



### High School

Director: Frederick Wiseman  
©/Production Company: Osti Film  
Producer: Frederick Wiseman  
Director of Photography: Richard Leiterman  
Assistant Camera: David Eames  
Editor: Frederick Wiseman  
Associate Editor: Carter Howard  
Sound Recording: Frederick Wiseman \*  
USA 1968©  
75 mins  
Digital 4K (restoration)

\* Uncredited

### Frederick Wiseman

#### Public Housing

Sun 26 Oct 17:15; Sat 29 Nov 14:20

#### Titicut Follies

Wed 29 Oct 18:10 (+ intro by Sandra Hebron,  
programme curator); Sun 9 Nov 12:30

#### High School

Sat 1 Nov 12:30; Thu 13 Nov 18:30 (+ discussion  
about Frederick Wiseman's aesthetics and  
approach with filmmaker Andrea Luka Zimmerman  
and curator Matthew Barrington)

#### Multi-Handicapped

Sun 2 Nov 15:10; Sat 15 Nov 17:45

#### Welfare

Sat 8 Nov 17:15; Sun 23 Nov 14:45

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AND  
SOUND**

### Frederick Wiseman

# High School

*The screening on Thursday 13 November will include a discussion about Frederick Wiseman's aesthetics and approach with filmmaker Andrea Luka Zimmerman and curator Matthew Barrington*

Although some critics have thought that *Titicut Follies* and *High School* are more straightforward indictments or simple exposes than the later films, Wiseman believes that his approach in all his films has been basically the same. *Titicut Follies* may appear one-sided at first largely because most viewers are almost totally unfamiliar with the subject; but Wiseman has carefully presented the differing arguments about Bridgewater. *High School* is also more complex than it may seem on first viewing. The film's point of view is enlarged by showing – through the parents – that the school's ideology is actually an expression of the goals of the surrounding community. Neither film merely indicts or judges one institution, but uses it to isolate and exemplify broader issues.

In a key sequence in *High School*, which was shot in 1968 at a large, chiefly white and middle-class school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the dean of discipline says to a student, 'We are out to establish that you can be a man and that you can take orders.' This message is reiterated in nearly every student-faculty encounter shown in the film and reinforced by every conference between school administrators and parents. Self-effacement and blind obedience emerge finally as the practical values, as opposed to the professed ideals, of the American secondary educational system and of the parents whose children are caught in the system.

One of the funniest scenes in *High School* shows a group of girls performing exercises to the tune of 'Simple Simon'. Beneath the humour, of course, is the suggestion that the school, while ostensibly aiming to develop the individual's potential, is actually encouraging its students to be Simple Simons, putting their hands on their heads and clapping their hands in the air in unquestioning acceptance of their teachers' authority. The result, as Wiseman shows us repeatedly in the film, is apathy, depression and waste – the sad waste of human potential in even the best schools.

An obstacle in making an engaging film about high school is that to most Americans the subject is excruciatingly familiar. Wiseman solves this difficulty by concentrating on certain crucial aspects of the high school experience – primarily relationships between students and teachers – and by making the familiar seem unfamiliar again, or rather by reminding us of the essential strangeness of the whole experience. One of his chief methods is to point out and underscore the comic qualities of high school, the ludicrous inflexibility of the system and of the people who run the system. Administrators and instructors become comic figures as they attempt to force their values – about everything ranging from family life and sexuality to dress habits – upon the students, without regard for their actual needs. The main motif of the film, as in traditional comedy, is the effort of the older generation to suppress or restrict the life and spontaneity of the younger generation.

In scene after scene we watch young people playing various roles in special outfits – almost as if they were actors in a play. They wear aprons and play at being cooks; they wear home-made dresses and play at fashion shows; they

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wear spacesuits and play at being astronauts; and they discuss the importance of wearing tuxedos and formal gowns to dances just like real adults. The girls dress up as drum majorettes and play with rifles, while the football team dresses up as cheerleaders and plays at being girls. None of these costumes or roles is necessarily harmful, of course, but what is damaging is the attitude toward the different roles fostered by the educators and the resulting detachment or boredom on the part of the young participants. The educators do not encourage involvement and self-realisation, and consequently the roles seem more like disguises masking the students' actual identities than fulfilling activities offering possibilities of self-discovery.

The goals of the extracurricular games they are all playing are self-effacement and obedience once again, and it goes on in the classroom discussion as well. In the film we watch teachers playing with knowledge, and students talking about unions and employees, poverty in America and Martin Luther King's assassination, with the same detachment that they memorise musical notes on the blackboard. Connections are seldom made between the ideas discussed in the classroom and the realities of the world in which the students live – chiefly because no connections are intended by most of the educators. Making such connections in the classroom – say, the relationship between the problems of union members and students – might be threatening to the security of the system.

Early in *High School* we hear a teacher discussing cause and effect with his students. The end of the film shows the ultimate effect of the system, its methods and values. In a faculty meeting the principal reads a letter from a former student who writes that he is about to be dropped behind the DMZ in Vietnam and wishes to leave his G.I. insurance to the school in the event of his death. The principal praises the letter as an example of the success of the school. Indeed it is, for the attitude expressed in the letter is totally submissive. Here is one version of the final role and costume that students – the males at least – are expected to wear and a perfect version of complete self-effacement: meek acceptance of death behind enemy lines. In the letter the young man aptly describes himself as 'only a body doing a job'.

Thomas R. Atkins, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1974