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Film, Parable, Reciprocity: Frederick Wiseman's "Reality Fictions" and Social Change

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Film, Parable, Reciprocity

Frederick Wiseman's "Reality Fictions" and Social Change

My attitude toward him is an attitude towards a soul.
I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
W. H. Auden

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that social criticism may be an effect of Frederick Wiseman's "reality fiction" films only if that effect is understood as analogous to that of parable, an awakened responsiveness to the unknown and the unresolved. The irresolution witnessed repeatedly in his films is the reality of "radical inequality" within institutions in democracy, with domination ranging from explicit exploitative relations to subtle aural and bodily cues. Within those relations, Wiseman opens up the space of parable as a vision and practice of reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity through, among others, filmic strategies of "lyric portraiture" and expressive "democratic noise". Furthermore, Wiseman's camera extends more-than-reciprocity to animals in a filmic style that shows human and animal relations as visceral markers of what otherwise might remain unseen in human-to-human relations.

KEYWORDS

parable, reciprocity, Frederick Wiseman, documentary, social change

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Alyda Faber is an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Atlantic School of Theology. Her first poetry collection, *Dust or Fire* (Goose Lane Editions/Icehouse) appeared this year, and includes an 18 part poem entitled "Berlinale Erotik: Berlin Film Festival".

A medium shot, a man on the left, a woman on the right, seated at a table in a room in the National Gallery in London. The woman says, “And I don’t mean this to be a criticism.” The man replies, “It’s quite clearly not a criticism.”¹ The woman speaks in paragraphs about the need to advertise to the broader public what the gallery has to offer. The man says very little. This conversation early in the film *NATIONAL GALLERY* (Frederick Wiseman, US 2014) gives the woman’s sense of what art might be for (a variety of intellectual, emotional, spiritual goods), while the man objects that he doesn’t want to “play to the lowest common denominator of public taste” (NG 7), along with non-verbal resistance to her words. In a Wiseman film, what is not said is as important as what is said, if not more so. The woman gestures widely in movements that sweep the table toward the man; making bowing motions, she avoids eye contact for the most part, while he sits, face impassive, arms crossed, leaning away from her, scratching his arm, looking up and away from her, at one point shifting ever so slightly farther away (fig. 1).² When he begins to respond with more than “Yes”



Fig. 1: Film still, *NATIONAL GALLERY* (Frederick Wiseman, US 2014), 00:08:15.

or “Yeah”, he leans forward slightly, there is more eye contact between them, the woman’s face relaxes; she smiles. The animality of enigmatic and clear bodily, tonal and facial cues, the subtle play of dominance and submission in this

- 1 Transcript of *National Gallery*, Wiseman 2014, 2. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to NG. I gratefully acknowledge Zipporah Films for providing me with transcripts. Thank you to M. Gail Hamner, David Heckerl, Jon LeBlanc, S. Brent Plate, and two anonymous reviewers who commented on earlier drafts of this essay.
- 2 Images are provided courtesy of Zipporah Films. More information on Frederick Wiseman and his films can be found at Zipporah Films, www.zipporah.com.

exchange between articulate people, may resonate for the viewer as much or more than any of the intellectual arguments presented.

The limits of intellectual arguments in this and countless other sequences in Frederick Wiseman's films suggest that his vision of art does not include the desire to provoke social change through didactic film.³ Social criticism may be an effect of Wiseman's art, but only if this effect is understood in an expansive and elusive way – just as parables draw us toward the unknown and the irresolvable with awakened responsiveness. As Wiseman points out, given the vast range of competing sources of information in a democratic society, a filmmaker would have to be living in a fantasy world to expect that his or her work would affect significant social change: “thousands of people aren't that easily moved in a democratic society.”⁴ Animated by the strangeness of the world, Wiseman doesn't attempt a didactic project, but simply tries to evoke the complexity of everyday life: “It's unpredictable what people's experiences or judgments will be. Part of the fun of making documentaries is the constant surprise, and the fact that people are always doing or saying things in a way that you wouldn't have predicted. When you're meeting them in the kind of situations that I'm meeting them in, it always runs counter to clichés.”⁵

Wiseman's films communicate the enigmatic everyday in a “novelistic” way,⁶ so that “reality fictions” is a more apt term than “documentaries”, in his view.⁷ That is, his films' dramatic structure, rhythm and point- or points-of-view convey, indirectly, his attitudes and feelings toward events and persons. He began his over 50 years in filmmaking with some fairly polemical work,⁸ but reflects that “my films have become less didactic ... I like to think I'm better able to express complex ideas in film terms ... So it's not that I'm without, for lack of better words, ‘ideological’, conceptual views, but I try not to ... exclude things that don't fit with whatever my ideology is at the moment.”⁹ When interviewer Daniel Kasman interprets non-didactic to mean “open text”, Wiseman clarifies, “Not open in the sense that it doesn't have a point-of-view or well defined points-of-view. Whenever you deal with reality as a subject, it should be complicated and ambiguous, and it shouldn't... if I could express the point-of-view of the film in twenty-five words or less I shouldn't make the movie.”¹⁰

3 Grant 1992, 1–41. Grant refers to Wiseman's style as “political cinema” that refuses “authorial superiority”.

4 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015; Atkins 1976, 40, 56, 79–80.

5 Ricks/Wiseman 1990, 9.

6 Kasman 2013.

7 Atkins 1976, 82.

8 Peary/Wiseman 1998.

9 Gerow/Toshifumi/Kramer/Wiseman 1997.

10 Kasman/Wiseman 2013.

PARABLE

While the analogy of a novelistic technique is fitting for Wiseman's work, I consider his films to be parable-like in their structure and lyric address. In a companion piece to this essay, "Silence-effects: Frederick Wiseman's Films as Parables",¹¹ I began to develop this analogy by comparing the silence of parable with Wiseman's "silent" films. What I call the "silence of parable" draws out the insight of parable scholars and theologians that parable exists on "the edge of language and the limit of story".¹² I have learned from Jan Zwicky to read as *lyric* both parable and Wiseman's films. Both foster fugitive moments of acute, wondering and even painful responsiveness to the world, a fleeting capacity to live without a why or, in Zwicky's phrase, in "the erotic embrace of speechlessness"¹³ that opens out into more-than-reciprocity. Parable is unstory.¹⁴ The parables of Jesus witness to the more-than-reciprocity of the empire of God, not as a project to implement in society, but as shared images that shape our sensibility and our relations in new directions.¹⁵ Parables disrupt the logical, causal, and linear *explanation* of story, of myth.¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan notes, however, "it is not possible to live in parable alone. To live in parable means to dwell in the tension of myth *and* parable."¹⁷ In other words, it is possible to distinguish myth (narrative) and parable (lyric) conceptually but not practically. Everyday speech mixes the two, and some works "employ both lyric and narrative structures".¹⁸

Wiseman's aesthetic in his films about public or private institutions reveals this tension between myth (story) and parable (lyric). Narrative sequences include film subjects' attempts to explain the values and practices of the institutions explored in the films, which imply a broader understanding of the world (myth). Yet these sequences also create lyrical "silence-effects" with the absence of extra-diegetic music, long sequences without dialogue or with very minimal dialogue, the lack of voice-over narration and lack of questions for the film subjects. Certain types of sequences and images are repeated in all of Wiseman's films (traffic montages; corridors; single, double and group portraits; close-ups of faces, bodies, hands) without an overarching explanatory narrative

11 Faber 2015, 138–152.

12 Crossan 1975, 46.

13 Lilburn/Zwicky 2010, 145.

14 This neologism plays with the recent proliferation of un-things: an ungame, for instance, is a non-competitive game without winners and losers. I use the term to amplify my point about parable as lyric rather than story.

15 See Williams 2000a.

16 Zwicky 2006, 87–105. Zwicky's contrast of lyrical witness and narrative explanation is particularly resonant for me when considering Wiseman's work.

17 Crossan 1975, 60 (italics in the original).

18 Zwicky 2006, 100.

structure, and with the spare characterization of film subjects that “portraits” suggest – a parable-like non-didactic, non-directive cinema.

I compare Wiseman’s style and the effect on the viewer in different sequences of his films and develop these interpretations through a discussion of parable, reciprocity, and more-than-reciprocity in order to flesh out the specific aesthetic strategies at play in his films. I argue that the effect of the play between myth and parable in Wiseman’s films (or in his terms, the “abstract” and the “literal”¹⁹) is an elusive yet galvanising vision of more-than-reciprocity that opens up the space of parable, the enigmatic everyday, in his work. The viewer is not directed toward any particular action, but disturbed by visceral responsiveness – bewilderment, curiosity, pain, sadness, wonder, joy – seeing and hearing people and animals that social practice consigns to invisibility and silence. At the same time, people with social prestige – like the director of the National Gallery in the scene described in the first paragraph of the essay, the medical staff in Wiseman’s *NEAR DEATH* (US 1989), the judge in *JUVENILE COURT* (US 1973), among others – are filmed in ways that complicate their public stature.

RECIPROCITY AND MORE-THAN-RECIPROCITY

In classic liberal theory, rooted in antiquity, reciprocity can be understood as justice wherein equal persons mutually consent to limits to their actions in relation to each other.²⁰ Simone Weil’s essay “Implicit Forms of the Love of God” recounts a tragic sense of reciprocity’s limits, given “facts of radical inequality”²¹ and “all that the strong can impose upon the weak.”²² She notes that Thucydides dramatises such force in the Athenians’ war with Sparta when they meet the resistance of the neutral island of Melos. The Athenians destroy the city, kill all the men and sell the women and children into slavery, claiming that justice as reciprocity is negotiated between equals, whereas “if one is strong and the other weak, that which is possible is imposed by the first and accepted by the second.”²³ They appeal to a law of “mechanical necessity”: the strong can take advantage of the weak in every way, treat them like things, like slaves. Next to this, Weil considers an indirect love of God as *more-than-reciprocity* in response to the neighbour, “behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly, in every respect, including the

19 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015.

20 Rawls 1999, 190–224; Skerrett 2005.

21 Williams 2000a, 78.

22 Weil 1973, 142.

23 Weil 1973, 141.

slightest details of accent and attitude”.²⁴ Despite her attention to the finest shifts in “accent and attitude”, Weil sees this possibility as a supernatural gift without strong human participation. My perception of more-than-reciprocity, while indebted to Weil, has more in common with Kathryn Tanner’s sense of human malleability open to radical transformation, through grace, through grace, as an expression of “natural” possibilities, and Kathleen Skerrett’s tender sensibility of the responsiveness in the flesh of one being to another when they share “images of reciprocity and self-respect and grace.”²⁵ Weil, Tanner and Skerrett imagine these possibilities as emerging within persistent relations of domination, consistent with a vision of reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity in Wiseman’s films.

Though it doesn’t necessarily have a theistic orientation in Wiseman’s films, *this disposition of more-than-reciprocity with the dominated, humiliated and weak* – whether in the style of filming his subjects, or the actions and attitudes of persons filmed – *is the compelling vision of all of his work*, witnessed in “the slightest details of accent and attitude”. In a quiet, yet disturbing way Wiseman creates an effect in viewers similar to the effect of Jesus’ parables described by Rowan Williams: they invite people to “decide for or against self-destruction, for or against newness of life, acceptance, relatedness.”²⁶ Williams contends that the enigmatic language of parable is consistent with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s call (in his letters from prison) for a non-religious language to proclaim the word of God for the renewal of the world. As is gradually becoming clearer to me, this means an acceptance of a life-giving, unpredictable unknown in the midst of everyday life: something that we usually resist. Eric Santner interprets, through Sigmund Freud and Franz Rosenzweig, God as such an unknown, “the name for the pressure to be alive to the world, to open to the too much of pressure generated in large measure by the uncanny presence of my neighbour”,²⁷ encountered as a stranger, that is, without a program or plan of action. This is parable as lyric, a call to a responsiveness of more-than-reciprocity to that which we can acknowledge but not know, to use Stanley Cavell’s resonant distinction.²⁸ Thomas Merton interprets the synergies of faith and doubt in a similar but theistic way, as a life of bringing “the unknown into our everyday life in a living, dynamic and actual manner” that holds in abeyance our exciting and energizing efforts to explain, where the “unknown remains unknown.”²⁹ Like parable, Wiseman’s filmic style brings the enigmatic everyday into focus, where the discounted or

24 Weil 1973, 143.

25 Tanner 2010, 1–57; Skerrett 2012, 242–244. For Tanner, “natural” means to live by God’s grace.

26 Williams 2000b, 41.

27 Santner 2001, 9.

28 Cavell 2002, 238–266.

29 Merton 1972, 136.

ignored appeals of the weak are made visible and audible, and relations of damaged or compromised reciprocity are disrupted with a vision and a practice of more-than-reciprocity, as we see in his films *NATIONAL GALLERY* (2014), *NEAR DEATH*, *PRIMATE* (US 1974), *BELFAST, MAINE* (US 1999), *MEAT* (US 1976) and *JUVENILE COURT* (1973).

LYRIC PORTRAITURE³⁰

Portraiture is the most resonant and enigmatic strategy in Wiseman's films for evoking reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity within subtle power dynamics of strong and weak, and even those who appear as equals. Andrew Delbanco contends that Wiseman "is not primarily a social commentator or an investigator of this or that institution ... He is a portraitist, and his favourite genre is the double portrait."³¹ These portraits often show a person or a group in a subordinate role to an authority figure/group, and the gestural, aural, postural and other cues that reveal dominance and submission, but equally persistently how these hierarchies are undone in film's structure (and sometimes also the content, as in *NEAR DEATH* [1989]). Again and again we see these portraits and hear hectoring, pleading, advising, insulting, listening, teaching and counselling in exchanges that either intensify the inequality or bridge it in some way, on a spectrum ranging from cruelty to indifference to compassion. The structures of inequality vary, and overlap, and include (1) authority of office, of the law, military, church, medical profession, government; (2) social circumstances of poverty, aging, disability, lack of education, racism; (3) extreme power differentials in interspecies relations: hunting, trapping for fur, vivisection, factory meat production; (4) benign and less benign hierarchies of art, education or rehearsals for various kinds of performances. I begin my consideration of more-than-reciprocity that emerges within relations of inequality with a recent Wiseman film, *NATIONAL GALLERY* (2014), which explores unequal relations in a playful manner.

In *NATIONAL GALLERY* (2014), shot at the National Gallery in London, portraits are numerous: gallery patrons, staff, and representational paintings. With the shot/reverse-shot structure conventionally used to film conversations, the paintings are often filmed in close-up without the frame visible, the silent expressive portraits appearing to meet, or look away from, the silent expressiveness of gallery visitors looking at them (fig. 2).

In the first narrative sequence of the film, a woman describes a medieval painting of haloed saints for a group in the gallery, suggesting that a picture takes on qualities of what it represents, for instance, just as we might resist tossing darts

30 I owe this term to Jon LeBlanc, developed in conversation about this essay.

31 Delbanco 2010, 94.



Fig. 2: Film still, NATIONAL GALLERY (Frederick Wiseman, US 2014), 02:33:39.

at the eyes of an image of a fluffy grey kitten to avoid hurting it, even when we know it is just a picture (NG 2). In other words, more-than-reciprocity emerges in seeing and being seen, as if the representation of a human or animal face or body elicits respect beyond the painting's "thingness", displacing the usual relation of person to thing, of strong and weak. This implicates the viewer of the film in an almost vertiginous layering of looking – looking at people looking at figures in paintings (who are also looking)³² – resonant with Jean Luc Nancy's sense of parable's address. In his view, parable doesn't convey a particular message or understanding of a "text", but makes the person looking (and hearing) aware of his or her capacity for looking and hearing. Any message is incidental to the awareness of this capacity for responsiveness.³³ Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests such a richly sensorial awareness with his remark, "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul."³⁴ My attitude is a sensual awareness of reciprocity with another that, in being gifted to her, redounds to me.

Throughout the film, in the discussions of the gallery staff and commentators, paintings share attributes of human animality and spirituality: described as "organic", they begin to age as soon as they are made (NG 84–85); they suffer "misguided" restoration efforts (NG 51); despite their being centuries old, it is not possible to definitively interpret them, or to understand particular details (NG 55); they change depending on where and by whom they are seen, in

32 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015.

33 Nancy 2008, 9.

34 Cited by Zwicky 2009, 116.

what lighting and next to which other paintings; in strong exhibitions “works start talking to each other” (NG 54); and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks* “sings” (NG 95) when placed next to other da Vinci paintings in the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*. In Wiseman’s style of filming them, and as human artefacts sharing multifaceted “humanness”, the paintings receive the kind of attention and care, the more-than-reciprocity, that in other Wiseman films can be received by humans or animals disadvantaged in some way, though they are also subject to similar risks, suffering inattention or destructive attention. These risks include inadvertently destructive methods of restoration and deliberate vandalism of paintings by gallery visitors (NG 73).

NATIONAL GALLERY (2014) is a film that, perhaps more than any of his other films, is indirectly about Wiseman’s film style and its effects. With reference to Leonardo da Vinci’s and Johannes Vermeer’s work discussed in the film, we see how he makes use of the visual play of looking implicated in human animality and spirituality. Although Wiseman does not interview his subjects, in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014) he films an interview given by the curator of the Leonardo da Vinci exhibit. His description of Leonardo’s work gives some apt characterizations of Wiseman’s films: the “paintings show figures that are incredibly present, incredibly vital, and yet extraordinarily remote and other, [revealing] ... a quality of thought allied with a kind of pitch of emotion and an intensity of craft” (NG 37). Reference is also made to the spiritual quality of Leonardo’s work that emerges through a “capacity to paint the invisible, the just out of reach ... an artist who constantly refines, revisits certain themes over and over again” (NG 38). Similarly, Wiseman has observed that all of his films can be considered as one long film, revisiting similar subject matters,³⁵ while various commentators consider how they take us beyond the patiently observed everyday.³⁶ What techniques are used to take us beyond the everyday? An art historian describes Vermeer’s painting *Woman Standing at a Virginal* (c.1670–1672) as creating an inaccessible yet inviting “ideal world” – which surprised me with its aptness for the effect of Wiseman’s unflinching realism of “the slightest details of accent and attitude”.³⁷ The art historian characterizes Vermeer as finding “a balance between realism and abstraction ... as you get closer, just like [in] impressionist painting that sense of realism dissolves into abstraction, and it remains forever elusive ... creating a barrier between our world and this ideal world represented in the paintings” (NG 90). She says that she has given many different interpretations of this “very ambiguous painting”, but with the “absolute regular-

35 Atkins 1976, 87.

36 Christley 2015. Christley describes Wiseman’s most recent film, IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, as follows: “Within a small precisely defined set of city blocks ... is an incalculable human animation, defiant of geography. Through brilliant planning and a variety of miracles of timing, this small film suggests the infinity.”

37 Weil 1973, 143.

ity and almost austerity of the composition, it's hard to tell exactly what the painting is about" (NG 90). Wiseman's films share the ambiguity, regularity and austerity of Vermeer's work, but I wouldn't characterise Wiseman's films as creating "a barrier between our world and this ideal world". Rather, they invite the viewer into the "ideal world" (for lack of a better term) through evoking, as a fugitive awareness, an "unknown that remains unknown", that exists alongside the compulsion to explain, a compulsion for bridge building over the unknown that may also erect barriers to the enigmatic. The effort to explain paintings (by art historians, curators, restorers, the gallery director, gallery staff, etc.) is repeatedly observed in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014) but does not form a narrative arc of the film. The play of known (or effort to know) and unknown is visually evoked through paintings shot with and without frames, with and without someone offering a narrative explanation. Wiseman's filmic style of wordless looking at an image intensifies the pressure of an encounter with a stranger, be it animal, monstrous creature or human, in the National Gallery paintings. The "ideal world" in Wiseman's films is a responsiveness of more-than-reciprocity to a person or animal in its weakness: in film terms, its aural and visual presence.

Similar to what the art historian calls Vermeer's "balance between realism and abstraction", which keeps ambiguity in play, Wiseman's films create a tension between what he refers to as the "literal and the abstract".³⁸ Nowhere is the tension of "literal and abstract" more teasingly felt in all its energetic demands and joy (and endless repeatability) than in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014). I interpret Wiseman's "literal" to mean all that we experience at the level of inchoate sensation or the "speechlessness" of lyric (Zwicky) or "is-ness" (Meister Eckhart) or "infraperception" (William Connolly).³⁹ In other words, the "literal" creates the visceral shock of parable. All we can do is multiply analogies: such inchoate expressiveness cannot be resolved into any final, definite explanation (or social action), try as we might, and we do try! As Crossan observes, we cannot live in parable alone; we need the explanation of myth and story. What Wiseman calls the "abstract", I regard as our dogged efforts to explain, systematise and narrate elusive experiences, in other words, the consolations of myth or narrative. In visual terms, these explanations are like frames we put around things, the choice to tell the story in a certain way (Wiseman's term, "reality fictions"),⁴⁰ which a painting must do in an instant. Vermeer's *Woman Standing at a Virginal* has many frames within the frame of the painting, implying the hospitality of art to see the world in many different ways and also its invitation to many possible readings. A man talking to a group at the gallery observes, "in

38 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015.

39 Lilburn/Zwicky 2010, 145; Eckhart 1981, 187; Connolly 2002, 27.

40 Atkins 1976, 82.

art you can be right in lots of different ways, but in maths, you can only be right once, otherwise you're wrong" (NG 31).

There are images and sounds where the "unknown remains unknown" in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014), both in terms of being human and elusive, but also in Wiseman's reticent style. Unlike videos about the National Gallery on YouTube, Wiseman doesn't include titles to inform viewers about the identity of speakers; he doesn't explain controversies about acquiring a painting for 80 million dollars, and so on. Challenges that the gallery faces are intimated in a trustee meeting about the annual budget and cutbacks, at a discussion about appropriate sponsorships for the gallery and through a cutaway of the hanging (at night) of a Greenpeace banner on the gallery façade ("IT'S NO OIL PAINTING #save the arctic" [with the Shell logo in the "o" of "oil"]). A montage of single, double or group portraits frames the beginning and ending of the film (and as cutaways throughout the film): silent faces on canvases, gallery visitors looking at paintings, people lined up outside the gallery or watching the Greenpeace banner being hoisted up, accompanied by mostly unintelligible speech (except for the swearing). A sense of speechlessness, of the limits of explanation, carries the film's final sequences, amplifying similar sequences throughout the film: murmuring blended voices in the gallery, footfalls of shoes on floors, sounds of hoists, floor cleaners and other equipment used in the gallery. Rather than attempting to explain Titian's *Diana and Callisto*, a poet reads her ekphrastic poem created in response to the painting. Between the words, she imagines "white noise star crunching, crackling noises" (NG 99). She thinks of language's limits as fortuitous: "we're always in a way hampered by language, and that's what's wonderful... And [words] never quite do. But the gap is, the meaning is all in the gaps" (NG 101). This sequence is followed by dancers performing in front of Titian paintings, their flowing movement contrasting the arrested movement of figures in the paintings, followed by the montage of portraits that ends the film, among them Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* and several Rembrandt self-portraits.

DEMOCRATIC NOISE

A very different Wiseman film, but also resonant with meaning in the gaps, *NEAR DEATH* (1989), was filmed in Boston's Beth Israel Hospital. The hospital functions according to Quaker principles, complicating the usual hierarchy of command in medicine. Within the Pulmonary Intensive Care Unit, house staff, the attending physician, the patient's personal physician, the patient's family and the patient (if he or she is competent) are involved in decisions about patient care. In practice, however, it is often physicians, who, believing a patient is near death, persuade his or her family to modify their wishes that "everything" be

done for the patient, and to adopt a more realistic care plan, as we see in the four cases followed in some detail in this film, along with brief encounters with other patients.

The film opens with a shot of a team of rowers that suggests these contraries of collaborative work and hierarchy. Rowers work while a person in the bow calls out the timing of the strokes, the boat and oars like a water spider moving in a diagonal across the water. The camera pulls back for an establishing shot of a river and a sunburst of light on city buildings on the edge of the water. The opening sequence evokes a complex beauty: nature, human movement, human technology, directed teamwork and borderlands. This sequence is followed by cutaways to traffic, the exterior of the hospital building, the Beth Israel Hospital sign, the hospital entrance, corridors, cleaning staff at work. Not only will these images be repeated throughout the film, with day and night shots of both traffic and the hospital exterior, but this pattern is also familiar from Wiseman's films. This invites comparisons with his other films; they begin to "talk" to each other. For example, in this language-intense film, Dr. Scott Weiss, the most philosophical of the physicians, observes, "there are a few situations ... in life where the critical meaning of what you say and how you say it has as much ramifications as it does around this [end of life] issue."⁴¹ Yet Wiseman's other films expand the places and events where such critical conversations take place in all their aural and non-verbal complexity.

The soundtrack of *NEAR DEATH* (1989) is a complex ecology. The physicians and nurses speak about treatments and symptoms in language that ranges from incomprehensibly technical (for medical outsiders) to graphically metaphorical. Around an unresponsive patient's bed, doctors say, "That's doll's eyes"; "That's positive doll's eyes" (ND 9). A number of sequences include several conversations going on at once, or a physician talking to family members with machine "white noise" in the background, or conversation interrupted by beeps of the doctor's pager, a layering of sound amplified with non-simultaneous sound where conversations begin before the viewer sees the speakers, or carries on over cutaways. Despite the admitted uncertainty of outcomes for patients, nurses and physicians offer clear, logical explanations of treatments and prognoses (with hesitations, pauses, repetitions); a rare clear directive from a patient offers some comic relief (Mr. Gavin asks the attending physician to scratch his back). More frequently, patients and families give uncertain directives and ask repetitive questions that accentuate the enormity of the situation they face. Patients' voices are muffled by oxygen masks, another patient shapes words, her voice inaudible, and Mr. Sperazza's communication is limited to squeezing

41 Transcript of *NEAR DEATH*, Wiseman 1989, 81. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to ND.

a hand, wiggling his toes and animal-like heaves and grunts between effort-full breaths. A sketch of this man emerges in his wife's conversations with their family physician, Dr. Taylor, as someone with mental health issues and described metaphorically by his wife as a "bit of a cry baby" and "the little boy who cried wolf once too often" (ND 96). What he means to her is expressed in her search for his hand under the sheets, her anxiety about his laboured breathing and her sudden outbursts of anguish while talking to Dr. Taylor: "He's my life. He's my life" (ND 85), and simply, "oh, Dr. Taylor" (ND 88).

The aural layering amplifies the visual layering of the film. For the most part, with the exception of Mrs. Sperazza, intense emotion is relayed with impassive facial expressions and tonal flatness. Patients near and after death look impassive, as do the physicians when speaking to patients' families – Dr. Taylor speaks with a family member on the phone, looking as though he will fall asleep on the spot – all mirrored by static "faces" of computer screens and heart monitors. Several sequences involve more than a dozen people working on a patient, or a group of medical staff discussing a case during rounds or in conferences. A variety of shot styles compose single, double, triple and group portraits: pans from the close-up of a physician to a patient or a family member, shots zooming in and out of close-ups, a shot/reverse-shot structure. In a spare medium sequence the viewer encounters a contrasting pace: a still camera creates a theatre effect, held for a lengthy conversation between Dr. Taylor and Mrs. Sperazza. Given her husband's critical condition, the table's edge seems to cut the frame with a horizontal line like a flat line on a heart monitor (fig. 3). As these shot styles suggest, the pacing blends slow, leisurely transitions with quick cuts, drawing the viewer into the conflicting boredom and anxiety that patients and their families face. The aural and visual cacophony in the film, interrupted by shots that evoke stillness (close-ups of faces, hands, the hospital façade, the hospital entrance), reveals a paradoxical space where parable opens up textures of more-than-rec-



Fig. 3: Film still, *NEAR DEATH* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1989), Disc 3, 01:24:14.

iprocity within inequalities of medical expertise and family members who lack this knowledge and are further disadvantaged by their distress.

The “literal” (visual and aural) layering is compounded by “abstract” layering that implies reciprocity between patients, their families, and medical staff in the enormity of the situation they face. Their sense of powerlessness is evident in references to God and in repetitive speech. In a conversation between two physicians about a patient, the attending physician says, “God decides. God decides. We don’t decide. These things have a life of their own; they really do, you know, I mean they really do, they have a life of their own” (ND 73). Mrs. Sperazza also appeals God as an expression of her helplessness: “I’ll put it in the hands of God. There’s nothing I can say or do except pray” (ND 82). The doctors have limited tools at their disposal while facing unrealistic expectations that they can and must *do something* for patients near death, an existential situation that relativises the social hierarchy of physician-patient relations. Dr. Weiss observes that physicians are “minor actors” dealing with “things ... that are bigger than us” (ND 110). Despite their expertise, physicians often tell patients’ family members that they don’t know how to interpret a patient’s symptoms, or how to predict his or her future (ND 82). Dr. Weiss expresses, in metaphorically vivid language, his sense of helplessness and despondency about medical technology’s limits: he refers to a treatment as using a “pea shooter against an atomic bomb” (ND 2); says he feels like Sisyphus pushing a rock up a hill only to have it roll down again (ND 58); is frustrated at not being able to express limitation (“we can’t do anything for that, we have no way to help that yet” [ND110]) or to be frank about the “torture” of cancer treatments (ND 57), not to mention rising costs of medical care that conflict with the wishes of family members to have “everything” done for patients. His colleague conveys the physician’s dilemma in a futile desire to help when a patient receives a devastating diagnosis: “If you wanted to give people quality of life, you could like be a furniture salesman ... it’s easy to fix things that are fixable” (ND 58). In conferences, grand rounds and one-on-one conversations, medical staff repeatedly debate questions: what is informed choice? (ND 57); what is “dead”? (ND 58); what is hopeless? (ND 72–73); “When does a terminal illness really become terminal?” (ND 73). Such questions are difficult to answer, while communication with patients and family members demands some kind of answer. And this doesn’t even begin to address the family problems that manifest themselves at hospital bedsides. The Intensive Care Unit brings together paradoxes and terrible ironies: an autopsy conference for Mr. Cabra, a thirty-three year old man, reveals that treatment for his testicular cancer successfully eliminated the cancerous growths but caused fatal pulmonary fibrosis. One of the physicians comments, “This is an example of curing the tumour but that the cure is deadly, the therapeutic index is very low” (ND 76).

The hospital policy of consultation with patients (if competent) and family is shown in its complexity and tediousness in the case of Mrs. Bernice Factor. The repeated efforts of medical staff to get clarity about Mrs. Factor's wishes is hugely complicated by the fact that, while considered competent to make decisions about her own care and characterised as the "strong one" in her family, she can only shape her words, without vocalising sound. She has to decide whether she will have the breathing tube removed or have a tracheostomy operation. There are numerous bedside and corridor consultations and discussions about her case – at first staff are certain she doesn't want treatment, then they are unsure, and finally the decision is made by her personal physician. In one consultation with Mrs. Factor, the first shot is a close-up of her in the bed, and throughout most of the sequence we see her in the centre of the frame with at least three medical staff on the edges of the frame (fig. 4). A longer shot near the end of the sequence reveals that at least nine people are in the room while this conversation goes on. Dr. Weiss, the spokesperson for the group, says that the decision is hers to make, but it isn't difficult to see how the odds (both in terms of physical frailty and in terms of authority) are weighed against her. He shifts from euphemisms to more direct language: the choice before her is life or death. In another sequence, a doctor observes that her way of posing questions and presenting options to a patient leads the patient toward the option she thinks is best, rather than really offering a choice (ND 57). Here, Dr. Weiss seems impatient with Mrs Factor's indecision and his difficulty understanding her (a nurse translates what she is saying), and, as the viewer knows from other sequences, he thinks that her death is likely imminent and that everything possible has been done for her: it is time to put an end to interventions to "see if she flies on her own" (ND 51).



Fig. 4: Film still,
NEAR DEATH (Frederick Wiseman, US
1989), Disc 2, 00:41:26.

Mrs Factor, mouthing words and making hand gestures, keeps the phalanx of medical personnel arrested when Dr. Weiss wants clarity and decision, though

he admits later to her personal physician, “If I were there I am not so sure how certain I would be about what I wanted to do” (ND 50). The spare close-up shots of those around the bed, with the medical staff “pushed off” to the edge of the frame, their numbers not revealed until the end of the sequence, are contrasted with the frequent close-up shots of Mrs. Factor in the centre of the frame, her hand gestures and a close-up of her hand covered in tape with tubes running off it, her livid eyes contrasted by the immobility of her body in the bed. The spectator doesn’t see her overcoming the authority of the medical profession, but rather, through her hesitation and deferral, she makes it pause and wait. An intensive effort is made to understand her obscure hand gestures, changing points of view, her mouthed few words: in those pauses and efforts, an unsettled more-than-reciprocity emerges. The way the sequence is shot amplifies these efforts as efforts *as if* between equals, despite the actual inequality of power.

Davide Panagia’s discussion of democratic noise in his book *The Political Life of Sensation* amplifies what may be in play in Wiseman’s lyric portraiture that constitutes his vision of more-than-reciprocity. Panagia contends that political theory’s “common sense” is a “narratocracy” of turning everything into *reading*, similar to the deliberative forms of narrative sense making discussed above as myth (the “abstract”). Such common sense has political effects of compromising reciprocity: it classifies people into those who can speak and those who cannot, those who have the official authority of word (speech) and those who are “just making noise”⁴² – the scene of Wiseman’s more-than-reciprocity. Panagia attends to the interruptions of declarative, authoritative speech by the *noise of democracy*, which requires attention not only to what is said, but also to the “aurality of an utterance” (46), its vocal qualities (49), its duration, its pauses, its interruptions, its babble and “democratic non-sense” (73). In other words, “sensation interrupts common sense” with its disrupting effects of “the experience of unrepresentability” elicited through a “heterology of impulses that register on our bodies without determining a body’s nature or residing in one organ of perception” (2). He wants us to listen for “the noises people make *when saying before stating, when enunciating before making sense*” (73, italics added) which shifts our perception concerning those who can take part in democratic conversation.

Wiseman’s filmic strategies allow the viewer to experience “democratic noise” visually and aurally, which may be the reason that he isn’t polemical about political discourse as “narratocracy”. His films quietly juxtapose deliberative, explanatory speech with so much that resists explanation and control, leaving a felt impression of the vastness of the unknown, the attempts to ex-

42 Panagia 2009, 53. Further page references will be cited in the text.

plain just small ships on a vast ocean, with something larger than politics at play. In NATIONAL GALLERY (2014), for example, commentators refer to restoring paintings “as a work of art that you read” (NG 84), of “learning ways to decode paintings” (NG 14) and, in a drawing session with a female model record, “we can’t help ourselves but add narrative when we’re dealing with the human body” (NG 34). These efforts at explanation are held in tension with repeated acknowledgements of how “very very ambiguous” and amorphous paintings are (NG 18–19). Beyond statements about the ambiguity of paintings, a resonant speechlessness emerges in Wiseman’s reiteration of images of silent yet expressive paintings, and faces of people looking or waiting in line. Furthermore, Wiseman’s films present an expansive range of human and animal aural address along with sounds made by the technological extensions of humans (traffic noise, ships’ horns, beepers, machines),⁴³ thereby expanding the range of democratic noise and its participants, and inviting the viewer into the unknown of an “attitude toward a soul”.

THE ANIMAL IN US AND WITH US

Wiseman’s work – its expansive aurality, the visual presence created through portraiture – invites kinship with humans compromised in their capacity to communicate, as well as animals (or representations of them in art). The threat of force in social relations is actual in PRIMATE (1974), shot at the Yerkes Primate Research Center in Atlanta, Georgia, where treatment of caged animals includes gentleness, dispassionate use in experiments, and forced constraint of the primates when they resist. In Newborn Reception, women hold, bottle feed, hug, play with and diaper baby orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees; elsewhere, interaction with the primates ranges from observation to vivisection. Despite the scientific detachment, the use of words like “hands,” “arms” and so on to describe primates’ parts suggests an implicit acknowledgment of kinship, along with images of primates clinging to, or being held by, humans as if they were infants. In one sequence, a Rhesus monkey with a metal box on its head containing electrodes into its brain is prepared for a zero-gravity experiment, its head, arms and legs confined in a plastic form of “stocks”. A visitor to the research centre breaks with the scientific detachment of the researchers with her facial and vocal expression of concern, “Oh, he does resent it, doesn’t he?” The researcher replies, “Yeah, generally he does.”⁴⁴ The monkey’s vocal expressiveness is perceived by the scientist, but ignored or discounted. In the film’s opening sequence, after a montage of images of eminent scientists, two

43 McLuhan 2013, 57.

44 Transcript of PRIMATE, Wiseman, 1974, 19. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to P.

researchers discuss observational techniques at the centre – a person watches a cage of gorillas and records, in timed intervals, what the primates are doing. The observer notes that the orangutan giving birth makes sounds (“It vocalizes ... It stops vocalizing ... It vocalizes briefly.” [P 4]), but none of this counts as data when the animals resist or protest capture, or when they create a cacophony in adjoining cages when a chimpanzee is rolled by on a trolley after surgery. It is impossible not to notice the resistance of animals taken from cages for experiments (resistance overcome with the animal’s arms held behind its back, or with plastic devices that immobilize the head and waist, or with anaesthesia). A man repeatedly attempts to inject a caged chimp with anaesthetic; the animal’s fingers reach out through the bars, swat at the needle; it makes high-pitched sounds whenever the needle hits its flesh. These and other scenes in *PRIMATE* (1974) evoke the ambiguities of competencies in moral reasoning and various professions that train us to question and even discount “animal recognition” in the achievement of some purpose.⁴⁵

Near the end of the film, equally clear “messaging” from a creature is ignored. As in other Wiseman films, the least powerful creature in a scene has a large visual and often aural presence, images of more-than-reciprocity. A man tries to catch a spider monkey – it escapes the man’s gloved hands by moving to the far side of the cage, gripping the mesh side; it chirps, squeals and chitters; when the gloves confine it to the other side of the cage, it clings to the inside of the door; the man swings the door open with the monkey clinging to it, and pries it off the door. Outside the cage, the monkey signals anger and fear with its agitated tail, the only expressive participant in this sequence, the man’s back to the camera. Just before another man immobilizes the monkey in a plastic “stocks”, it bends over the man’s glove and attempts to clasp onto it; even as its neck is being forced into the device, it makes an open fingered “appeal” (fig. 5). When secured, it opens its mouth without producing sound and stops resisting, the contrasting silence as expressive as its noise. It is anaesthetised, head shaved, cut open and stitched; the other spider monkeys are agitated and noisy when its inert form is placed back in the cage. The second stage of the process begins with the monkey being sliced open, inner organs pulsing, the head cut off and the brain removed to prepare for sections to be taken from it and examined under a microscope. Repeated close-up shots of the spider monkey’s face convey its presence before (fig. 6) and after the removal of the brain, while the men capturing and immobilizing the spider monkey are filmed in ways that minimise their expressiveness, with their backs to the camera or brief shots of their faces in profile along with close-ups of their giant gloves.

45 Williams 2000a, 43. This issue of ignoring cues has also been raised in discussions of sexual assault by Melanie Bere in Anderssen 2014.



Fig. 5: Film still, *PRIMATE* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1974), 01:11:32.



Fig. 6: Film still, *PRIMATE* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1974), 01:11:32.

Parable happens in the disquieting gap between the deliberative speech of the researchers and the gestural, facial and aural communication of both human and animals. The researchers discuss their observations, experiments, data and the importance of basic research with expressionless faces, a contrast to the mothering attention given to the newborn primates and the primates' range of vocalisation, their gestural and facial expressiveness (some of it agonisingly clear in its messaging, some of it ambiguous). The ambiguity of parable opens up a sense of kinship with these animals, and some alienation from the monotone humans. What lingers, in my perception of the film at least, is not the deliberative discourse, in Panagia's sense of "narratocracy". I am undone by the protest of the spider monkey in all its bodily and vocal resistance to capture; it brings me to a painful place of more-than-reciprocity. Although this is one of Wiseman's early and more polemical films, it doesn't allow the viewer a free pass to judge scientists, for all of us benefit from the medical and other technology that results from curiosity-driven research involving animals. It may also raise questions for the viewer: what aural and physical cues am I missing or ignoring in my daily encounters?

Just as Wiseman's films can insinuate themselves into consideration of large social questions about the use of animals in the development of technology, they also insinuate themselves into more everyday habits, like opening a can of tuna for lunch, again in light of the question of what or who remains unseen, unnoticed.⁴⁶ BELFAST, MAINE (1999), shot in a blue-collar city on Maine's coast, has a sequence of about 14 minutes wherein even the great inequality of assembly-line workers and the fish that they process into tins of sardines is mobilised into a kind of reciprocity through visual and aural democratic noise. The people involved in the processing are reduced to quick repetitive mechanical functions, fixed facial expressions, very minimal speech or silence, in a space with clattering machines and mechanical sounding voices over a PA system.⁴⁷ The shot/reverse shot takes in workers and a continuous stream of sardines, neither of which regards the other – they are simply in each other's physical space. A life-like stream of dead fish, close-ups and extreme close-ups of the fish, alternate, in quick cuts, with images of the workers; the relation between workers and fish "told" through the rapid cutting as much as in the persistent focus on the fish. More on-screen time is given to the fish, with a ratio of about five to one. The workers are shown in extreme close-ups of their faces, but just as often as arms, hands or bodies working machinery or interrupting the stream of cans for inspection (fig. 7). Even when the fish are packed in symmetrical patterns in cans, before the lids are stamped on, they are more visible than the workers. This sequence in the film doesn't create a celebratory reciprocity; rather,



Fig. 7: Film still,
BELFAST, MAINE
(Frederick Wiseman,
US 1999), Disc 2,
01:14:16.

46 For a detailed discussion of BELFAST, MAINE and MEAT, see Faber 2015, 143–148.

47 Another sequence of Belfast, Maine, in which a teacher lectures on Moby-Dick as a working-class tragedy, is suggestive for this assembly-line scene.

it is the strange likeness of assembly-line workers with the product that they produce out of once living things. Their mind-numbing labour, ignored by most people opening cans of mass-produced food, suggests a state similar to that expressed by a former student of a high school in a letter read by the principal to a group of teachers (HIGH SCHOOL, Frederick Wiseman, US 1968): “I am just a body doing a job.”⁴⁸

Wiseman’s film *MEAT* (1976), shot at Montfort slaughterhouse and meat-processing plant in Colorado, shows the industrial processing of beef cattle and sheep, reduced to a thing, but a thing with a face. The workers are often shot on the edge or to the side of the frame, the faces and bodies of the cattle in the centre. While the workers mechanically perform their kill, or single cut, the camera records the faces of the workers (fig. 8), but even more persistently the dead animals – a macabre circle of skinned faces move in a circle like an eerie merry-go-round, workers barely visible behind them (fig. 9).



Fig. 8: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:35:53.



Fig. 9: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:34:58.

⁴⁸ Benson/Anderson 1989, 138.

As in other Wiseman films, there is a complex layering of sound and image, the cacophony of tools for processing the animals, workers reduced to very little sound, while images of the killed animals parody life-like movements: the shudder of a leg when a carcass is first hung, a swinging tail when the hide is torn off, twitching muscles on decapitated heads. Repeated images show the cattle as if at rest when they are bled just after slaughter, and later the heads on metal stakes look like stabled cattle in stanchions with feeding buckets nearby. The camera records every part of the disarticulated animals, the masses of internal organs, the parts salvaged on an assembly line, others disposed of down massive chutes, the blood pooled on the floor. In more leisurely cuts than the sardine sequence in *BELFAST, MAINE* (1999), the camera brings together the life-like movements of the dead with the death-like movements of the living – a reciprocity of inattention – with attention that neither can give the other. The space of parable happens in this gaping silence of reciprocal inattention that addresses us (and we do not look away).

Inattention is a powerful theme revisited in many Wiseman films, and highlighted with a discussion of Giovanni Bellini's *The Assassination of Saint Peter Martyr* in *NATIONAL GALLERY* (2014). A man asks a group of gallery visitors why this representation of the story includes woodcutters going about their work, taking up more space in the picture than the assassin and martyr. He suggests that a tragic event is intensified if there are people who “don't really notice these things happening ... they just keep going on and on and on” (NG 33–34). He also refers to the *Fall of Icarus*: “Fantastic painting where almost all of the painting is people not noticing what's going on, people out plowing the fields and doing lots of other things, while in the background [Icarus] plunks into the ocean and dies” (NG 33). Many sequences in Wiseman's films notice what people are not noticing, a paradox that intensifies the address of the films to the viewer to be aware of seeing and hearing, and enter into a possibility, both realised and unrealised by film subjects, of more-than-reciprocity. I consider *JUVENILE COURT* (1973) as a final example of such an invitation.

Wiseman has a number of films that explore court cases (*DOMESTIC VIOLENCE I* and *DOMESTIC VIOLENCE II*, US 2001/2002), but none with such an extreme power differential as *JUVENILE COURT* (1973), shot in the court of Memphis and Shelby County in Tennessee where children come face to face with representatives of the powers of the state. The children become “cases” and numbers, are deliberated upon, and judged with a variety of techniques: case history, assessments of drawings, Rorschach inkblot tests, a polygraph test, etc. The judge in *JUVENILE COURT* (1973) exercises the power to retain jurisdiction over a juvenile or to waive it, sending the defendant to adult court, and to send children home or to foster homes or training school. These are all critical decisions, but such measures seem paltry in the face of the overwhelming need of the

children standing before the judge or considered in photographs of damage done by a severe beating. Scene after scene raises the complexity of what to do with children running away from home, shoplifting, getting into prostitution, selling drugs, taking drugs, along with questions of whether a child is loved or cared for, with no simple answers and no obvious solution to their problems. The larger circumstances of such deep human need for nurture and love relativizes the judge's authority, exercised in a diplomatic and often caring way, even as he also communicates the coercive power of the state explicitly through references to incarceration and the death penalty. A play of domination occurs when the judge, in chambers, refers to the punishment of death in the electric chair to a boy who persistently denies a charge of molesting a little girl he was babysitting. The judge follows his remark (likely intended to get a confession) with the assurance that Tommy would not be subject to such punishment. In the final sequence of the film, the same threat is leveraged in the case of Robert Singleton, in the judge's chambers and in court.

The power differential is acute. Robert has entered a guilty plea in juvenile court against his own wishes, a tactic advised by his lawyer to avoid sentencing in adult court. Robert tells his story while the judge sits on the bench as defender of an impartial law (but here, as elsewhere in the film, shows subtle "tells" that imply that he is not as dispassionate as he appears). Robert is very emotional, while the judge appears controlled and rational, an impersonal tone and manner usually accorded greater social authority. The hierarchy of the situation is usually amplified by the physical position of the judge, seated higher than the defendant. Yet the filming of this scene "scrubs" the scene of these visual markers of the hierarchy of judge and defendant (though the gavel, symbol of the judge's authority, is visible in some shots of him). Robert's address to the court is shot like a conversation between equals in conventional cinema, alternating close-up shots of Robert and the judge in a shot/reverse-shot sequence. The judge appears in medium close-up (fig. 10), while Robert appears in close-up shots, accentuating attention to his facial expressions. In a debate within a huge power differential, Robert questions justice while the judge defends the law. Rather than diminishing his authority, the aural quality of Robert's inadvertent gestures and sounds – he pauses, gasps for breath as if there is not enough oxygen in the room, his mouth gapes open as if caught in surprise (fig. 11) – leaves a lingering impression that he is telling the truth, despite the judge's comment "You've been doing some rationalizing and you've convinced yourself that what you're saying is true, but you haven't been able to convince anybody else."⁴⁹ The viewer may be convinced by Robert's anguished pleading, and may

49 Transcript of JUVENILE COURT, Wiseman, 1973, 83. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to JC.

Fig. 10: Film still, JUVENILE COURT
(Frederick Wiseman, US 1973),
Disc 2, 00:28:20.



Fig. 11: Film still, JUVENILE COURT
(Frederick Wiseman, US 1973),
Disc 2, 00:28:56.



also note the judge's rationalising in this case with the aim of doing what he thinks is in the "manifest best interest of this boy" (JC 79). (Even if the judge may be right.)

In the democratic noise evoked in this sequence, Robert's presence has authority, however calmly and authoritatively the law speaks in opposition to his pleading and his distress. The judge and lawyers argue for a pragmatic resolution to the case, rather than an investigation of Robert's contention that his co-accused threatened to kill him if he did not drive the man to the location of two armed robberies. Asked if he wishes to speak, Robert says:

All I can say sir is I'm innocent, and I feel like I've been trapped. Is there any justice, isn't there any justice for me? Must I either spend six months in the training school for something I didn't do or take the chance that somebody's gonna trap me again and put me in jail for twenty years? I have no choice, either way I'm trapped. (JC 82)

Robert has no choice but to submit to the guilty plea on two counts of robbery with a deadly weapon, but he does raise unanswerable questions about jus-

tice. Can they be heard in this context any more than animal distress in *PRIMATE* (1974)? After the verdict is heard, Robert asks, “But why must they lie? Why?” (JC 85). A man insists that in ten years the matter can all be erased, to which Robert replies, “An injustice has been done” (JC 85). Alongside the rational and pragmatic deliberations of the judge and lawyers, the sequence keeps in play “democratic noise”: the aurality in all the participants’ reasoning, their coughs, averted glances and gestures that express emotion. The power differential here is weighted in the judge’s favour: his speech is supported by the coercive powers of the state that may incarcerate or even kill citizens. Within this intense exchange, however, Robert pleads questions of truth and justice that will resonate with some viewers along with the conviction that he is telling the truth, but this carries little weight with those who have been tasked to end deliberations and to make a decision (largely based on pragmatic assessments). Robert is coerced into going the way the judge and counsel have set out, but the camera records his protest, going his own idiosyncratic way against the common sense of counsel and the judge. More-than-reciprocity emerges in the art of the film where it does not exist socially, amplified by the style of filming the judge’s and Robert’s visual proximity, aural cues and references to questions much larger than the parties present. In so doing, the film opens up the space of parable, unsettling the resolution arrived at in the court.

CARCASSES AS DRESSES

Transporting parable into the visual and aural medium of film, as I’ve done in this essay – parable as aural image – accentuates the formative capacity of images to shape a vision, to form capabilities, while remaining elusive and enigmatic. It may also push Jesus’ parables out of the bored familiarity with which they are sometimes greeted by religious practitioners. While the visual art of cinema can’t entirely escape the “language game of information”,⁵⁰ Wiseman, in a move away from didacticism, shifts his film style toward aural and visual “democratic noise” for an effect of visceral sensation and shock consistent with the way scholars characterise the effect of parables. Furthermore, whatever Wiseman’s own views on religion, the structure of his films (and some content) consistently evokes – within the public sphere of social institutions – a religious vision and practice of reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity with a neighbour. The films catch what political liberalism misses: the need, within democracies, for “comprehensive doctrines of life, relation, and purpose”⁵¹ that have the potential to resist “a strong technological destiny that deactivates religious ways

50 Ludwig Wittgenstein cited in Crossan 1973, 3.

51 Skerrett 2005, 190.

of being in the world.”⁵² The capacity to perceive this requires a religious sensitivity to the ways in which everyday practices shape persons – whether those practices are shopping, worship, modes of travel, work, food preparation and so on – routines of human relating that appear in Wiseman’s films in the “slightest details of accent and attitude”.⁵³ Conceptual ideas are quite powerless against such formative practices; usually unnoticed, these practices require “engagement in a set of counter-practices through which our bodies acquire the vitality of better possibilities.”⁵⁴ In Wiseman’s films, reciprocity between “peers”⁵⁵ (the effect of parable on the listener, and Wiseman’s films on the viewer) and more-than-reciprocity are not ideas but images of transformed relations. These sensual images remain elusive, an ever-renewable responsiveness to the unknown in the midst of life: call it the soul, the neighbour as stranger, God.

Parable forms capabilities (again, not information) for proximity to the unknown, patience with the unknown, bearing frustration in relation to the unknown: parable bears witness to the unknown. Wiseman’s films open up the space of parable as aural and visual perplexity. At the same time, the films observe the social incitement to *explanation*, the excitements of abstraction, rationalisation, deliberation, argumentation, which for Wiseman bear risks of social regimentation and domination. His films patiently register the layered sounds and appearances of inequality as it emerges, whether in human-to-human or human-animal relations. The social dynamic is usually one in which there is a plan or process into which these humans and animals must fit. The most often cited example of this comes from *HIGH SCHOOL* (1968), in which the Dean of Discipline tells a student who protests unfair punishment that being a man means learning to take orders. In the stream of cattle headed for slaughter, there is one who runs in the opposite direction, away from the steady walk to the kill site, but it is soon turned around and made to join the others. In the stream of fish, one gets caught in a gate as the others flow by, but eventually it is released and discarded. In the courtroom, the hospital or factory assembly lines, people and things are regimented into “the army of the upright”.⁵⁶

With his lyric portraiture, Wiseman envisions a radically egalitarian possibility within the given social world of persistent hierarchies and domination. He invites the viewer into an “erotic ... speechlessness”⁵⁷ of animal presence with other humans or animals, so that the physical cues of openness or resistance within relations matter more than any social status – in the scene that opens

52 Skerrett 2005, 189.

53 Weil 1973, 143.

54 Hauerwas/Coles 2011, 178.

55 Wayne Booth cited in Crossan 1973, 2.

56 Woolf 2008, 104.

57 Lilburn/Zwicky 2010, 145.

this essay, in relations of doctors and patients in *NEAR DEATH* (1989), judge and defendant in *JUVENILE COURT* (1973), assembly line workers and cattle in *MEAT* (1976), among others. Resistance is usually overcome by the socially powerful one in the dynamic, as we see with the researchers and the spider monkey. Yet Wiseman's films also expose the limits of social power, manifest through physical and aural "democratic noise". The dominant ones in the relation, as we see most explicitly with the workers in the meat-processing plant, may be as benighted as the ones dominated. Along with witnessed moments of social grace, the camera sees something in excess of observed relations of domination in the "is-ness" of the face, alive or dead; in plaintive sounds or alarms; in shorter or longer gaps in vocalisation, between words. Wiseman's lyric portraiture invites possibilities of transformation made by us, found by us, or that find us, suggested in unlikely visual images: carcasses draped in cheesecloth become a parade of dresses (fig. 12), a vault of ribbed flesh sings with light (fig. 13).

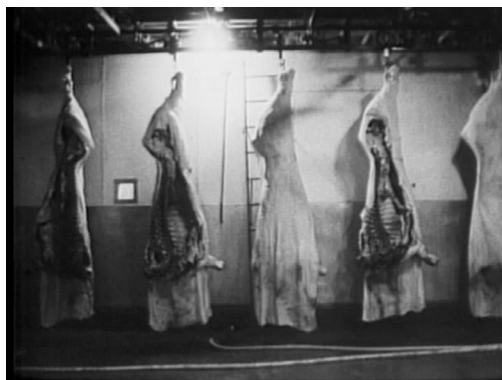


Fig. 12: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:48:16.



Fig. 13: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:48:56.

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