

Public Housing, directed, edited and produced by Frederick Wiseman

A look at Chicago's poor: "Drama in ordinary experiences"

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Famed filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's new documentary, *Public Housing*, provides a graphic picture of daily life in a Chicago housing project. In contrast to the sound bites on the evening news that sensationalize the horror and degradation experienced by people portrayed as less than human, Wiseman's penetrating camera captures in painstaking detail the plight of real people who live in the Ida B. Wells complex.

Wiseman chose this location for his film because the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) is synonymous with public housing in the United States. The Ida B. Wells project houses 5,000 people on 75 acres. It is located in a four-mile area on Chicago's south side that has continuous projects, including the well-known Robert Taylor Homes. This stretch of human warehouses, the most densely populated public housing area in the United States, is walled off physically from the rest of the city by the 10-lane Dan Ryan Expressway, and socially, by poverty. Chicago contains 11 of the country's 15 poorest census tracts; half of the adult population in the public housing projects subsists on less than \$5,000 a year. Unlike Robert Taylor's high-rise prisons, however, the Ida B. Wells complex also includes many two-story buildings, making them more accessible to Wiseman's camera.

In response to an interviewer from the *Boston Phoenix* in March 1998, who asked if he looked for 'drama' while shooting, Wiseman replied, 'The first thought: I'm trying to make a movie. A movie has to have dramatic sequence and structure. I don't have a precise definition of what constitutes drama, but I'm gambling that I'm going to get episodes. Otherwise it becomes Andy Warhol's movie on the Empire State Building. So, yes I *am* looking for drama, though I'm not necessarily looking for people beating each other up, shooting each other. There's a lot of drama in ordinary experiences.'

This is, perhaps, one of Wiseman's great strengths. One of the most emotionally moving segments in *Public Housing* involves a drama about an old man being evicted from his apartment by police. Presumably he will be taken to a nursing home. That this traumatic event is being carried out by police officers instead of social workers speaks to the increasingly brutal nature of social relations in America.

Crippled from arthritis, the man can hardly walk. The police repeatedly ask him to gather up his belongings, explaining that he will not be returning. The man is disoriented. He appears not to understand what they want him to do. They offer to help him. The television is blasting away. The volume is then turned down by one of the police officers and the camera moves into every area of the small apartment. It becomes painfully apparent that the man has nothing. The walls are completely bare. There is not a single photo, book, document or even a knickknack. A bed and small kitchen table are the only furniture. A few canned food items and his medication are put in a plastic bag and the man is escorted out of his apartment.

The dehumanization of the poor emerges in a scene in which nuns from a local church have set up a rummage sale in the housing project. Dozens of plastic bags, paper bags and broken down cardboard boxes filled with used clothing have been placed on the pavement. The viewer is taken aback by the demeaning spectacle of adults bent over, picking through other people's discarded belongings on the ground. One of the nuns, plump and robust, recognizes a young woman and inquires about her status. The young woman, hoping to find some compassion and help, tells the nun that what she really needs is furniture. She explains that she is trying to get her life back together by dealing with a drug or alcohol abuse problem, but it is very difficult. She has no furniture. The nun replies that all of her sources that generally donate furniture have dried up. She then cheerily

adds that the items the young woman has chosen cost only 25 cents each.

Wiseman's remarkable gift lies in being able to show how what is an ordinary activity for many people can, under different circumstances, become a gut-wrenching social ordeal. Take, for example, the normally mundane task of buying groceries. The camera first reveals a line of people of all ages lined up outside a building. As the camera moves closer, the building is disclosed as a small grocery store, with one distinction. No one is allowed in. Only one person can shop at a time. When the shopper makes it to the front of the line, thick plexi-glass divides him or her from all of the items on the shelves. The residents shout orders to the employees behind the glass. The viewer hears the sounds of noisy frustration: 'No, not that one, the other bag of chips!' The employees go up and down the aisles selecting the items. The segment goes on for quite a while, ending with the painful transactions as customers count pennies, struggling to come up with the right amount of money for their purchases. Like many aspects of this film, one is totally drawn into the scene and can actually feel the frustration of not being able to touch or examine a single item until it is fully paid for.

The overall conditions of the housing project are deplorable. There are many scenes of buildings in the complex with boarded-shut windows, broken glass and overgrown weeds. And suddenly within one such building, a sign of life appears. There are actually people residing and trying to make a home in one apartment in a nearly condemned structure. Outside children play basketball with a milk crate for a hoop.

Wiseman chooses an interesting apartment to depict the pervasive problem of roach and rodent infestations. The particular residence is the home of a middle-aged woman who has obviously taken great care to keep her place clean. However, in spite of her efforts the problems persists. The exterminator patiently explains how she must spread the powder on the kitchen floor, suggesting she sprinkle in a little sugar. 'The sugar works,' he tells her, 'but be sure to wear gloves.' And in a matter-of-fact manner, he adds, 'The powder causes skin cancer.'

Wiseman is part of the 'Direct cinema' school, which emerged in the 1950s and 60s, made possible by significant technological developments, such as light-weight mobile 16mm cameras, tape recorders and the invention of crystal synchronization. These developments made it possible for the camera and sound crews to move and work independently without the many cables that had bound them together. The most important byproduct was the ability of the filmmaker to capture images and sounds as they occurred, instead of creating them. The core of this

documentary movement was represented by Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and Albert Maysles. Their works centered on individual subjects. Frederick Wiseman's enduring contribution was to expand the range of the new documentary beyond portraiture and recording to the more complex and difficult area of the investigation of political and social phenomena.

From his first film through to his most recent, Wiseman has dedicated his talents to exposing social institutions and conditions. *Public Housing* is Wiseman's thirtieth documentary in as many years. Born in 1930, trained as a lawyer in Boston, Wiseman has explored a series of institutions in the United States, beginning with *The Titicut Follies* (1967). The once-banned film was a devastating exposure of the inhumane treatment of patients in a Massachusetts institution for the criminally insane. Shortly after that Wiseman made another film which also created a political storm, *High School* (1968), shot in Philadelphia. *Law and Order* (1969) described the social and political forces at work in the Kansas City Police Department.

These three major films were followed by *Hospital* (1970), shot in New York; *Basic Training* (1971), shot at Fort Knox; *Essene* (1972) a study of an Episcopal monastery in Michigan; *Juvenile Court* (1973), shot in Memphis; *Primate Center* in Atlanta, which raises basic questions about forms of scientific research and probably Wiseman's most controversial film; *Welfare* (1975), a harrowing study of that institution as it operated in New York City; and *Meat* (1976) about the meatpacking industry.

The filmmaker does not seem interested in making overt political statements. As in the scenes featuring housing project activist Helen Finner, and former Los Angeles Laker Ron Carter, now a middle class black entrepreneur, Wiseman simply lets them speak for themselves without comment or criticism. For Wiseman, if a viewer is taken in by the hokum of the black businessman, selling illusions to desperately impoverished people, it is not a failing of the film. Wiseman is not trying to convince, only to show what is. Whether this is a weakness in Wiseman's filmmaking is open to debate. Nevertheless, Wiseman is to be commended for *Public Housing*. To his credit, he has remained true to his beliefs.



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