

**THE LANGUAGE
AND IMAGE
OF AMERICAN
EDUCATIONAL
INSTITUTIONS
IN FREDERICK
WISEMAN'S
DOCUMENTARY
FILMS**

Veronica Metlenga

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*To Frederick Wiseman
and to my Grandmother, Izabela,
both born in 1930*

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Foreword I

Frederick Wiseman, unquestionably one of the most significant figures in the history of documentary cinema, has yet to receive a comprehensive biography in Poland. The present volume does not attempt to fill that gap. Instead, it examines a narrowed selection of films from Wiseman's remarkably extensive oeuvre, and it focuses on a single theme: the representation of educational institutions. This theme, however, is of particular—one might even say foundational—importance for Wiseman, even in those works that do not directly address the educational system but rather depict the interactions through which people negotiate their relationships and exert influence upon one another. Educational institutions are the very epitome of such processes: they function as a lens that focuses diverse forms of interpersonal interaction—relationships between teachers and students, among students themselves, and among the teachers—each interaction shaped by customs, conventions, and institutional regulations.

Veronica Metlenga proposes a novel approach that integrates film analysis with a reflection on language. Perhaps nothing is more appropriate for such an analysis than the work of Frederick Wiseman. The director embarked on his artistic career in the 1960s within the American direct cinema movement, arguably the most influential and widely recognized formation in the history of American documentary film. If one were to distill a single defining characteristic from this movement's abundant achievements, it would likely be direct cinema's commitment to granting ordinary people a voice. While this may appear self-evident today, it should be remembered that the cinematic documentation of

an ordinary individual—in a non-studio, everyday setting—engaged in spontaneous conversation only became technically feasible in the 1960s. American direct cinema was the first movement in cinematic history to elevate this method to a guiding principle.

Other prominent representatives of this tradition—such as Robert Drew, Albert Maysles, D.A. Pennebaker, and Richard Leacock—later moved away from a strictly orthodox observational style, incorporating commentary, direct-to-camera interviews, more dramatic editing, or musical accompaniment. Wiseman, however, remained steadfast in his adherence to the observational mode. His films may initially appear disarmingly simple, grounded as they are in patient observation of human interaction. Language—people’s ways of speaking to one another—is naturally the central instrument of such interactions. Yet the simplicity of Wiseman’s films is deceptive: each work is the outcome of a painstaking, months-long editing process. This labor is not immediately visible, for the resulting films do not rely on conspicuous cuts or transitions but instead construct networks of meaning that emerge from the juxtaposition of seemingly natural situations.

A deeper engagement with Wiseman’s films reveals them to be an inexhaustible source of insight into the multifaceted functions of language—conscious, unconscious, and subconscious—within its broader entanglement with history and social relations. The present book thus offers an excellent basis for reflection, equally valuable to scholars of film and to linguists.

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Foreword II

In this study, Veronica Metlenga concentrates on three documentary films made by Frederick Wiseman: *High School* (1968), *High School II* (1994) and *At Berkeley* (2013). These films not only reflect the realities of the American educational institutions they present, but they also create their image, shaped by the subjective choices made by the director in the processes of shooting and editing the material. Metlenga investigates selected scenes from the films, focusing on the complex relationships between the school authorities and students (or their parents) in the social and political context.

Wiseman carefully listens to the people portrayed in his documentaries. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why researchers should pay close attention to language use – not only to what the subjects say and what vocabulary and grammatical structures they apply, but also to how they say it and in what situations. However, as Metlenga stresses, following other scholars, the language of films, including documentaries, has not been extensively explored. Contributing to filling in this gap, her monograph aims to highlight the importance of the use and function of language in the three films made by Wiseman.

The multimodality of films imposes certain requirements on researchers. First of all, the combination of image and sound, including language, ought to be taken into account – as Metlenga writes, a film “is an audiovisual work, ... composed of various, complementary modes, and should be studied as such”. Studies investigating the language used in films clearly demonstrate that the traditional methods employed in linguistics appear to be insufficient. Effective solutions are offered by

media linguistics, combining linguistics (including sociolinguistics), media studies and cultural studies. Media linguistics analyzes language use influenced by a plethora of factors, including social, political and ideological, to mention but a few. It also focuses on the image of reality created by the language used in films. Critical discourse analysis is considered particularly helpful in examining the language of the media since it is open to the integration of various research methods and techniques, and concentrates on language use in the social context.

Veronica Metlenga analyzes the selected film scenes employing the tools recommended by media linguistics. It is worth emphasizing that the inclusion of language use in the film analysis she conducts in this monograph draws the reader's attention to the functions of language. Moreover, the linguistic perspective provides a deep insight into the changes that Wiseman observes in the portrayed educational institutions. Due to the original combination of film analysis and linguistic study, media scholars, film experts and linguists will all find this monograph intellectually stimulating.

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