or impression of reality. In this way Wiseman is able to subvert the conventional and ideologically conditioned use of the camera to function as the symbolic Father of transcendental vision and knowledge—the unacknowledged speaking subject that dominates and reduces to passivity a
viewing subject whose “lack” is sutured over through a narrative and representational illusion that requires a relationship of imaginary identification. In a narrative exposing the Oedipal seduction of the Son and the repressive phallocentric power of the Father, Wiseman is thus able on the formal level to defeat the symbolic Father of the film text by undermining the monolithic Father’s law of a unified narrative and seamless representation.

Notes


5. For Foucault’s distinction between “discipline-blockade” and “discipline-mechanism,” see Discipline and Punish, 209.

6. The basis for much of my analysis here is Foucault’s discussion of the relationship between the “moral city” and the modern asylum in Madness and Civilization, 60–68.


8. For a discussion of Model in these terms, see Dan Armstrong, “Wiseman’s Model and the Documentary Project: Toward a Radical Film Practice,” Film Quarterly 37, no. 2 (Winter 1983–84): 2–10. For a similar discussion of Manoeuvre, see a forthcoming issue of Quarterly Review of Film and Video (Fall 1989).


17. For full discussions of Lacan’s notion of “foreclosure” as the unsuccessful accession of the subject into the symbolic realm through the failure of the paternal signifier to be properly inscribed, see *Ecrits*, 179–225, and *Jacques Lacan*, 230–46.
23. According to Dana Polan the message “Look Here!” is attached to all cinematic spectacles. See “‘Above All Else,”’ 63.