

In Jackson Heights: Documentarian Frederick Wiseman on life in a New York City neighborhood

Mark Witkowski, Fred Mazelis
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In Jackson Heights is the latest documentary in the long career of the octogenarian filmmaker Frederick Wiseman. Wiseman is known, in 40 films including *Titicut Follies* (about a prison hospital for the criminally insane), *High School*, *Public Housing*, *Racetrack*, *Ballet*, *Zoo*, *Central Park*, *Boxing Gym* and *Belfast, Maine*, for his methodical studies of social relations and institutions.

Here he has turned his attention to perhaps the quintessential immigrant neighborhood in New York, a city that has been shaped and transformed by successive waves of immigration over many generations.

Wiseman has sometimes been referred to as a practitioner of *cinéma vérité* (literally, truthful cinema—a form of observational cinema, usually without a narrator's voice-over). He strenuously rejects the label, pointing out that, although he forgoes narration, titles or explanation of any kind, he shapes and creates his movies through use of editing, choice of subjects and decisions on structure. In any case, his method has often made for fascinating and engaging portraits. Ordinary working people speak for themselves, and spheres of social life not often explored in film are treated in interesting detail.

At the same time, Wiseman's approach is not without its pitfalls. He readily acknowledges that his films are not unbiased, that his own outlook finds expression in the scenes and editing that go into one of his movies. This is honest and correct. Wiseman's position stands in contrast to egregious examples like *Zero Dark Thirty*, for example, whose filmmakers outrageously claimed they were not taking sides on the imperialist aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the same time, Wiseman's choices are of course legitimate subjects for scrutiny. The editing decisions that went into *In Jackson Heights* weaken it in significant ways.

The Jackson Heights neighborhood offers Wiseman the opportunity to show the details of life as it is lived. "I wanted to do a film on immigrants coming to the country now," he told an interviewer, and "the cultural diversity jumped out at me." With 130,000 people in an area of about 300 square acres, the community, part of the borough of Queens, is one of the most densely populated in the world. It is only a few miles from Wall Street, but seemingly a world away. Unlike many other neighborhoods, it is not sharply polarized between the very rich and the poor, nor is it among the more impoverished sections of

the city.

Official estimates put the number of languages spoken in Queens at more than 160. Walking on one of the main shopping streets of Jackson Heights, 37th Avenue, one may hear English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, Russian, Greek, Creole and other languages in the space of a fairly short stroll. While Jackson Heights may be the most diverse neighborhood, it has stiff competition from neighboring Elmhurst, with its large number of Chinese, Thai and other East Asian residents, in addition to South Asians and Latin Americans.

Spanish speakers in Jackson Heights include large numbers of Colombians, Ecuadoreans, Dominicans and others from South America and the Caribbean. The newcomers live not far from older generations of immigrants and their descendants, mostly older Irish, Italian and Jewish residents. Jackson Heights also has a large gay presence.

All of this is shown in scenes that are often engaging and effective. A series of seemingly random images are shown in rapid-fire order between scenes of dialogue and social interaction. Bright colors are often the focus. Fruit on display outside a local grocery store, children's clothing in a store window, mannequins in a store window and a stand selling fresh-cut flowers provide a lively backdrop for discussions. Many of the scenes will be familiar to New Yorkers. Bustling Roosevelt Avenue is the center of activity for Latin American immigrants, with restaurants, immigration lawyers, and discount and clothing stores attracting passersby. Overhead the elevated No. 7 train travels between Manhattan's West Side and the largely Chinese and Korean neighborhood of Flushing.

The camera switches between vignettes that show community meetings, a neighborhood barbershop, a Jewish community center, meetings of immigrant workers and gatherings of gay and lesbian Jackson Heights residents as well. Some scenes are more effective than others, and there are times when it seems that residents, aware they are being filmed, are less at ease and less candid than they would otherwise be.

A particularly effective and humorous scene shows a roomful of immigrants, most but not all from the Indian subcontinent, at a class that will help them pass the test to become taxi drivers.

A 92-year-old Jewish woman in an assisted living center has only one major complaint: She finds it almost impossible to find

people to talk to. As the camera lingers on her exchanges with her neighbors, the viewer sees quite clearly that this is indeed a problem of social isolation of the elderly, a problem that defies improvement in the current system of profit-driven health care.

In another scene, gay and lesbian residents recount the horrific murder in Jackson Heights about 20 years ago of Julio Rivera, the victim of a brutal gay-bashing. A street sign marks the spot where this attack took place.

Some major themes emerge. The large number of immigrant workers have legal issues to confront, as well as the desperate need for affordable housing and the problem of wage theft, in which employers refuse to pay overtime and sometimes refuse to pay back wages. In a discussion where some young workers describe the ways in which they have been taken advantage, it is pointed out that some of the guilty employers are themselves Latino. As one worker explains, this is “not about race, it’s about humanity.”

There is also the threat of gentrification, which Jackson Heights has so far mainly avoided, but which shows signs of encroaching in certain areas.

In the barbershop, for instance, the barber and his customers discuss a proposed business improvement district (BID) that is being established, something in the mold of the employer-funded outfits that are a bigger presence in wealthy shopping areas of Manhattan. One man explains the process by which real estate developers use the BID to bring in new and more upscale businesses, driving out existing merchants. Rising taxes and expenses lead to higher rents, forcing small shop owners to leave. The smaller landlord finds himself forced to sell his property to real estate investors on their terms.

In another scene, one shopkeeper, who has been doing business at the same location for 22 years and now faces eviction, laments that “we live in a capitalist country where private property is the most important.” He thus sees no alternative—nothing can be done.

These scenes show the drawbacks as well as the positive sides to Wiseman’s work. Since his methods preclude any overt intervention from the filmmaker or anyone else, the issues of gentrification and the exploitation of immigrant workers are only touched on. The impression is left that gentrification is simply inevitable, for instance, and this may indeed be Wiseman’s belief.

Jackson Heights itself, as well as this film depicting the community, raises the issue of multiculturalism and its relationship to broader social questions. The term is used in two different senses. Will workers, and the young generation in particular, mix together in school, at work and elsewhere? Will they begin to see their concerns as class issues, as briefly suggested by some of the conversations recorded by Wiseman? Or, as is most often claimed in the media, is it a matter of tribal separatism, of at-best peaceful coexistence between different religions and ethnicities that will never join together in a common struggle?

Wiseman has edited 300 hours of film down to a still-lengthy 3-hour-and-10-minute feature. He has clearly made some choices. He has opted, for instance, to film inside the office of the local Democratic Party city councilman, Daniel Dromm. Dromm, one of several New York Council members who are gay, also is given a lot of screen time, interacting with residents at various local

functions, and leading a gay pride parade along with Mayor Bill de Blasio.

The unstated premise is that Dromm represents the interests of Jackson Heights, this overwhelmingly working class community. But Dromm is a capitalist politician, who has the assigned task of spouting occasional left-sounding phrases to convince his constituents that they can defend their basic social rights by pleading with the ruling class, that American democracy consists of separate sections of workers each competing for the favor of the billionaires and their political representatives. His job is to keep these workers chained to the Democratic Party, the party that is steadily moving toward world war, that has deported a record number of immigrants in recent years, and that has presided over widening and unprecedented social inequality.

This outlook overlaps completely with identity politics, a prime means of keeping the working class divided. One of the weakest aspects of *In Jackson Heights* is the way it deals with the issues raised by some of the gay and lesbian residents. Much time is given over to the demand for a separate “space” in which they will feel comfortable. The desire for a community center is of course legitimate, but something else is being emphasized here. The fight against bigotry is posed in a separatist, exclusivist fashion. It is assumed that each constituency has its own separate issues, and that identity politics, not the fight for the unity of the working class, is the way to fight homophobia.

Despite these significant weaknesses, Wiseman’s latest film deserves a wide audience. New York City is almost always portrayed as the playground of the rich and famous, a place where certain upper middle class types spend at least \$1 million for an apartment and where ultra-luxury apartments in new sky-high skyscrapers south of Central Park are being sold for tens of millions of dollars. *In Jackson Heights*, if nothing else, is a reminder of the fact that, even in this wealthiest city in the world, the working class makes up the vast majority of the population, and it will be heard.



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