

Toronto International Film Festival 2002: An interview with Frederick Wiseman, director of *The Last Letter*

Part 5

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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the Toronto International Film Festival 2002, held September 5-14.

“My goal is to make as many films as possible about different aspects of American life,” Frederick Wiseman told an interviewer in 1998. He has been as good as his word for several decades, making thirty-three documentaries on “different aspects of American life,” particularly its institutions. His first work, *Titicut Follies* (1967), examined life at the State Prison for the Criminally Insane in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. The harrowing film so disturbed state authorities that they had it banned for 24 years.

Wiseman, born in 1930 and trained as a lawyer, has proceeded systematically to investigate high schools, police departments, welfare offices, hospitals, public housing, the fashion industry, racetracks, domestic violence shelters and numerous other institutions and social settings. It has been suggested that his films offer an unparalleled social history and critique of daily life in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

His stylistic and perhaps intellectual trademark is the absence of narration, interviews, background music and other similar elements. Although objectivity is a loaded word when used in the context of social documentation, where the filmmaker’s ideological outlook will directly shape many of his or her choices, Wiseman takes pains to provide an all-sided picture of the phenomena he studies, leaving critical judgments to the spectator.

The filmmaker has said that his works are principally concerned with “issues of control and issues of authority,” and indeed it is impossible to view his films without drawing sharp conclusions about the dehumanizing and abusive conditions that pervade American institutions and public life.

La Dernière Lettre (*The Last Letter*) is Wiseman’s first fiction film. It is a monologue, performed by the French actress Catherine Samie (of the Comédie-Française), adapted from a chapter of Soviet author Vassili Grossman’s remarkable novel, *Life and Fate*.

Grossman’s story is an extraordinary one. Born in 1905 in Berdichev in the Ukraine, he studied chemistry at Moscow University and became an author of “social realist” novels. During World War II, Grossman was the chief Soviet war correspondent for the newspaper *Izvestia*, and was continually at the frontlines.

During the anti-Semitic campaigns of the Stalinist bureaucracy after the war, Grossman fell from grace. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, the writer began working on *Life and Fate*, which follows the story of several dozen characters at the time of the battle of Stalingrad in 1942-43. Grossman details not only the atrocities of the Nazis and the resistance of the Soviet population, but the crimes of Stalinism as well.

The book moves from the frontlines of the war to German concentration camps to Stalinist hard-labor camps to Moscow and a dozen other locations. Grossman is a talented and moving writer. Whatever his conceptions, the work on the whole indicts Stalinism from the point of view of its nationalism, anti-Semitism and betrayals of the ideals of socialism. It provides indelible portraits of the philistine, self-satisfied and chauvinist types who filled the middle and upper ranks of the bureaucracy.

Grossman was apparently most sympathetic to Bukharin as a political leader, but he does not conceal that Trotsky was the arch-enemy as far as the bureaucracy and Stalin personally were concerned. One of the central figures in the book, for example, lands in the notorious Lubyanka prison when it reaches the wrong ears that an article of his was once praised by Trotsky.

When Grossman showed his work to Soviet literary authorities at the time of the Khrushchev “thaw,” they told him it could not be published for “at least two hundred years.” In February 1961 KGB agents showed up at his apartment and seized manuscripts, carbon copies and notebooks. They drove to Grossman’s typists and took their copies, and their typewriter ribbons. In 1964 the author died in poverty, broken by the suppression of his life’s major work. The work reached a Western publisher in 1980 and was published the following year.

The chapter Wiseman has chosen to dramatize contains a letter sent by the mother of another of the central characters to her son. The woman, a doctor, has been trapped in a Ukrainian town when the Germans enter and herd all the Jews into the old ghetto, in preparation for their extermination. She knows that she has only days or weeks to live. (Grossman’s own mother, a French teacher, was murdered along with all the other Jews in Berdichev by Nazi forces in 1941.)

The letter, to be smuggled out by a sympathetic Russian, is not morbid or bitter. She writes: “I want you to know about my last days. Like that, it will be easier for me to die.” (All quotes taken from *Life and Fate*, translated by Robert Chandler, Harper & Row, New York, 1985.)

The woman describes the responses, cruel and kind, of her neighbors to the news that she was to report to the ghetto. “The caretaker’s wife was standing beneath my window and saying to the woman next door: ‘Well, that’s the end of the Jews. Thank God for that!’ What can have made her say that? Her son’s married to a Jew. She used to go and visit him and then come back and tell me all about her grandchildren.”

She notes that she had always associated anti-Semitism with Russian chauvinism, “But now I’ve seen that the people who shout most loudly about delivering Russia from the Jews are the very ones who cringe like lackeys before the Germans, ready to betray their country for thirty pieces of German silver.”

When the time had come to report to the ghetto (“Anyone remaining will be shot”), the woman is surprised by the appearance of a patient, “a gloomy and—so I had always thought—rather callous man called Shchukin,” a printing-house worker, who “picked up my belongings, gave me 300 rubles and said he’d come once a week to the fence and give me bread.” She continues, “After he came, I began to feel once more that I was a human being—it wasn’t only the yard-dog that still treated me as one.”

She describes the overcrowded and desperate conditions in the ghetto, and the varying reactions to the Nazi tyranny: “What can I say about people? They amaze me as much by their good qualities as by their bad qualities. They are all so different, even though they must undergo the same fate.” And later: “The poorest people, the tailors and tinsmiths, the ones without hope, are so much nobler, more generous and more intelligent than the people who’ve somehow managed to lay by a few provisions.”

She tells her son: “I’ve closed my eyes and imagined that you were shielding me, my dearest, from the horror that is approaching. And then I’ve remembered what is happening here and felt glad that you were apart from me—and that this terrible fate will pass you by!” And concludes: “This is the last line of your mother’s last letter to you. Live, live, live, live for ever ... Mama.”

Wiseman has shot his film in black and white, against a grey backdrop on a bare set. Samie performs the monologue movingly. Sometimes we see only her silhouette, a reminder of the shades of the millions who died at the hands of fascist barbarism.

David Walsh: I’m wondering if you’ve long been familiar with *Life and Fate* and how you came upon it?

Frederick Wiseman: I came upon it because I saw a very different kind of production, just two people reading the chapter, in a theater in Paris in the mid-1980s. And I hadn’t known the book, and I went and bought it. I thought it was one of the great books of the century. And then in 1987 I did a completely different version of the play at a theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was very naturalistic. It was still a monologue, but it was done with props and so forth. The lighting was completely different from the way I directed the play in Paris and the way the film was subsequently shot.

And then a number of years intervened, and I did a documentary about the Comédie-Française. A year or so after I did the movie, the administrator of the Comédie-Française called me and asked me if I’d like to direct a play there. I was pleased to be asked and I suggested *La Dernière Lettre*. He agreed.

I had met [actress] Catherine Samie when I was doing the documentary—in fact, she was in some of the crucial scenes of the documentary—and so I asked her whether she’d be interested in acting in the play. The play was very well received in Paris, it had two different runs of six weeks each, and it went on tour. It came to the US and Canada. As a result of the play, I was able to raise the money in France for the movie.

Grossman was a great discovery. It is tragic that the book couldn’t have been published earlier. Before he died in 1964, it was seized by the KGB and disappeared into their files. In 1980, a microfilm copy was sent to L’Age d’Homme, a Swiss and French publishing company. The novel was then published in the West. The speculation is that some KGB agent who liked literature came across it in the files or already knew it was there, and sent it on.

DW: The book is unusual in its treatment of two of the great tragic issues of the twentieth century, fascism and Stalinism. It is also somewhat unusual in that it is by and large a left-wing critique of Stalinism.

FW: I’d have to think about that.

DW: It’s a critique of Stalinism from the point of view of its nationalism, its anti-Semitism, its betrayal of the socialist ideal. It is not a

work that begins from the assumption that Stalinism is the inevitable product of the Russian Revolution.

FW: It seems to me the critique of Stalinism ... left-wing or right-wing, I don’t know ... it seems to me it’s an honest man’s critique of how horrible Stalin was. For reasons you stated and many others.

DW: There was no event or development that precipitated the making of this film, it was purely accidental that it appeared at this point.

FW: What precipitated it was that I walked by a theater in Montparnasse years ago where these actors were reading the chapter. It sounded interesting from the blurb outside the theater and I went in and I was immediately taken by the text. I went out and bought the novel. It’s a subject, for all the obvious reasons that I’ve always been interested in. I was born in 1930, and as a child I remember hearing Hitler on the radio and when the war started I followed it closely and read widely about Germany and Russia.

DW: I’m not familiar with any work you’ve done in fiction.

FW: Aside from an experimental work, this is it.

DW: Would you like to do more?

FW: If I find something I like and feel passionate about, like this project, yes.

DW: I suppose what I’m really saying is that I was a little surprised, considering your long and determined career as a documentary filmmaker, to see that you had done this.

FW: I don’t see any reason why I shouldn’t do this.

DW: Nor do I. How do you see the relation between fiction and documentary?

FW: They’re all movies. I’ve always just done whatever interested me and this interested me. I never felt any need to rationalize to myself or to anyone else why I chose to do a fiction film. Maybe I’ll do another fiction film, maybe I won’t; maybe I’ll do another documentary, maybe I won’t.

DW: A more general problem. The accusation is sometimes made against a certain school of documentary filmmaker that it suffers from passivity, a failure to make choices. I certainly see many contemporary documentaries that simply seem like heaps of material, without the filmmaker having intervened with apparently any degree of consciousness.

FW: You have to edit the material. That assumes that some kind of a mind is operating in relation to the material. Not all minds are the same. Every aspect of filmmaking requires choice. The selection of the subject, the shooting, editing and length are all aspects of choice.

I don’t think of it in lofty terms, I’m trying to make a movie. I don’t know how to separate out artistic ambition or intuition from the rest of it. I apply what there is in my mind to the issue of how I can find a film from the subject matter I’ve chosen. I don’t really think in formal terms about aesthetics, I’m thinking of what kind of choices I have, what is the best choice, what pleases me.

What the origin of my decisions may be I have no idea, except that I’ve learned, for better or worse, to trust my intuition. Which doesn’t mean that it’s always right. I always have a reason for making a choice. I can go through each one of my films and tell you exactly why each shot is there, what its relationship is to the shot that goes before and after, and how the last ten minutes of the film are related to the first ten minutes. One of the ways that I know that the editing is finished is because I do that. Now even though I may make a certain connection between two sequences in a dream or when I am taking a shower, I nevertheless have to be able to rationalize it to myself. If I can’t rationalize it to myself, it may not be a good cut.

So I go through that process of trying to think about the material ... editing is in one sense a kind of monologue ... during the time I’m physically editing, but also when I am walking along the street or whatever, I’m thinking often about how this goes with that, or does this go with that? Or why don’t I start the film this way, or what is its

connection, how is the first sequence related to the twenty-third sequence, and have I got the characterization right early in the film so the audience understands a sequence better that appears later in the film. I wouldn't have this conversation with anybody but myself. I need to provide myself with a rationale as to why everything is there, and what the relationships of the various sequences are to each other.

DW: That may seem ABC, but I don't think it happens with a great many filmmakers. It seems to me fairly critical.

FW: Well, for me it is. I can't speak for others. For me it's critical in anything that I do, I have to figure out why I'm doing it. If I'm writing a letter, I want to make my points clearly, in a way that is suitable for the letter. In a sense, the process is related to anybody that does anything. Whether you're a newspaper journalist, a lawyer, a doctor. You have to organize your thoughts.

DW: Presumably in artistic work, as opposed to lawyering or doctoring, there is a larger element of the unconscious or intuitive.

FW: I think that's right. But the really good doctors, who make diagnoses in truly difficult cases, are making connections between disparate physical symptoms that other doctors haven't made. It would be presumptuous to suggest that there is not an artistic element in that.

DW: Absolutely. One of the great difficulties today is the Chinese Wall that's placed between art and science. Still, there is presumably in art a larger role for that process.

FW: It is in almost every aspect. Although there are a lot of boring parts of filmmaking. I'm thinking of the early part of editing, when you're going through a lot of boring material to arrive at the scenes you want, it's not all that creative.

DW: I drew the implication from one interview you gave that when you began to make films you had a somewhat more direct conception of the relation between filmmaking and social change, and now you see that as a more subterranean or indirect connection.

FW: You're practically quoting from an interview, yes. I think I was naïve, in a sense I lost my naïveté as a result of *Titicut Follies*. One of the reasons I made the film was to bring the conditions to the attention of people who didn't know anything about them. I was equally interested in making as good a movie as I could. But it was a classic example of turning against the messenger.

DW: But when you speak about change, perhaps I'm speaking about it in a somewhat different fashion. Because you certainly changed, in a broader sense, general conceptions in a significant way.

FW: I don't know how to measure that.

DW: Obviously, it's difficult to measure, but one has to believe...

FW: One likes to believe that.

DW: If one were to say that he or she had no preconceptions ... or, put it the other way around, someone who is satisfied with the way things are, doesn't make films about mental hospitals, or public housing, because they know they are going to find things that are unpleasant and abusive and unjust.

FW: But I also find people who are doing a good job, who are compassionate, fair and sensitive. I think it's just as important to show those aspects of human behavior as it is to show the cruelty and evil. It's not for balance, it's for complexity.

DW: I agree. But I'm simply saying that an individual who is happy with the way things are doesn't take a look at situations which he or she knows are going to be complex and have unpleasant aspects to them. There's an element of social criticism simply in the choices of subject matter.

FW: Anybody whose mind is functioning at all can't be content with the way the world works.

DW: These days that is nearly a revolutionary statement. Because there is a good deal of filmmaking which does begin from the fact that those who are making the work are quite pleased with themselves and quite

pleased with the world.

FW: It is difficult to underestimate the role of narcissism in filmmaking.

DW: There are a good many people who are mostly concerned that they will be thought of, create the proper image of themselves, pursue a successful and lucrative career—in documentary or non-documentary.

FW: In film or non-film.

DW: Any thoughts about the state of contemporary documentary filmmaking?

FW: I'm bad about generalizing. In any event, I work seven days a week, I'm editing, I'm traveling, so I don't have a lot of opportunities to see films of any kind.

DW: Any thoughts about the contemporary political situation, including the impending war against Iraq?

FW: You'll have to read my book on that.

DW: Which book is that?

FW: (Laughing) It's going to be part of the book I'm writing about Toronto after being here for three days.

DW: Is it a novel? A *roman-à-clef*?

FW: Yes, it's a *roman-à-clef*.

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