

## 45th Sydney Film Festival

## Case studies of social breakdown

Richard Phillips  
11 July 1998

As well as a season of films by D.A Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, the 45th Sydney Film Festival screened a large range of other documentaries. These included: *Public Housing*; *Wittstock, Wittstock*; *Wasteland*; *The Maelstrom -- a family chronicle*; *Free Fall* and *The Way*.

Three of these films in particular stand out for their treatment of the social problems facing the working class in the US, Germany and Hungary. *Public Housing*; *Wittstock, Wittstock* and *Wasteland* all show in graphic detail aspects of the social devastation inflicted on working people as a result of profound economic and political changes in the 1980s and 1990s.

All of them reveal a sensitivity and concern for the plight of the individuals in the films. This is an encouraging development. At the same time, however, one senses that the directors have reached a certain intellectual and political impasse. They are able to record the personal and social tragedies with technical skill and compassion, but are either unable or unwilling to delve into the causes.

Like other artists, documentary filmmakers confront basic questions: Is it necessary, or possible to reveal the underlying political and historical reasons for the social problems? Should the director only record the facts and the opinions of the film's subjects? Is the filmmaker obliged to probe more deeply into the psyche of his or her real life characters?

Some directors, like Frederick Wiseman in the US, argue that it is necessary to maintain an objective, sociological approach -- a stoic presentation of details. But precisely because documentary filmmakers create factual accounts of social life, decisions as to whether they expose, ignore, or cover up the political reasons for the calamities confronting their subjects are more direct and obvious.

For non-fiction filmmakers working prior to the 1960s the questions were complicated to some extent by technical considerations. Bulky and unwieldy equipment prevented directors capturing on-the-spot synchronised footage and sound comments from their subjects. This meant that many documentaries from this period were awkward and lacked spontaneous interchange between filmmakers and their subjects.

Lightweight cameras, high-quality synchronous sound, high-speed film and other refinements have overcome these physical impediments. Today directors can capture the most intimate and spontaneous moments in high quality footage synchronised with sound under virtually all conditions.

But the greater flexibility provided by these technical refinements has only highlighted the intellectual and political dilemmas confronting non-fiction filmmakers.

Life in *Public Housing* in the US

*Public Housing*, the latest film from Frederick Wiseman, is a harrowing three-and-a-quarter hour account of everyday life in the Ida B. Wells *Public Housing* project in Chicago's South Side. The estate is home to more than 5,000 residents and one of the poorest areas in the US.

Wiseman is a major figure in US documentary making, having produced

30 films during his 30-year career. Describing his films as 'reality fictions', his approach to filmmaking is dispassionate in the extreme. He makes no explicit editorial comment but prefers to allow the surroundings and the subjects in his films to speak directly to the viewer. There is no narration and the only music is the sounds recorded during filming.

In *Public Housing*, Wiseman and his excellent cameraman, John Davey, reveal the all-pervasive poverty in the estate -- the drug problems, unemployment, illiteracy, cock-roach and rat infestations, and the generally unhealthy and run-down living conditions.

While Chicago state authorities maintain best behaviour on camera, the film records the constant confrontation between residents and the police. Little imagination is required to visualise what would be the reaction of police if local residents step outside the official bounds.

*Public Housing* also shows the deleterious role of black entrepreneurs, housing officials and various charities. Their constant theme is that personal commitment, small business enterprise and cooperation with the police and local authorities can overcome the social problems.

The film ends with a speech by a former National Basketball Association player who advises the tenants, most of them unemployed, to use their ingenuity to start small businesses. Residents are regularly subjected to this sort of 'motivational' talk. The unrelenting oppression and poverty shown in *Public Housing* points to the impossibility of such solutions.

Wiseman's is a skilled craftsman, but his approach only touches the surface of things and fails to probe the cause of this misery. Viewers, shocked and disturbed by this portrait of life in a US public housing estate are simply left to draw their own conclusions.

Social consequences of German reunification

The problems apparent in Wiseman's film are repeated in Volker Koepp's *Wittstock, Wittstock*.

Koepp examines the life of three female textile workers, Elizabeth, Renata and Edith, from Wittstock in East Germany. Beginning in 1974, the film records the hopes and aspirations of the women, following them through marriage, childbirth, unemployment and divorce. They were grandmothers when the filming stopped in 1996.

The monotonous routine of their life in the GDR is turned upside down by the collapse of the Stalinist regime, the capitalist reunification of Germany and the privatisation of the state-owned factory at which they work. Job destruction sweeps through the town and the rest of eastern Germany.

After devoting the greater part of their lives to the factory, Edith, Renata and Elizabeth are sacked. Within three years, three-quarters of Wittstock's women are unemployed. This dramatic change -- from a 'job for life', to mass unemployment, poverty and the endless and mind-numbing round of retraining programs and part-time work, is carefully recorded.

Koepp's sympathies are clearly with the women, but his film does not

attempt an explanation for the dramatic change in the subject's lives. The director is not obliged to provide a detailed analysis, but the questions asked of Edith, Renata and Elizabeth are virtually all non-political. The director does not venture beyond asking about the most mundane and immediate issues.

#### Gypsy life in Rumania

*Wasteland*, by Andrei Schwartz records a year in the life of hundreds of desperately poor gypsies living on a rubbish dump outside the Rumanian city of Cluj. The film won the 1997 Joris Ivens Prize at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam.

The gypsies, a long-oppressed minority in Europe, and their children survive by scouring for paper, scrap metal, plastic, in fact any item that can be sold for cash, burnt for heating, worn or eaten. They share the dump with thousands of rats, birds and countless other animals that scavenge the tons of waste. The settlement is ironically known as Dallas, after the American television series.

The residents live in flimsy shacks of tin, plastic sheeting and wood off-cuts and constantly face eviction by the local council. Eviction threats only recede during elections when local politicians attempt to secure the gypsy vote. At all other times the residents are the subject of racist abuse.

It would take a Charles Dickens or Emile Zola to adequately convey in words the squalor that the film reveals: children scavenging the dump in bitterly cold winters; mothers attempting to provide food and sustenance under impossible conditions; the grief when a mother and two young children are accidentally burnt to death in their shanty home.

Schwartz refers to the racist slanders and provides some detail on the political opposition to the gypsies. But he never asks the question why, nor examines their historical oppression.

#### An immigrant's search for love

Hungarian director Ferenc Moldoványi takes an entirely different approach in his outstanding film *The Way*. Moldoványi eschews a bland presentation of the facts. In so far as he directly deals with social issues it is through the eyes of one individual -- Liu Zhixian, a 55-year-old Chinese intellectual, now living in Hungary.

Liu was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. His marriage failed and so, in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, he left China and his only son to settle in Budapest, Hungary.

Liu has no interest in the preoccupations of his fellow-countrymen in Hungary and their efforts to enrich themselves. His mission is to find a loving wife from China and reestablish a meaningful relationship with his son. But the women he meets are only concerned with his assets. For them love is measured by wealth and family connections. The film records his most recent trip to China to meet his son and a potential wife.

From this simple story Moldoványi, with exceptional camera work by Tibor Máthé and sensitive editing by Mártha Révész, translates the innermost thoughts of Liu into a lyrical portrait of the shattered dreams and loneliness of countless immigrants around the world.

The soundtrack is a combination of comments from Liu and letters, his son's poetry and traditional Chinese music. One is continuously forced to remind oneself that this is not a drama but a documentary; that the film's subjects are not actors but real people.

The director's empathy with his characters, his sensitivity to their illusions and hopes generates a hauntingly beautiful film and one that deserves a wider audience.

#### Two chronicles from the Holocaust

Other more interesting documentary works at the festival were two films

on the Holocaust -- *The Maelstrom -- a family chronicle* and *Free Fall --* by Hungarian director Péter Forgács.

Both films are compelling studies of Hitler's 'final solution' against the Jews -- in this case, in Holland and Hungary. These films are profoundly personal and chilling records of Nazi domination of Europe in this period.

Forgács is a talented archivist and editor who has spent the past 10 years collecting and editing home-movies from the 1930s and 1940s. Using this footage the director creates an atmospheric and detailed portrait of the families' attempts to maintain normal life as the Nazi political machine imposes its grip over all aspects of their existence.

In *Free Fall*, Forgács weaves a film and musical tapestry of the life of Hungarian Jew, Gyorgy Petö and his extended family. Petö, is a talented musician and amateur photographer. In *The Maelstrom -- a family chronicle*, the director contrasts footage shot by the Peerbooms, a Dutch Jewish family and home-movies from the Seyss-Inquart family, leading Dutch fascists.

In both films, the narrator dispassionately details the Nazi expansion and quotes from the ongoing and increasingly harsh anti-Jewish laws enacted by Dutch and Hungarian quisling regimes. One by one family members perish in the death chambers or their precursor, the labour camps.

#### Capitalism glorified

Notwithstanding the weaknesses of *Public Housing*, *Wittstock*, *Wittstock* and *Wasteland*, all of these are serious and sensitive exposures of the plight facing ordinary people.

By contrast, *To Get Rich is Glorious* by Australian director Nick Torrens is an unashamed apology for the profit system and the rich.

The film was shot during the 1997 administrative handover of Hong Kong from the Britain to the Beijing Stalinists. Embracing Deng Xiaopeng's infamous expression, Torrens applauds the activities of two capitalist entrepreneurs in China.

*To Get Rich is Glorious* is a toadying portrait of Vincent Lee, the young son of a Hong Kong multi-millionaire who has close contacts with the Beijing Stalinist bureaucracy. Torrens, who provided the commentary on the film, obviously regards Lee as a warm and sensitive young man. Unintentionally, the film provides a glimpse of the self-centred, narrow and cold-blooded attitudes of those who have benefited from the handover.

Lee is in partnership with Mark Bakal, a Harvard professor and investment banker whose company amassed a fortune asset-stripping hundreds of companies in Eastern Europe in the early 90s.

*To Get Rich is Glorious* traces their trip to mainland China following the Hong Kong handover and their attempts to locate state-owned enterprises to buy-up, slash jobs, asset strip then list on the Hong Kong and New York stock exchanges and make millions. Its sequences are exclusively of Bakal and Lee's business meetings, social gatherings and Lee's own privileged background.

Millions of state-enterprise workers are being sacked as the Chinese Stalinists form partnerships with people like Lee and Bakal. On current estimates 369,000 of the 370,000 state-owned companies will be sold off or closed with tens of millions sacked and plunged into poverty. This is of no concern whatsoever to Torrens.

The fact that this film has already been purchased and shown on Australian television while *Public Housing*, *Wittstock*, *Wittstock* or *The Way* have not, is no surprise. After all, films sycophantically worshipping the profit system are unlikely to be knocked back by the television networks.

See Also:  
*Documentaries and semi-documentaries at the 1998 San Francisco Film Festival*  
The camera never lies ...

[21 May 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**