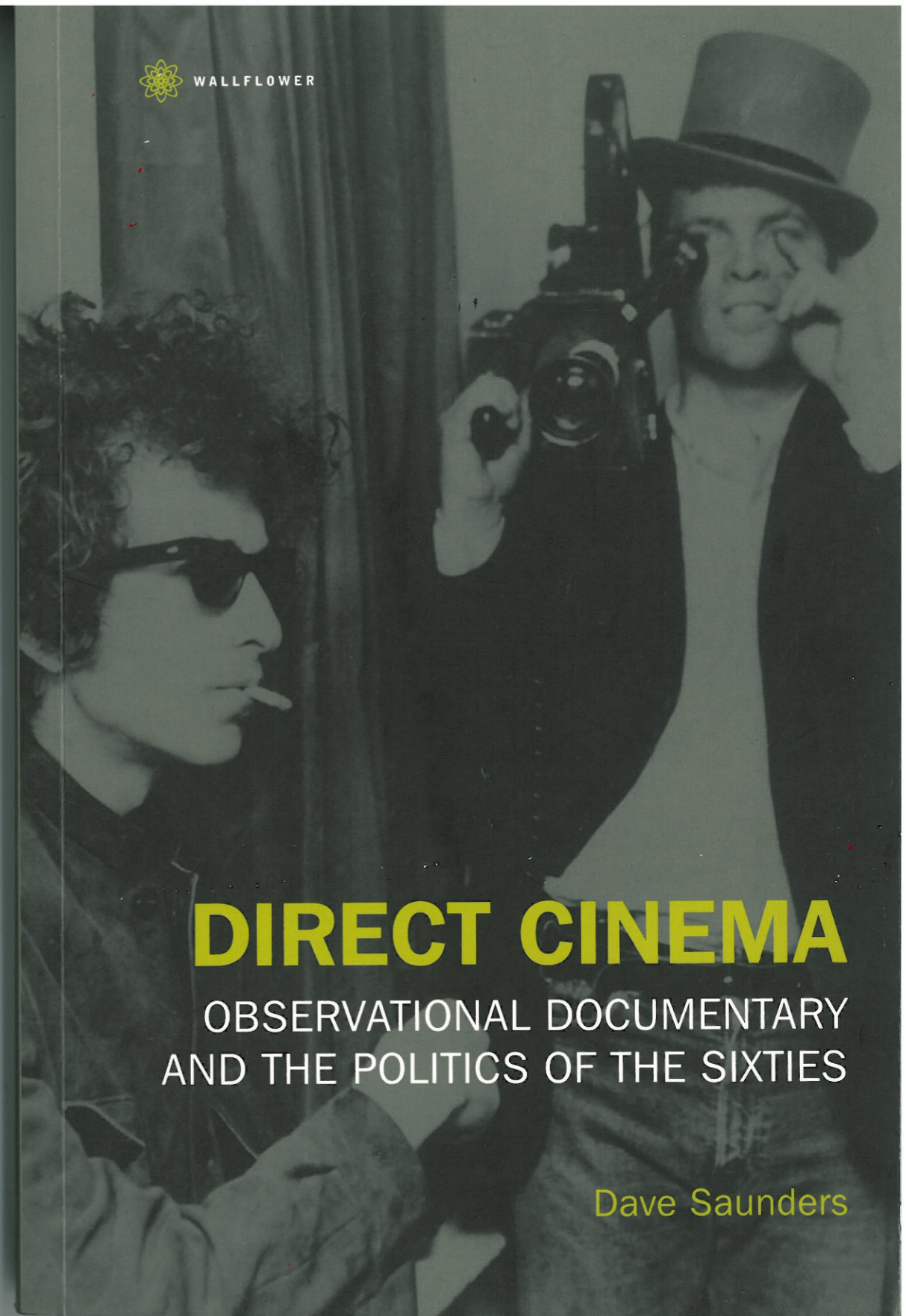


 WALLFLOWER

DIRECT CINEMA

OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY
AND THE POLITICS OF THE SIXTIES

Dave Saunders

7 | WISEMAN AND CIVIL REFORM: FOUR INSTITUTIONS

FREDERICK WISEMAN: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Yale graduate and former lawyer Frederick Wiseman is the most steadfast adherent to the Drew-inspired template of formal austerity, and unquestionably the pre-eminent observational filmmaker of the last forty years.¹ Mostly eschewing non-diegetic supplementation and pro-filmic interaction with his subjects, Wiseman strictly observes a personally congenial, cinematically unadorned code he feels best suits his form of social commentary. A latecomer to direct cinema and the most volubly cynical amongst his contemporaries about early talk of *vérité*, he labels his films variously 'reality dreams', or 'reality fictions'. These terms, although glib, nonetheless appropriately update a truism attributed to John Grierson, 'the creative treatment of actuality' (see Eitzen 1995: 82), in their acknowledgement of the tendency on the part of documentarists to manipulate material for reasons of rhetorical or dramatic emphasis.² Typically working with huge shoot-to-edit ratios, Wiseman – who during production acts as sound-recordist and director – spends many months piecing together his 'arbitrary, biased, prejudiced, compressed and subjective' films (Anderson & Benson 1991: 279);³ only well into the editing stage does it become apparent how a composition will take shape, and what elements are effective in apposition.

In distinction to the work of the Drew Associates and of Michael Wadleigh, Wiseman's works pivot not on the famous and urbane, but on the average, nameless (but not faceless) inhabitants of the quotidian world; rather than seek taut 'scoops' or charismatic protagonists, he sees import in, and wrings drama from, the mundanity and unpleasantness of the 'other' 1960s. 'The other America', wrote Socialist Michael Harrington, 'does not contain the adventurous seeking a new life and land. It is populated by failures, by those driven from the land and bewildered by the city, by old people suddenly confronted with the torments of loneliness and poverty, and by minorities facing a wall of prejudice' (1962: 17). This prosaic America, a class-divided homeland of dispossession and fear, is, as Barry Keith Grant (1992) has pointed out, Wiseman's backcloth. His aesthetic falls perhaps more squarely in the humanist tradition of Walker Evans and Robert Frank (the gentle and cruel American photo-documentarists of the 1930s and 1950s, respectively) than that of the Drew Associates; yet it harks back also to the disparaging agenda of Upton Sinclair in its illumination of the other America, a 'subculture of misery' (Harrington 1962: 9) in the world's wealthiest nation.⁴

Part Three of this study elucidates Wiseman's first five documentaries, all of which were filmed in institutions, and all of which thereby critique the wider soci-

ety: *Titicut Follies* (1967), set in the MCI-Bridgewater secure hospital for the criminally insane; *High School* (1968); *Law and Order* (1969), about a Kansas City police department; *Hospital* (1969; first broadcast in 1970); and *Basic Training* (1971). As Bill Nichols explains, Wiseman's works evince no progressive, causally contiguous narrative, but utilise instead a 'mosaic' or 'slide-puzzle' assembly.⁵ Framed by the contextual locus of a particular institution,

the supplementary or associational nature of Wiseman's mosaic pattern stresses goal-seeking and constraints more than determinism and causality. A later event does not occur because of a previous event as it does in narrative; rather any event occurs because of the constraints imposed upon all events (within a given system – in Wiseman's case, the system governed by the institutional code). (1981: 216–17)

Whilst the staffs of public institutions ('social actors' whose lives are intrinsic to the behavioural system within which they function on a day-to-day basis) seek to effect a prescribed remedial or didactic change, as is their professional duty, Wiseman's self-proclaimed purpose as a filmmaker is not salubrious. It is true that his ruminative films do not explicitly forward solutions to the problems they depict; nor, for the most part, do they beg emotional participation of the casual viewer or offer simple diatribes to satisfy the politically fervent. If, however, we scrutinise Wiseman's early documentaries with a view to illuminating an ideological crux, the yens of an evolving mindset – a mindset thoroughly enmeshed in its epoch – become clear. Belying Emile de Antonio's impetuous complaint that 'only people without feelings or assumptions could even think of making *cinéma vérité*' (quoted in Beyerle 1997: 40), Wiseman's cultural perception and political beliefs are the essence of his vocation. It is the aim of Part Three of this study to redress a dearth of scholarly attention to Wiseman's place in history, and to seek a more complete understanding of Wiseman's purpose as a filmmaker by assessing how his chosen themes and content might reveal not only his motives, but also definable impetuses behind them.⁶

LOCI OF ANXIETY IN THE LAND OF THE FREE

What is needed is a way to connect knowledge to power and decentralise both so that community or participatory democracy might emerge, to be connected with the problem of the individual in a time inevitably ridden with bureaucracy, large government, international networks and systems.

– Tom Hayden (quoted in Cavallo 1999: 189)⁷

When we are admitted to any organisation whose purpose is to administer care, instruct or evaluate, we entrust our wellbeing to professional operatives, and surrender our futures to their judgement. *Hospital's* prelude – of a scalpel incising an anaesthetised patient's abdomen – thus connotes more than the documentary filmmaker's desire to penetrate; as a fragile human organism goes under the knife, it surrenders all autonomy and submits itself to the greater body of the health-

care process. This arresting opening trope expresses, albeit with typical obliquity, one of Wiseman's chief aims: to confront us with discomforting truths about the Western condition of dependence upon, and uneasy faith in, regime-administrated systems. To the American individual, Howard F. Stein reminds us, personal submission is anathema:

The core constellation of American values – which includes self-reliance or inner-directedness, autonomy, independence, mobility, privacy, individuality, and future orientation – is [in the healthcare system] systematically counterposed with such values as other-directedness, hierarchical authority, dependency, fixity, community, consensus or conformity, and past orientation ... Americans believe that they can master anything yet dread being mastered by anyone or anything. (1990: 33)

An important consequence of this deference, for Wiseman (and for many before him), is the resultant discursive dissonance between 'citizen' and 'professional', between the disparate voices of 'the lifeworld' (see Fairclough 1993: 143) and the structurally defined voice of a civically empowered occupation: he frequently asserts his fascination with 'the relationship between ideology and practice and the way power is exercised and decisions rationalised' (quoted in Halberstadt 1974: 25). Near the end of his 1849 treatise 'Civil Disobedience', Thoreau underlines his conception of the sacredness of individual liberty: 'There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognise the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly'; but, 'in the century or so since Thoreau wrote these words', argues Peter Conn, 'the state has grown larger, and the individual smaller, than he could have imagined' (Conn 1990: 182).⁸ Against a backdrop of worsening domestic crises, which, in the late 1960s, were alarming both the American electorate and those who served it, Wiseman examines the relationship of state to dependent individual within the modern, systematised civic institution – a system that did not, as Godfrey Hodgson writes, operate in isolation from the 'great national crisis of the 1960s: the disillusionment with rising federal budgets, the impatience of the white middle class with strident radicalism, the counterattack of organized interest groups, and the stubbornness with which conservative intellectuals have patched up intellectual defences of the free enterprise status quo' (1973: 60).

While the war in Vietnam raged on, matters of health, education, crime and welfare proved equally contentious domestic bugbears. For the ethnically and socially diverse low-income populace – a demographic to whom Woodstock was a dissolute irrelevance – urban malaise and the reality of physical decay were everyday concerns.

Wiseman's first documentary, *Titicut Follies* (filmed in 1966), devotes much of its time to showing the cruelty with which contemptuous warders treat their charges: the total institution indubitably serves here as a state-sanctioned conduit for the release of possibly innate, sadistic urges. Robert Jay Lifton, in his paper 'Medicalized Killing in Auschwitz', details several unsettling similarities between

Nazi concentration camps and modern America in the way custodial medicine is practised. He writes of Nazi operatives:

SS doctors, in their literal life-death decisions, experienced a sense of omnipotence that could protect them from their own death anxiety in the Auschwitz environment. That sense of omnipotence, along with elements of sadism with which it can be closely associated, contributed to feelings of power and invulnerability that could also serve to suppress guilt and enhance numbing. Yet doctors could feel powerless, consider themselves pawns in the hands of a total institution. (Quoted in Luel & Marcus 1984: 29)

The warders and psychologists of the 'subversive' *Titicut Follies* are implicated personally in a scheme of self-perpetuating cruelty.⁹ Even if they are beholden to a greater force, they are seen to sublimate their own sentient fears by exacting control over others deemed, by popular consensus, abnormal. The criminally insane – although quite reasonably incarcerated – become therapeutic quarries for men whose identities depend upon role-playing. Maintenance of a 'coherent, functioning world' (Stein 1990: 121) within Wiseman's Bridgewater is thus reliant on the victimisers' complete subjugation of their 'inferiors', problematic banes whom mainstream society would rather keep out of sight, mind and conscience.¹⁰ Kennedy's optimistic 1963 reform act, which aimed to stamp out dehumanising methods of dealing with the mentally ill, had failed, largely because communities lacked the impetus to take care of them;¹¹ *Titicut Follies* is hence a reminder that 'snake-pit' asylums were neither sensible nor extinct. Wiseman's scathing commentary on Bridgewater evokes critical accounts of institutions in history from fellow observers such as Dickens, Melville, Upton Sinclair, James Agee and Mary Jane Ward,¹² but the prosperous 1960s was an ostensibly unlikely epoch in which to find a dungeon. Ken Kesey's asylum-set novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962)¹³ satirised the macrocosm through inmate relations and complained of American authoritarianism, but Wiseman's is a 'muckraking' broadside mostly without humour – if not without irony – ideally suited to the situation's anachronistic absurdity. Bridgewater's bureaucrats seem dedicated to procrastination and the misapplication of treatment; there are no advocates to mediate; and the doctors are flippant and apparently careless in the line of duty.

The film's first close-up, during the opening 'Strike Up the Band' stage performance, is of an inmate awkwardly attempting to keep in step with the stilted choreography of an ensemble dance sequence. Implying unity, cohesion and buoyancy, the Gershwins' title itself seems fanciful, as does the warder's compere, the incongruously affable host of a troupe (and an entire inmate/staff microcosm) isolated from one another through mental illness and regimented hierarchy. As a ceremonial practice typical of many institutions, the revue's purpose is simple: to bind together a fractured social order by temporarily fusing the superordinates' and the subordinates' roles in a performative ritual (see Goffman 1991: 102). In superficially changing the normal relationship between worker and inmate, the *Follies* aims to demonstrate that perceived character and role differentiations within

Bridgewater are not as immutable as they may at first seem. Promptly, however, the film takes issue with this semblance of cohesion; Wiseman invites us to question the role of the 'lunatic' in relation to the asylum, and to ask ourselves who are the real madmen – the inmates or the guards.

An incestuous paedophile is quizzed by a nervously twitching, Teutonic psychiatrist filmed in unflattering close-up, while, in parallel montage, inmates are stripped naked to divest them of individuality (and means by which to commit suicide), and questioned: 'How many times do you masturbate? ... [Your wife] must not give you too much sex satisfaction ... Do you think you are a normal man?' The young and doe-eyed child-abuser, who obviously knows he is not normal, asks for help. 'You'll get help here, I guess', replies the psychiatrist – although we feel, as he is led away to solitary confinement, that he surely will not. In the film's most inflammatory scene, Jim, an obviously disturbed middle-aged man, is walked down a corridor and into a bare, concrete washroom, wherein he is shaved with slipshod force by a guard, who both verbally taunts him and, maybe even deliberately, cuts him. When Jim has been taken back to his unpleasantly spartan cell, after several minutes of goading, he stands naked and vulnerable in front of the camera, which peers at him as if through a Judas hole. As the guards – behaving alarmingly like cruel children – exhibit Jim for the crew, we wonder about his life outside of the total environment, and ponder the nature of his madness, as he himself, for a moment, appears to be doing. The guards ask Jim, for the benefit of the camera, if he used to be a schoolteacher, and if he passed 'with honours'. Jim says that he was a teacher of mathematics in Pittsburgh, that he played the piano, and that he did indeed pass with honours; but all that, as the guards know, was when he was a 'functioning' operative in society – a teacher in charge of a classroom, as the guards are now in charge of him after his decline into dependence. 'They figure they got the toys to play with', a politically fervent inmate (Kaminsky) shouts of the American government and its nuclear weapons, 'so they're gonna play with those toys.' On the micro-societal level of Wiseman's Bridgewater, the less empowered authoritarians (irresolute men born of a vast, unspecified folly to which the film's title alludes) have their toys, too.

The adamantly rational Vladimir, an emblem of the film's hopeless outlook and as close to a protagonist as exists in *Titicut Follies*, is doomed to frustration because of an impasse with the psychiatrist: 'Why do you say I am mad?' asks Vladimir. 'Because you've had a psychiatric assessment', replies the doctor, stubbornly. 'If I am wrong then you can spit in my face, you know?' Vladimir's response to this bizarre declaration is understandably incredulous: 'Why would I want to do that?' During his hearing later in the film, the young man passionately argues his case for release: 'Day by day, I am getting worse ... I've been here for a year and a half, and this place is doing me harm. If you leave me here, that means that you want me to get hurt, which is an absolute fact.' Eventually, in pushing too passionately and too hard, Vladimir reveals the extent of his latent illness: he thinks his thorax has been poisoned. As Wiseman acknowledges: 'The situation is quite complex because Vladimir's critique is accurate and he is also quite sick. Once the label "paranoid schizophrenic" is attached to him the staff is satisfied. The fact that he

has problems or has been convicted of a crime does not mean that he should be subjected to the kind of "treatment" he's getting' (quoted in Atkins 1976: 54). The panel is ultimately unsympathetic; they bandy some 'parody psychiatry' (ibid.) and opt to put him on a larger dose of medication.

Malinowski's suicide by starvation is a more obvious, irrevocable failure. The insouciant staff cannot save him, and do not give the impression of trying – a shortcoming underlined by Wiseman's infamously manipulative cuts between the emaciated patient's force-feeding and his cadaver's meticulous close-shaving (a counterpoint, also, to Jim's vicious grooming).¹⁴ Irrespective of human dignity in life, the unbridled guards apparently afford the 'equalised' dead more respect than those living with the torment of mental illness. Cherished personal power, in the age of labour-division, comes with responsibility, and secular 'rites' performed for the deceased – so Wiseman seems to suggest – may bring at least imagined spiritual absolution. 'Remember, men', reminds the eschatologist as Malinowski is committed to the ground, 'that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return.' Only a few men bear witness to Malinowski's interment, and they are staff from the asylum, such a place as to render all thought about God's charity hopeless for even the most ardent believer. The combined product of governmental negligence and innately American insecurities, Bridgewater, in *Titicut Follies*, is patently presented – in Wiseman's early 'Kino-fist' style – as a surrogate *raison d'être* for immoral functionaries, men for whom authority had perhaps always been synonymous with oppression.

Less harrowing but more insidiously respectable methods of abusing authority form the discursive core of *High School*. Emile Durkheim, in a 1922 essay on the power of education, compares the teacher's role with that of a hypnotist:

The child is naturally in a passive state, one that is entirely comparable to that in which the hypnotised person is artificially placed. The child's consciousness still only comprises a small number of representations that are capable of fighting against those that are suggested to him. Thus his suggestibility is very easily aroused. For the same reason, he is very susceptible to the infectiousness of example, and very disposed to imitate. (Quoted in Giddens 1986: 182)

With a predominantly middle-class and relatively affluent student body, Northeast High School in Philadelphia could not, superficially, be a more different locale from Bridgewater; the inherent similarities, however, are exploited by Wiseman in a series of scenes whose (maybe overly) transparent effect is, as Wiseman concedes, to 'mock formal ideologies' that mirror larger trends in the United States' social system (quoted in Westin 1974: 61). According to sociologist Dan Dodson, the function of American schools is to 'take all the children of the community and teach them their place in the power order', so that 'all will understand their failures are their own. Otherwise they would react and blow the system apart' (quoted in Cayo Sexton 1967: 32). Durkheim's 'infectiousness of example', essentially the control mechanism by which this time-honoured propagation of orthodoxy in the nation's youth is effected, becomes, in *High School*, a malevolent force.

After the film's title flashes briefly up, there is a montage of travelling shots set to Otis Redding's '(Sittin' on the) Dock of the Bay', featuring nondescript sidewalks, fences, shop-fronts and houses – an implied morning's journey to school through an insipid townscape. 'Dock of the Bay's' presence on the soundtrack is a rare example of non-diegetic music in Wiseman's oeuvre, and has been read by Barry Keith Grant as a comment about alienation and the 'death of the American Dream' (1992: 58). 'It's about a guy who has left Georgia and gone to California in search of America', is Wiseman's interpretation of the song's pessimistic narrative. 'He's at the end of the continent. He's travelled all over and it doesn't mean a thing to him' (quoted in Rosenthal 1971: 73). Composed as a reciprocal but oddly backhanded gesture towards the concertgoers of *Monterey Pop*, who had given him a rapturous welcome and paved the way for his acceptance by a white audience, 'Dock of the Bay' sees the singer – a working-class black man – traverse the country in order to find happiness; he ends up, however, merely 'wasting time'. Pennebaker's late 1960s California, as presented in *Monterey Pop*, is an altogether more convivial locality. While the children of Keynesian economist J. K. Galbraith's affluent society gambolled in the sun, Wiseman was walking in the shadow of the Great Refusal and finding a culture of ennui still thriving across the land.

The first image of rhetorical significance, which comes only seconds into the film, is a close-up of the back of a milk truck emblazoned with the 'Penn Maid Dairy Products' insignia. The meaning of this metaphorical device will become clearer in time, but one instantaneous inference is that *High School* will concern itself with the 'production line' nature of secondary education in Pennsylvania (home of the Liberty Bell), as students coming of age in the midst of a supposed renaissance of existentialist individualism are 'churned out' like uniformly standardised tubs of butter. For all the heterogeneity and idealism on display, the nature of the United States, as Redding laments in 'Dock of the Bay', remained the same.

Soon, Northeast High School looms into view, its utilitarian architecture and towering chimneys giving it the look of a factory, a processing plant or, more ominously, a crematorium (Grant 1992: 53). Wiseman does not usually employ exterior establishing shots – almost certainly considering them trite – but this exception makes a point that left-wing existentialist Norman Mailer also articulates:

Totalitarianism is a cancer within the body of history, it obliterates distinctions. It makes factories look like college campuses or mental hospitals ... It makes the new buildings on college campuses look like factories. It depresses the average American with the unconscious recognition that he is installed in a gelatin of totalitarian environment which is bound to deaden his most individual efforts. (1963: 201)

Once inside Northeast's 'totalitarian' environment, the students are given the daily bulletin and read the 'thought for the day', an aphorism contrived to inspire: 'Life is cause and effect. One creates his tomorrow at every moment by his motives, thoughts and deeds of today.' Following this, a glamorous Spanish teacher encourages her pupils to repeat, rote, the word '*Existentialista*'; the lesson is on Jean-Paul Sartre. A paradox becomes clear: the class's perfunctory, parrot-fashion

response is quite at odds with the existential philosophy of Sartre, who stressed the importance of individual, creative power over religious or social authority, and advocated rebellion against controlling bodies as a precaution against loss of self. If one is to 'create his tomorrow at every moment', then one should not passively relinquish true freedom of choice – an absolute condition for human existence as Sartre imagined it – to the rote learning of any such philosophies. As Wiseman himself puts it:

The ideology of the school is revealed in the daily bulletin ... The announced values are democracy, trust, sensitivity, understanding, openness, innovation – all the wonderful words we all subscribe to. But the practice is rigidity, authoritarianism, obedience, do as you're told, don't challenge. (Quoted in Atkins 1976: 54)

To emphasise further the stultifying nature of this process, Wiseman cuts to the percussion section of the school orchestra in rehearsal, an apparently uninterested group conducted by a bored looking music master, and a French lesson in which the students appear apathetically remote.

Wiseman repeatedly includes the school's militaristic senior administrator, who exercises, in an early sequence, what Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson call (after Gregory Bateson and others) the 'double bind' – a means by which to effect compliance by 'making nonsense of ordinary discourse' (1989: 119). Whatever choices the student makes in a double bind situation, he or she is continually foiled by conflicting verbal clues that lead inexorably to frustration. Michael, a boy who has been given detention for insubordination, is engaged in a dialogue with the administrator, who steers him towards an institutionally desirable but subsuming compromise:

Administrator: We're out to establish that you can be a man and take orders...

Michael: But, Mr Allen, it's against my principles; you have to stand for something.

Administrator: I think you should prove yourself. You should show that you can take the detention when given it.

Michael: I should prove that I'm a man and that's what I intend to do by doing what I feel is, in my opinion, is what I – is right.

Administrator: Well, are you going to take the detention or aren't you? I feel that you should.

Michael: I'll take it, but only under protest.

Administrator: All right then, you'll take it under protest. That's good.

So Michael has proven his manhood, by taking orders that are against his moral beliefs and losing a game of semantics and interpersonal power to Mr Allen.

Another of Northeast's teachers is seen patrolling the hallways. Upon his stopping to peer through a glazed door, Wiseman contiguously cross-cuts to a young women's calisthenics class in progress, somewhat unjustly implying that the member of staff is ogling their bottoms and hence unprofessionally prurient.¹⁵

(The spectator, it must be said, might also consider this prurience on the part of Wiseman and his cameraman on *High School*, Richard Leiterman.) The song the students are exercising to is 'Simple Simon Says', an asinine hit for the 1910 Fruitgum Company in the otherwise artistically progressive year of *High School's* production; here, though, it is a dogmatic edict:

Put your hands in the air,
Simple Simon Says,
Shake them all about,
Simple Simon says,
Do it when Simon says,
Simple Simon says,
And you will never be out.

If you want never to be 'out', or a pariah, so the logic goes, you must do as you are instructed. A female teacher, shortly after the 'Simple Simon' scene, ineffectually recites Ernest Thayer's 'Casey at the Bat'. This comic poem of 1888 again promulgates an American obsession – winning – by depending for its impact on a sporting humiliation, as a batsman errs in a crucial baseball game, forfeiting respect and bringing misery upon his hometown:¹⁶

Oh, somewhere in this favoured land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville – mighty Casey has struck out.

Losing is thus equated with failure, and individuality once more subordinated to the following of instruction. If we recall *Titicut Follies'* opening routine, with its moribund performers and their confused dance moves, a parallel emerges through which Wiseman makes a comparison between the two institutions; the original cultural messages conveyed in 'Strike Up the Band', 'Casey at the Bat' and 'Simple Simon Says' may not be identical, but the idea behind the use of these widely enjoyed verses in Wiseman's first two films is plain: that those who are different, or 'out of step' with the system, can only ever lose in life. 'The most mortal of sins', lamented Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of their adopted liberal democracy, 'is to be an outsider' (1997: 150).

At the rehearsal for the school fashion show, young women are taught how to carry themselves like 'attractive' women, and tutored in the ways of the all-American feminine aesthetic. Through awareness of contemporary fashion, the teacher seems to say, these young women will further conform to acceptable gender roles (and, consequently, find themselves 'suitable' men). Self-deprecatingly charming though she is, the middle-aged teacher extols a culturally ingrained physical ideal: 'If [that dress] were on someone with slimmer legs, I think it might look good. Could you find someone to model it Friday with real thin legs, honey?' The next mini-skirted model walks on stage to another unreserved critique: 'Now

this young lady, she's got a leg problem too. If she did something about those stockings she might well look better.' Of a heavily-built young woman, the teacher comments: 'I think this young lady's done a lovely job of really putting some style into this particular garment ... This gal, she's got a weight problem – she knows it. And, um, she's done everything she can to cut it down ... This is what you do with fashion and design.' The class continues, and the young women are instructed to turn in a dainty manner ('You're not here to show your derriere!') and walk with a 'much more graceful' stride than the teacher's exaggerated, ungainly mimicry of the 'typical' Northeast student. 'These are the important things, girls', she tells the assembled participants, 'to walk with your shoulders high and proud.' 'Given the beauty norms set up in this society', remarks Pauline Kael in her contemporaneous review of *High School*, 'what are they to do? Cut off their legs? Emigrate? They're defeated from the legs up' (1969: 203).

To both radical feminists and less vehement participants in the sexual revolution, this type of homogenising practice was an infringement of newly-won rights to sartorial choice and satisfaction with bodily shape. At best, the fashion show looks like an amusing throwback to the 1950s, when popular notions of domestic bliss as the bedrock of American civilisation drew heavily on sexually-defined feminine ideals, epitomes that were reflected and propagated by the media in sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–57) and in the commercials that paid for them. At worst, as is almost certainly Wiseman's purpose, the scene engenders a suspicion that, despite feminist author Betty Friedan's best intentions, the 'consciousness-raising' women's movement failed to permeate beyond its heartlands and influence provincial institutions. Speaking in hindsight of the 1950s, Friedan mourned women's collective enculturation by the 'feminine mystique', and saw that many (especially middle-class) wives had sacrificed their identities to the joys of homemaking and birthing as promoted by pamphlets written for female teens: 'You find yourself more completely a woman', gushed one, 'as, indeed, you are.'¹⁷

If homemaking was a positive thing, as far as Northeast High's conservative didactic policy was concerned, then the kind of promiscuity indulged in by the hippies in the name of 'free love', at least for women, was certainly not. After a class of boys has been given an affable but fundamentally hidebound lecture on the 'matriarchal', 'modern Jewish family' ('Once in while she's nice and asks your father if he wants to look at a new car they're going to buy'), the young women receive a talk on sex and the morality of the Pill: 'I think promiscuity is what any society cannot tolerate ... You've had to have practice at controlling your feelings and impulses, ever since you've been a baby. By the time you get to be a high school senior, you don't eat all the chocolate cake, because you don't want to get fat ... You have learned by now, as part of being human, that you can't have what you want, when you want it. The girls who haven't learned that – and the boys – are impulsive, and they never connect what they're doing today with what happens tomorrow.' The 'thought for the day' – 'One creates his tomorrow at every moment by his motives, thoughts and deeds of today' – seems apt, but this is a reconsidered seconding of that maxim's import; it is now an ominous warning about lack of abstentious self-restraint and the dangers of temptation.¹⁸ Two teachers scold

a young woman who wants to wear an 'inappropriate', short dress to a formal dance, one of them telling her that, 'It's nice to be individualistic.' The teacher then qualifies his statement, almost inevitably, by saying that, 'There are certain places to be individualistic...'. 'I didn't mean to be individualistic', says the young woman, unwittingly demonstrating for the viewer the school's success in its mission to reduce the sexually burgeoning students to undemonstrative products, ready for the adult world of self-possession, competition and functionality.

Simon and Garfunkel's 'The Dangling Conversation' forms the basis of a poetry seminar given by a young, polo-necked female teacher, whose appearance suggests a modicum of beatnik sensibility. Her reading is not as uninvolved as that of 'Casey at the Bat', but shows only reverence, not passion, for the wistful lyric:

And we sit and drink our coffee,
Couched in our indifference.
Like shells upon the shore,
You can hear the ocean roar,
In the dangling conversation,
And the superficial sighs,
The borders of our lives.

The students do seem indifferent, and, 'like shells upon the shore', they can sense the wider world, with its promise of liberation, love and sex, but the school – the borders of their lives – stands in the way. The song, of course, is about a fading relationship, but Wiseman posits the class as a well-intentioned but ultimately otiose exercise in reducing poetry to science. If using a contemporary pop song is a commendable attempt to rouse the students' passions, then the regimentation of the classroom and the cold analysis (on the blackboard are written taxonomic categories: 'figurative language'; 'thematic words') has killed any enthusiasm for Paul Simon's enigmatic if sophomoric imagery. As the teacher turns on the tape player, Wiseman, over the music, cuts to a close-up of the spinning reels, perhaps to highlight the mechanical nature of teaching something that cannot be discussed in concrete terms and the contrast between the effects of recorded and live performances (we might remember Simon and Garfunkel in *Monterey Pop*, swathed in red light and adored by the crowd). Over the following verse, Wiseman composes an elegiac montage. From the students' faraway expressions that hint of internal escapism ('We are verses out of rhythm/Couplets out of time'), he moves out of the classroom and into the spartan corridor, where a solitary young woman leans against a wall; a prisoner of circumstance, she seems as stifled and unable to be alive within the buildings of Northeast High as the inmate-patients of Bridgewater. The truth is, of course, that she has never known the abject misery of the disregarded.

'We have, evidently, a great imbalance in American society', the well-meaning teacher who earlier read the daily bulletin explains to another class of students, who, in response, gaze silently at the walls and floor. 'On the one hand we have an affluent society, and that's one America', he continues. 'On the other hand



High School (1968): loneliness and isolation in a middle-class setting

we have another America – and by the way, that’s the name of a good book by Michael Harrington, called *The Other America* ... and [Martin Luther] King was there [presumably Memphis, Tennessee] to try and uplift the other America.’ A survey is conducted to ascertain how many among the classmates would join a club if other members were, in various proportions, ‘Negro’. Most, it turns out, say they would join the club, but when a lone hand is tentatively raised to register a negative, the ostensibly prevaricating teacher steps in: ‘Remember, there’s no right or wrong answer, I’m just trying to determine what attitudes are.’ He knows that the truth can never be determined under such circumstances. The white, middle-class children will, regardless of their feelings, demonstrate only what is expected of them in a time of racial and economic tension. Martin Luther King’s assassination had just sparked rioting across America; his ambitious Poor People’s Campaign, begun in January 1968, quickly dwindled to nothing because his advisers questioned the soundness of a plan that centred on swamping Washington with ‘waves of the nation’s disinherited’ (Garrow 1986: 591–2) until Congress took notice. The system that King was trying to ‘uplift’ at the time of his death in Memphis seemed to reward the greedy and to punish the desperate of whom Harrington’s book told, but whites simply moved to the suburbs in ever greater droves and ignored uncomfortable disparities. ‘Poverty in the 1960s is invisible and it is new’, wrote Harrington (1962: 21), and in *High School* – despite the best efforts of the teachers in this respect – the financially advantaged seniors appear to have no compulsion to change anything beyond hemlines. There was, says Wiseman, a tragicomic lack of appetite for reform at Northeast: ‘A few days after Martin Luther King Jr was killed, there was a two-hour meeting of the student council. And a very

serious debate about whether to send fruit or flowers to Mrs King. The decision was made in favour of fruit’ (quoted in Atkins 1976: 53).

Those few who are seen to disparage the school’s ideological practices do not come across as potential revolutionaries so much as self-consciously inchoate refuseniks. A student wearing sunglasses complains, during a seminar, that Northeast is ‘such a cloistered and secluded place. The policy of Northeast is to avoid controversy completely ... I think in its attitude towards education and in its relations with the world today, this school is miserable ... It’s completely sheltered from everything that’s going on in the world, and I think that’s wrong, it has to be changed. And I think that’s our purpose here, and not to talk about films.’ In his attitude, the student is admirably outspoken, and his critique is a ray of idealist – if politically schematic and juvenile – light; his sunglasses and not-yet-grown hairstyle, however, look as derisory as Mr Allen’s ostentatious ring, another vain attempt to express uniqueness in a restrictive environment.¹⁹ ‘Mr Simon pointed me towards his office and said, “You don’t look like a Northeaster, son,”’ says the student, making plain his pride in ineffectual, cosmetic defiance. Anderson and Benson, harshly, call him a ‘smug pseudo-rebel playing it cool’, and ‘another one of [the school’s] products, groping unsuccessfully for a way to become fully human in a political situation that robs him of that opportunity’ (1991: 35). In fairness, the seminar allows a venting of dissidence (if only to sublimate more considered disruption) that connects, however tenuously, to the turmoil of the macrocosm. Even though (or perhaps because) the teacher continually interrupts her class in order to quell overtly anti-authoritarian sentiment and stress that Northeast is far from the worst school of its kind, as was certainly true, the message is clear. ‘Morally, socially, this school is a garbage can’, opines a black student, ‘let’s face the facts.’ Whether or not the viewer will ultimately agree with this statement is contingent upon the film’s closing act, a series of rhetorical hammer-blows to defendants of the American education system.

Following a revue featuring male seniors dressed as cheerleaders (complete with huge false breasts) – a show that makes ritual mockery of the students still developing sexual identities – a smug gynaecologist speaks to an auditorium of boys, appealing to the more puerile facets of their nature by boasting of his professional access to women’s vaginas (‘I get paid to do it!’). ‘Nature sets us up’, he concludes, wagging his tightly framed finger, ‘that the male is the aggressive, and the female the passive, in these circumstances ... this is the nature of the beast.’ The young men are continually suffused with the notion that a promiscuous appetite for sex is in their bestial make-up, a natural function of the id; for the young women, it is something that ‘any society cannot tolerate’, a transgression likely to lead to moral desolation and venereal disease. Suburban females were expected not to acquiesce to what they were told would be a barrage of hormonally-charged animals in thrall to nature; but men, as the supposedly progressive Bob Dylan sang in 1966, could plead, ‘I want you, I want you ... I want you so bad’,²⁰ with no shame. Northeast’s old-fashioned attitude towards gender formation and sexual behaviour demonstrates a patriarchal bent that Wiseman, by his inclusion of several scenes featuring sex education, seeks to make clear through his own,

filmic inculcation: the manifesto of the school is not to nurture fresh thought but to propagate the mores of its catchment area.

High School's vignettes mostly concern the maintenance of Apollonian, conservative values by teachers who preserve the status quo and reflect the wishes of the wider, parental community; the vagaries of the libertine counter-culture and of rock 'n' roll, in an obviously sexually charged atmosphere, were not encouraged. If faculty in many schools were slow to take up the promotion of alternative values and radical thought, that too is hardly surprising. As we have seen, the Dionysian hippies only angered the older generation as 'rebels without a cause', and the New Left, which had focused its energies on stirring dissent on higher education campuses, was ineffective and already doomed. Patricia Cayo Sexton, writing in a 1967 report, notes that: 'Schools presumably extract the norms of the whole society for transmission to the young, but, in fact, school values represent a rather narrow band in the spectrum of social norms' (1967: 76). It is this blinkered socialisation that Wiseman seems most to abhor. When the narrator of the animated film about gonorrhoea warns that, 'there is a danger that [the mother] may transmit the disease to the child when it passes out of her body', two messages concerning socially transmitted problems are imparted. The explicit meaning, of course, is that women should be wary of unprotected intercourse lest they become infectiously ill; this is the didactic point of the film-within-a-film. The implicit meaning, however, as Anderson and Benson point out, is a metaphorical device that exists only for those who are reading *High School* on a figurative level. It is a condensation of Wiseman's thesis; Northeast, we are invited to infer, is passing on a psychological 'disorder' to its students, whose values upon leaving are forever bound by strictures imposed at school (see Anderson & Benson 1991: 136).

The final scene, a culmination of the film's attack on Northeast, is indeed the 'climactic stroke in Wiseman's rhetorical design' (Benson & Anderson 1989: 138), and a comment on what is, on the school's part, an inability to judge how critics might perceive its declared goals. The principal reads, to a faculty meeting, a letter she has received from an 'academically sub-average' alumnus, Bob Walter, who is about to be dropped into service in Vietnam and wishes to bequeath his Army life insurance to the school:

'I have only a few hours before I go ... I pray that I will make it back, but it is all in God's hands now. You see I am going with three other men; we are going to be dropped behind the DMZ. The reason for telling you this is that all my insurance money will be given, for that scholarship I once started, but never finished, if I don't make it back. I am only insured for ten thousand dollars – maybe it could help someone ... My personal family usually doesn't understand me; they don't understand why I have to do what I do do [*sic*] ... They say, 'Don't you value life? Are you crazy?' My answer is yes, but I value all the lives of South Vietnam, and the free world ... Please don't say anything to Mrs C. – she would only worry over me. I am not worth it. I am only a body doing a job.'

doing a job', realising the legacy of JFK's commitment to the free world, and to the people of South Vietnam. Like the Project SPARC²¹ astronauts earlier seen acting out another of Kennedy's aspirations (in which, through technological prowess, the Soviets are subdued), Bob must do his duty and prevent the spread of collectivism. Unlike the simulated space flight there is a risk of death, but Bob knows this – it is what his schooling has prepared him for. As *High School* begins with a dairy product, so it ends with a military product; the perfect tool of American imperialism has been moulded, 'just like a Chevrolet rolling off the GM line' (Wiseman quoted in Atkins 1976: 48). 'Now when you get a letter like this', concludes the teacher, beaming proudly, 'to me it means that we are very successful at Northeast High School. I think you will all agree with me.' Wiseman cuts to the credits, and his case rests.

In recent years Wiseman has become increasingly vehement in his abjuration of the potential for reform in documentaries:

Documentaries are thought to have the same relation to social change as penicillin to syphilis. The importance of documentaries as instruments for change is stubbornly clung to, despite the total lack of any supporting evidence ... Documentaries, like plays, novels, poems – are fictional in form and have no measurable social utility. (Quoted in MacDonald & Cousins 1998: 282)²²

However non-reformist Wiseman may declare himself, it is worth noting that, as Raymond Aron said in 1965, 'If you study social organisations in detail, you will find something to improve everywhere. In order to seek a revolution – that is, a total upheaval – you must assume an overall viewpoint, take up a synthetic model, define the essence of a given society, and reject that essence' (1965: 5–6). It is doubtful that, at least subsequent to *Titicut Follies*, Wiseman has sought an upheaval. A theme of rejection, however, especially of authority, courses through *High School*, befitting an intellectually acute filmmaker emergent in the late 1960s, when despondency was overtaking optimism in the popular imagination and disillusionment with the 'machine' (Savio 1995: 111) of American society ran high. Students involved in the Free Speech Movement, as Dominick Cavallo notes, 'started to see themselves as fodder for an educational system – and a society – determined to mould them into efficient and compliant components' (Cavallo 1999: 109). University of California president Clark Kerr proudly called Berkeley a 'knowledge factory', but this metaphor provoked some collegiates, who 'saw it as proof that they were perceived by society as "products" and "resources" whose destiny was to serve the needs of an unidentified "national purpose" not of their choosing' (ibid.). Wiseman's functionalist hypothesis in *High School* is clear: teachers – the agents of ideological knowledge and power (Ginsberg's 'Moloch' personified) – suppress personal identity in their students to make way for the instillation of conservative values.

Kerr's 'national purpose' – which Wiseman questions and indicts in *High School* (and to a degree in most of his films) – and its implementation via a 'hypnotic' abuse of power by an institution acting *in loco parentis*, was of great concern not

only to Wiseman, but to a great many of his more outspokenly reformist contemporaries. From Ken Kesey to SDS, egalitarians, artists and New Leftists believed in a danger inherent in modern America's 'assembly-line' ethos: homogenisation.²³ 'Beginning with school', wrote Charles A. Reich in *The Greening of America*, 'an individual is systematically stripped of his imagination, his creativity, his heritage, his dreams and his personal uniqueness, in order to style him into a productive unit for a mass technological society' (1970: 5). According to campus dissident Mark Kleiman, as expressed in an agitative SDS pamphlet:

Both student and teacher are tool and product of administrative totalitarianism. The student comes out of high school a finished product to be consumed by either the agro-business or the war machine. He is by then also a tool, to be used to make others conform. The teacher, who began as a tool, in an Orwellian nightmare finally believes that he is helping his students to lead useful and moral lives. (1970: 320)

The condition of 'orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery' (de Tocqueville 1966: 693) that de Tocqueville saw underpinning nineteenth-century US democracy was, if Kleiman is to be believed, insidiously established at Northeast. As Wiseman – a polymath in his second major career – well knew by the time of *High School*, the opportunity for individualism and reinvention still existed at the heart of what America had always promised. But, for many, the American success story meant only regimentation and narrow expectations: a blinkered future founded upon the bounty of the post-war economy and the cautious, conservative wills of one's parents and mentors.

After completing *High School*, Wiseman turned his attention to the means by which the affluent society maintained its desired state of social removal from the other America and silenced those dissenters – Ivy League radicals and ghetto fighters alike – who might question its values too vigorously. Filmed in the autumn of 1968 (in the immediate aftermath of the anti-war riots that beset the Democratic Convention in Chicago),²⁴ Wiseman's *Law and Order*, its very title signifying a perspective critical of the Right's resurgence, examines the Kansas City police force's culpability and responds to that body's militaristic enforcement of consensus diktat. Although the film suggests that policemen are always close to losing their battle against anti-social menaces – and by no means are the officers the only physically threatening presence – Wiseman appears broadly to sympathise with the liberal-intellectual stance against the 'law and order' platform and its undertones of state-sponsored repression.

'Law and order', a phrase that conveyed a feeling of pervasive reluctance to jeopardise hard-won gains made in the years after World War Two, became in the late 1960s a mantra against so-called 'limousine liberals' and their policies aimed at tackling the root causes of crime rather than simply imprisoning every criminal. Johnson, upon declaring his 'war on crime' to Congress in March 1965, insisted that 'the long-run solution to crime is jobs, education, and hope' (quoted in Isserman & Kazin 2000: 202). This emphasis was, however, easily lambasted by Republicans looking to exploit domestic unrest. Gerald Ford, House minority

leader in 1966, warned of what he saw as a 'soft social theory that the man who heaves a brick through your window or tosses a firebomb into your car is simply the misunderstood and underprivileged product of a broken home' (quoted in Edsall & Edsall 1991: 51). By 1968, years of street crime, riots and aggressive protestation had embittered the majority of Americans' attitudes towards civil rectitude: public order was seen to be crumbling. 'Let the police run this country for a year or two', urged the now independent George Wallace on the campaign trail, 'and there wouldn't be any riots' (quoted in Isserman & Kazin 2000: 237). Although Wallace did not win the presidential election of November 1968 (the Alabamian governor's image was, at least above the Mason-Dixie line, tainted by unconcealed bigotry), Nixon would take the White House for the Republicans and symbolically demarcate the end of a political era. As he pledged during his second bid for office: 'This is a nation of laws and as Abraham Lincoln has said, "No one is above the law, no one is below the law", and we're going to enforce the law and Americans should remember that if we're going to have law and order.'²⁵ To most liberals and those on the Left, such rhetoric appealed to the worst in every citizen's nature.

As in *Titicut Follies* and *High School*, the majority of *Law and Order's* scenes (as far as they can be so called) yield to the next; there are no resolutions – and no proposed solutions to what Wiseman ambivalently seems to concede are problematic issues. As he admits: 'I started off with the naïve idea of "getting the pigs," but realised that the police do not have a monopoly on brutality.'²⁶ The majority of *Law and Order's* content, though, is undeniably pessimistic (and often appalling), as Wiseman focuses again on the plight of the other America following his despairing of suburban apathy at Northeast High. A prostitute, in the midst of a raid apparently carried out without a warrant, is held in a fierce armlock by a vice squad officer – 'Don't choke me no more', she pleads, as another cop says she is 'imagining it'; a drunk man is violently pushed to the ground as he yells 'you ain't got no guts'; an officer tells a young car thief (Howard) that he would 'like to break your god-damned head'; and a middle-aged woman desponds about being 'thrown into a paddy wagon bodily'. 'Jesus Christ, man – it's their way or none', she cries.

Law and Order constitutes an unfavourable illustration of the police of Kansas City and of the city itself. By his inclusion of so many physically confrontational scenes between the apparently belligerent police and exasperated poor, Wiseman engenders a disconcerting hypothesis: if, like the staff of Bridgewater, the police force had *carte blanche*, then perhaps its true nature as a modern-day 'Gestapo' would be exposed. (In Chicago the comparison was explicitly made, after police officers violently suppressed demonstrators.)²⁷ Indeed, Wiseman includes in *Law and Order* a series of projected mug shots that evoke the pseudo-scientific endeavours of nineteenth-century anthropologists to define a 'criminal type'. This stark sequence criticises the police's (unconscious yet perhaps real) continuation of a phrenological premise – the rogues' gallery – into modern times; we may even infer from this sequence that an unseen officer is 'reading' these physiognomies as might a genetic supremacist pursuing, in Miles Orvell's words, 'twisted theories of criminality that associated anti-social behaviour with a certain slant of the forehead or tilt of the nose' (2003: 31). Although the faces are diverse in character,

and belong to people of disparate races, they share the same, hardened expression; these are countenances beaten down by life and its unending lack of real choices, both political and social. Consequently, when much later in the film we see and hear an electioneering Nixon's rancorous public address on the theme of criminal justice, it is with a sense of foreboding; poker-faced secret service men and police surround the podium, looking like Nazi agents and filmed in ominous close-up. When the eventual victor in the election of 1968 calls for 'respectful law and order', his words become, historically, a barometer of the shifting political climate. In the minds of liberals, notes William L. O'Neill, 'The Great Society was a marvellous idea', yet it became increasingly evident that most Americans would 'cheerfully have settled for a safe one' (1971: 148).

Law and Order's occasional glimmers of emotional relief come from pathos and a darkly comic inclination on the part of the filmmaker to join in the inured drollery of Kansas City's underclass. The despondency is leavened by some engaging and tender material: the abandoned black child in the care of the young, pipe-smoking officer, who buys her a candy bar and comforts her with toys as tears run down her face; the vulnerable husband who is close to crying because he thinks his wife has been abusing their daughter ('I ain't never been in trouble with the law'); the amiable teenage street informants chatting with their policeman friend as he leans out of his patrol car window. Moments like these serve to lend a balance to *Law and Order* that is arguably lacking in Wiseman's previously single-minded films; moreover, we are presented with the difficult question of how America should deal with violent and abusive recidivists like Howard, whom, we learn, gets away with only 'a slap on the wrist'. Gary Arnold notes that:

Wiseman doesn't 'get' the cops, and he doesn't glorify them. What he does get is a vivid impression of their working lives and through this a complex sense of what it means to be in their position in a large American city. It's not an enviable position: much of the work is banal and repetitive and inconclusive, but there is the implicit threat of violence in any radio call. Moreover, the cops are expected to dispose of countless routine problems – drunks, accidents, family quarrels – that can't be 'solved' to anyone's satisfaction and that most 'decent' or privileged middle-class people don't want to touch. (1970: C6)

The police do indeed face a Sisyphean undertaking, but in *Law and Order* – a subtle but affecting plea for social justice – what matters more is the underlying, unspoken reason for the cyclical despondency, oppression, personal isolation and dread that allow the other America to exist. The overarching sense is one of a crippling societal failure: the fat woman in the station reminds us that the human spirit is hard to crush, but the tramp Babsby's total inebriation proves that it all too often is. Confused as to its moral duty in world and home affairs, the 'decent', affluent society sought solace from a culture of fear – perpetuated in part by the mainstream media – in the subjugation of minorities, poor people, outspoken students and activists, and in the worship of a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant God whose mercy did not extend to all of the nation under Him.

In *Hospital*, the dialogic content begins with a series of fractious exchanges between doctors and patients in the busy emergency room:²⁸ a distraught black woman is probed about her very recently dead mother's pathological history; a black, alcoholic man is questioned about the condition of his stools; a young, white, overdosing heroin user is barely able to respond to a doctor's vital queries; and a greatly disturbed black woman has to be carried to a bed by a policeman. These vignettes, as well as instantly establishing an atmosphere of uneasiness and panic, all concern the effects and uses of mollifying drugs, whether proscribed or prescribed: the grieving woman becomes frustrated with a physician's demands to know what colour pills her mother was taking, and is offered a sedative – an acceptable chemical remedy – as she becomes tearful. The alcoholic has sedated himself to the point of chronic illness with a legal substance, and ended up in care. Unable to rouse the heroin user from his stupor, the young doctor tries, with admirable patience, to ascertain how much his case has taken – the response is a mumbled request that no police be called. The urban poor of 1969 had a need for distraction through chemical means every bit as great as their middle-class, bohemian contemporaries; the crucial distinction between the hippies' and the New Yorkers' self-administering is that whilst the former viewed drug-taking as a 'mind-expanding' leisure pursuit, the latter sought soporiferous escape.²⁹

A thematic undercurrent of disquiet runs through Wiseman's early work, but it is in *Hospital* that this motif – the modern condition and its bearing on lives in turmoil – most repeatedly surfaces. Inside the geometric, oppressive walls of functional institutions, superstructural manifestations of an attempt to conquer nature's cruellest territories, we see how humankind, to appropriate *Hospital's* osteologist, 'is not born with disease [but] acquires these disorders when he tries to adapt to a certain level of civilisation'. Only the First World, with its promotion of structural care, can precipitate mass worry regarding long-term health and well-being in even its poorest citizens, and only in the industrialised West do we find regimes that have, rightly or wrongly, tried to screen their subjects from the reality of death. Wiseman does not shy away from depicting the failure of the world's richest country to eradicate mortality, madness and destitution, instead preferring to foreground these (metaphorical and literal) viscera in his films as a means of countering America's post-war assertion – based largely on faith in technology and science – of superiority.

In the late 1960s dissenting social critics and the wider left-wing public alike viewed large institutions of all kinds as fallible and manipulative, a critique with which Wiseman frequently concurs. Moreover, it is possibly as succinct an illustration of the filmmaker's convictions as can be found: the fundamental goodness of human beings under threat from misguided, domineering authority. This does not mean that Wiseman always disapproves of filmic subjects whose vocations apply the strictly disciplined American regime; he is often sympathetic to those who enforce an ideal, the 'humanity', as Morgan Miller observes, 'trapped within the technology'.³⁰ Many of the doctors in *Hospital* appear to be working hard to perform their function, and seem well aware of rising public expectations. In contrast to the wardens of *Titicut Follies*, the teachers of *High School*, and the policemen

of *Law and Order*, here the professionals are seen as diligent bearers of a national burden.

In this sense, *Hospital* marks Wiseman's depictive maturation; he no longer employs didactic editing or strives to realise a pre-conceived notion of slant or attack. Rather, it would seem that the once zealous reformist has finally settled upon a more balanced (or at least moderate) approach to filmic commentary; New York Metropolitan is not, like Bridgewater in *Titicut Follies*, an aberrant, modern-day Bedlam, but a typical example of a hard-pressed public healthcare unit (see Benson & Anderson 1989: 151). As a result, *Hospital* is not so much an indictment than a gradual, elegiac portrait: the different nature of the fourth institution in the series has necessarily led to the attenuation of Wiseman's methodology.

In one scene, an amiable psychiatrist speaks with a young, black, schizophrenic transvestite – Mr Vivas – who has come for a welfare assessment in a bid to cease prostituting himself. After interviewing Mr Vivas, the doctor makes an impassioned, telephoned plea to a bureaucrat, the farcically named Miss Hightower, for allowance. This lengthy exchange, with which Wiseman stays in an almost insufferably long take indicative of sympathy with the doctor, ends with the exasperated physician looking up (perhaps to Wiseman as he takes sound) and declaiming, 'She hung up on me!' As two links in a chain of approval – the remote official and the public interface – Miss Hightower and the doctor both try to do their jobs: hers conserving funds for judicious allocation; his providing immediate palliation of poverty. The impasse, however, proves too much: the system cannot cope, and Mr Vivas must remain forever (at least for the spectator) waiting, nervously smoking a cigarette in one of the hospital's uncongenial lobbies.

Repeatedly, we see this inability to accommodate made manifest, but Wiseman's film always presents it not as the fault of indoctrinated operatives but of a



malaise deeply rooted in America's political and societal mechanisms. Conservative politicians expediently blamed laziness and immigration for the 'monstrous, consuming outrage' of welfare (President Nixon quoted in Patterson 1996: 167). As Ronald Reagan exclaimed in 1967, 'We are not going to perpetuate poverty by substituting a permanent dole for a paycheck. There is no humanity or charity in destroying self-reliance, dignity, and self-respect ... the very substance of moral fibre' (ibid.). 'There is no question in anybody's mind', said Senator Russell Long, 'that the present welfare system is a mess' (quoted in Patterson 1996: 168). However, the patients in *Hospital* seem to want anything but permanent handouts – rather just a way back to health, work and pride. An elderly woman communicates her desire for support, 'when need comes'. 'You want to remain self-supporting, you don't want the government to support you all the time – don't you think so? Everybody has that', she maintains. America's shift to the Right with the imminent election of Nixon (an obvious concern for Wiseman in *Law and Order*, especially) did not entirely impede Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives.³¹ Medicare and Medicaid, two expensive packages aimed at relieving the old and very poor respectively, survived (and called into question the soundness of well-intentioned but unworkable liberal pronouncements).³² In *Hospital*, no specific blame is apportioned, and no manifesto made plain; it is as though, for the first time in Wiseman's film career, cause (why is something happening?) is subordinate to consequence (what is happening). We care for these dispossessed American citizens precisely because they submit themselves in desperation, not because they are sectioned, arrested or legally required to attend classes.

Wiseman acknowledges the healthcare system's difficulties, but sees them as products of a wider, capitalist ethos in place since the end of feudalism, not as the end results of a legislature's particular policies. 'After all', as Michael Harrington has noted, 'St. Paul's injunction – he who does not work shall not eat – is the basis of the political economy of the West' (1985: 98). (A publicly funded system of comprehensive national health care, of course, would evoke for many affluent Americans the spectre of socialism, even though such provision finds funding in capitalist Europe through taxation.) Wiseman himself dilates:

It's too much of a liberal's thing to say, 'If only we had more doctors...'. The problems are so much more complicated, so much more interesting ... And you see the staff trying to deal with them as best they can – but they can't correct the problems that led to these people walking through the hospital door in the first place. (Quoted in Levin 1971: 316)

'If', warned Harrington in 1962, 'there is to be a lasting assault on the shame of the other America, it must seek to root out of this society an entire environment, and not just the relief of individuals' (1962: 18). By the close of the 1960s, "'liberal" had become almost synonymous with "sellout,"' notes Mark Kurlansky: 'Phil Ochs amused young people with his song "Love Me, I'm a Liberal". The song's message was that liberals said the right things but could not be trusted to do them' (2005: 166). It is the metropolis – or so goes Wiseman's implied premise in *Hospital*

– that has engendered social disparity and the misery of the lower- and underclass, unable as they are to escape the echelon of the pariah by becoming ‘functional’, ‘valued’ components of the pervasive military-industrial complex.³³ In the words of Howard F. Stein, ‘functionality is one of our most positively valued cultural symptoms and ... any hint of dysfunction, and the dreaded dependency associated with it, is one of our most negatively valued cultural symptoms’ (1990: 57). Throughout *Hospital*, New York, a ‘dual city’ of ‘dreams and nightmares’, a place in which the working class is estranged and the underclass swells, demonstrates its capacity to yield up incurable penury for the dependent.³⁴ The city, ‘whose charity is inadequately financed, maddening in its slowness, and bureaucratically inexplicable to the uneducated poor’ (Harrington 1985: 92), bears responsibility.³⁵

Hospital’s famous closing shot, as the sound of a dour religious service slowly fades, frames a highway down which endless cars – emblems of hollow, consumerist affluence – pass. It is a summation of Wiseman’s outlook at the end of a supposed decade of revolution. The cars are standardised, sterile and carrying fully functioning advocates of the American Way back to suburbia, another bromidic, anaesthetising total institution ‘inhabited by people from the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mould’ (Lewis Mumford quoted in Diggins 1989: 183). By implication, they are fleeing the loci of anxiety (both in spirit and body) that Wiseman records and reconstitutes in his ongoing account of America’s perpetual dichotomies.

CONCLUSION: AWAY FROM THE BROMIDES – BENDING THE RULES OF THE CHANGE GAME

Any man who genuinely cares for his society will keep clear of any alignment of Right against Left or vice versa, just as a pacifist will have nothing to do with armies arrayed to slaughter one another.

– Giovanni Baldelli (1971: 23)³⁶

Titicut Follies has a distinct central theme – the cruelty of human nature when unchecked by rational authority and community; *High School*’s preoccupation is with the militaristic intellectual blinkering of students; *Law and Order*’s overriding message, regardless of concessions to the police, is that crime, though a symptom of deep social disparity, is not being addressed properly by either politicians or heavy-handed functionaries; *Hospital*’s premise is less clearly delineated (and less replete with ‘liberal clichés’ (Wiseman quoted in Atkins 1976: 56)) but the film is still concerned with social problems: poverty, inequality and the counter-productive machinations of officialdom. ‘I’m not a pharmacist. I’ve had an opportunity to observe how middle-class reformers play the change game’, Wiseman asserts; ‘I guess I’ve gone very far away from the bromides that I started with, especially the simpleminded social work view of help and intervention’ (ibid.). The failure of the system – that is to say the immutable capitalist system of the West – is the intan-

gible cause of all the misery and terror on screen in *Hospital*, Wiseman’s final work of the 1960s and his first ‘mature’ film. From the Byronic, middle-class art student who has taken poisoned mescaline to escape the boundaries of his creative despondency, to the underprivileged, black knife victim clinging on to life, everything is beyond an immediate human remedy, and beyond – as the director has realised – reform through schematic politics.

At the closing of the 1960s, pragmatic dissidents were coming to realise the impossibility of ending social injustice with passion and idealism alone.³⁷ Neither ‘managerial liberals’, who subscribed to the New Deal and Great Society model in which lobbying interest groups supposedly ensured ongoing democracy, nor activists who stressed the underlying unfairness of remote governance, would carry the day. Radicals who had split from organised New Left groups became more petulant, violent and nihilistic, ironically rendering even more internecine the domestic arguments Nixon had been chosen to assuage. As the ‘permissive decade’ gave way to the 1970s, it became obvious that one major casualty of the 1960s had been the liberalism that characterised its early gains in the way of civil rights. Fervent blue-collar and Middle-American backlash against oversold reform programmes, riots and ‘sanctimonious do-gooders’ (Patterson 1996: 677) would prove the nemesis of the increasingly unfocused Democratic Party, and of the hopes embodied by John Kennedy. ‘A conservative, it was said, was a liberal who had been mugged; a liberal was a conservative who hadn’t been mugged – yet’, recalls James T. Patterson (ibid.). Washington could offer only varying degrees of palliation or suppression; America’s moral incertitude, guaranteed by Vietnam’s continuation, implicit in the speeches of Richard Nixon, and cast from the faces of the war-dead in *Life* magazine, hung heavily over a populace tired of sedition yet unsure of its destiny.

By the late 1960s direct cinema (away from the concert, the heroic protagonist or the dramatic crisis) already needed a new voice, but it would not be one of ‘simpleminded’ liberalism or formal imposition. Narrative has little place in Wiseman’s films of the 1960s because those films are contrived in their anti-syntactical sequencing to operate outside of a reductive structural (or *institutional*) scheme.³⁸ Propitious was the time, argued the ‘Class of 1968’, to do away with ‘all the orders of meaning and or reality that signs help maintain’ (Rivkin & Ryan 1998: 334), and to avoid cultural assertions of axiomatic truth, rectitude and Symbolic Order. The then nascent Post-Structuralist disdain for such orders as ‘strategies of power and social control’ (ibid.) is arguably as manifest in Wiseman’s early ‘reality fictions’ as it is in contemporaneous agitative or reflexive works (that could never, of course, have found funding from American public television).³⁹ Ultimately, Wiseman asks of his audience an understanding of how, to amend civilisation, one must *heuristically* question not so much the means of production, but the means by which our acculturation to non-didactic modes of reform may eventually preclude hegemonic influence on the civic realm also. Moreover, to forward a convincing critique of America’s institutions that might supplement or supersede those of the transitorily influential New Left (with which Wiseman has much in common), the filmmaker distanced himself from schematic association of any kind, dismissing archetypes

of both politics and culture as mutually inclusive, reductive institutions. Herbert Marcuse, perhaps the Sixties' most influential critic of corporate liberalism's disingenuous nature, warned that, 'Contemporary society seems to be capable of containing social change ... the struggle for the solution has outgrown traditional forms. The totalitarian tendencies of the one-dimensional society render the traditional ways and means of protest ineffective – perhaps even dangerous because they preserve the illusion of popular sovereignty' (1964: xii, 256).

Thoreau, in 1849, decried unchecked technological expansion as symbolised by the ever-extending railroad: 'Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine' (1981: 92). By the middle of the next century, contended those on the Left, demand for compliant technicians was pervading the university and creating an environment in which intellectuality could be bent to the needs of the military-industrial complex; beyond a façade of epistemophilia, lamented Free Speech Movement leader Mario Savio, education served only the power elite's interlocking, all-pervasive network: 'There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part ... you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop' (Savio quoted in Lipsit & Wolin 1965: 163; see also Marx 1964: 63). Born at the beginning of both the Great Depression in the US and Nazism in Europe, Wiseman quickly learned that institutional authority could be a beguiling and insidious instrument of conformity. Coming to filmmaking thirty years later, when idealistically conceived non-violent reactions to the mechanisms of American society were already weakening, Wiseman naturally sought to convey a disavowal of commonplace or naïve political obligation. When asked to elaborate on the orientation of his social conscience, Wiseman is typically glib, appropriating a Situationist slogan that may well reveal more than intended: 'As the saying goes, the Marx is more Groucho than Karl' (quoted in Atkins 1976: vii).⁴⁰ Notwithstanding a reticence to bare his soul, the director paradoxically betrays a commitment to serious social commentary via his films' gradual abandonment of rhetorical fervency in favour of measured interpretation; all the more effective for an intellectuality beyond immediate interpretation, these films revel in a denial of all that is entrenched within systematised, post-industrial life.

Equality of societal franchise in modern America, since the affluent society had become so almost without realising it, was, for Wiseman, a fallacy maintained by establishment interests and promulgated by serfs of the apparatus: the prison warders, schoolteachers, policemen and bureaucrats who inhabit his oblique yet perceptibly timely *oeuvre*. 'A good filmmaker', said Wiseman, 'has to have some ideas in response to the world' (quoted in Feldman 1976: 68). It is this response, and the myriad contemporaneous rejoinders to the 'pseudopolitical burlesque[s]' (Cavallo 1999: 200) of the decade's end, which inform Wiseman's cinema of the 1960s.

In the film discussed in the final chapter, *Basic Training*, Wiseman recapitulated the anti-authoritarian themes of *High School* and lamented a more palpably destructive reality: the ongoing war for 'freedom' in Vietnam.

7 | THE SYSTEM FIGHTS BACK

Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction.

– President Dwight D. Eisenhower¹

It was like the fantasy life of a kid. I'd played cops and robbers as a kid, so when I saw what was happening in Nam, I really wanted to cash in on it. Why not? It was like being invited to play with the big kids ... Nobody in the unit was over twenty-one.

– Anonymous veteran (quoted in Baker 1982: 56)

In the summer of 1970, Frederick Wiseman visited the US Army Training Centre at Fort Knox, Kentucky, to film over the course of nine weeks – the entire duration of basic training from induction to graduation. What the filmmaker found during his days at the camp was a politically timely combination of human contrivance and federal atavism. Reminiscent in equal measure of *The Green Berets* (1968) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *Basic Training*, completed in 1971, depicts an installation whose straightforward public remit – to turn boys into soldiers – belies disturbing paradoxes. Alumni numbering many thousands, from high schools like Northeast, graduated into the army in the late 1960s and found themselves in a world as familiar as it was strange; Fort Knox was not only a school, but also a rite of passage engineered by the necessities of a war in freefall.

DROPPING IN: JUST LIKE A MOVIE

The film begins with a sequence of initiation routines, as the recruits arrive at camp. This introduction evokes the customary 'arrival' prelude of the generic war film, and in this sense *Basic Training* is strikingly atypical of Wiseman's work. We see new trainees alighting from a bus, carrying their personal belongings in small luggage cases; they nervously dab their trousers and swipe their soon to be shaved hair with their hands. Vital statistics are taken; bunks are allocated by number; and the depersonalisation ritual is completed by the application of electric clippers to scalps. The troops receive inoculations, and pose for photographs against the Stars and Stripes, a globe (meant to intimate their potential or honorary kingship of the world upon joining the American forces) held in front of them by the photographer's assistant. 'Say something nice about George Wallace, huh?' says the white photographer to a black subject; the trainee does indeed smile at what

is a refreshingly honest admission of political insidiousness. A drill sergeant asks, in the usual bellicose tones of an army trainer, if the assembled troops have their duffle bags and dog-tags ready and packed; the concerted reply is 'Yes, sergeant.' Already, the scene is set for a routine of drilled compliance.

Wiseman follows this montage with something equally redolent of generic narratives: the induction speech. An affable general takes the podium to the fanfare of 'The Caissons Go Rolling Along', and welcomes the young men to Fort Knox:

I think you're gonna find that training here could be described as rigorous, probably also described as demanding, but you're gonna find that it's well within your capabilities ... What we are going to try and do, is give you the military training, which, backed up by your native instincts and native intelligence, is going to turn you into a soldier, so that your reactions in times of stress are going to be a combination of instinct, native ability and intelligence, reinforced by the military training that will give you the skills to react effectively.

So basic training is as much about instinct as it is discipline – at the camp, a contradictory, confusing sense of primal ordinance is instilled right away: a good soldier, so the recruits have been told, is an animal that obeys rules laid down by a distant elite to lay claim on territory. The inductees cannot know their own function within this new microcosm, and so are edged into submission through the familiar process of the double bind. If the young men are to fight, then they cannot at the same time ruminate; the nature and ethics of warfare regarding Vietnam were being questioned and highlighted by ubiquitous, arresting images and distressing testimony from the front line. 'There's nothing wrong', comments Susan Sontag in an essay on the emotional effects of war photography, 'with standing back and thinking' (2003: 106). In civilian life, this is observably true. In war without mandate, however, philosophical enquiry is insidious exactly because, as Sontag continues, 'Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time' (ibid.). Lt. Hoffman, 'your Company Commander', makes things plain in another speech aimed, as many (including Benson and Anderson (1989), and Barry Keith Grant (1992)) have noted, at pre-empting dissent in a similar manner to the teachers of *High School*: 'You start trying to fight the system, that's when you get in trouble. If you go along with the system, it's fine; it's when you buck it you come into the problems.' 'All we ask', continues Hoffman, 'is that you go along with it.' In contrast to the students of Northeast during their lessons in the liberal arts, however, the trainees seen in close-up appear rapt – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that they are doomed to stigmatisation or court-martial if they wish to escape.

Wiseman returns to certain recruits repeatedly in *Basic Training*, and, although there are no true protagonists, there is demonstrated within the film an empathetic regard for the institutionally subjected that is arguably lacking in *Titicut Follies*, *High School*, *Law and Order* and *Hospital*. Wiseman also abides by generic custom in *Basic Training* to the point of utilising dramatic stereotypes and narrative conventions for reasons other than simple formal or ideological subversion. As Grant writes, Wiseman evinces 'a greater interest in formal matters than [in] the earlier

documentaries' (1992: 80), and this is a rhetorical strategy. The filmmaker wants the spectator to consider the relationship of notional fiction to notional reality, and to draw inference from a broad context of filmic representation. 'The essential concern of the [typical] war film', writes Grant, 'is to show the importance of a group working together to achieve a common goal; individuals must be welded together into a unit, a platoon, in which each works for the good of all and a clear, mutually accepted hierarchy is established' (1995: 118). Troops embroiled in the melee of Vietnam frequently declared, hinting at what was a psychologically protective (and thus necessary) sense of unreality, that the experience of fighting was 'just like a movie', because that was the frame of reference most beneficial to their coping strategies. Wiseman, by imposing generic conventions upon reality and highlighting popular mythology's appropriation of history, comments on and echoes this dubious means of comprehending, via the mental formulation of archetypes, an increasingly complex world. There was, in Vietnam, no unambiguous John Wayne figure to lead America's charge, but the trainees must still be shown moral examples, even when they do not properly exist. Despite the best efforts of generals and presidents to reiterate the need for victory, the methods and motives compelling the instructors – and, by extension, the war itself – were mired in confusion.

Throughout *Basic Training* (one of the earliest American films concerning Vietnam), we are invited by Wiseman's tessellation of a cinematic template to question the role of fantasy in the shaping of real life, and to consider what reality might ultimately entail for the often reluctant soldiers who we see being methodically 'welded together'. Active service is clearly more ruinous to potential than the conformist indoctrination evinced in *High School*, and, despite the numerous comparisons invited by *Basic Training*'s motifs, more scourging of innocence; Vietnam was a deadly destination, whether one was a draftee or volunteer. In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1969), playwright and veteran David Rabe's Sergeant Tower tells his recruits: 'Where you think you are? You think you in the movies? This here real life, gen'l'men. You actin' like there ain't never been a war in this world ... Don't you know what I'm sayin'? You got to want to put this steel in a man' (2002: 39). Tower, though, seems more honest and less equivocal in his intent than Fort Knox's instructors in *Basic Training* – Wiseman's 'war film' without heroes.

Wiseman, following the orientation speech, cuts to a film the trainees are being shown that demonstrates how one should clean one's teeth to 'avoid cavities while in the army'. Regimenting the most simple of individual ablutions to a surreal degree, this programmed enforcement of a particularly Western ritual is a diversion aimed at steering somatic attention towards the cosmetic and superficial. Despite Vietnam historian Mark Woodruff's claim that 'American troops are not trained to be mindless automatons' (1999: 239), it would nonetheless seem that they could not be trusted to carry out their own dental care regimen without group habituation effected by the screening of an indoctrinatory movie. Headed for an environment in which any kind of bathing was usually impossible, the troops would have little opportunity for tooth-brushing in the field of combat. After the students happily partake in the practical exercise, to the aural accompaniment of the educational film's jingoistic march, Wiseman offers his response to this method of filmic tute-

lage: holes in their teeth, so the filmmaker implies by apposition, were the least of their long-term worries.

MAKING PEACE WITH THE GUN

The gun is emblematically part of army training, and a longstanding totem of masculine endeavour in a world almost defined by precarious relationships of arms to counter-arms. An M-16-A1 was the combat soldier in Vietnam's standard tool, and the recruits in *Basic Training*, after their lesson on dental care, are ritualistically taught about its protective qualities by sergeants whose enthusiasm for the rifle is disconcertingly fetishistic:

The M-16-A1 rifle ... Study it very carefully, nut-for-nut, screw-for-screw, rivet-for-rivet – and you will find very shortly that it is exactly, *exactly* my friends, the same as the one I have in my hand. Millimetre-for-millimetre, square inch-for-square inch, the weapon you have in your hand is exactly the same as I have in my hand.

A member of the assembled company asks if these mass-produced, identical (and hence 'perfect') 'guns' have been used before, worried about handling something that may have despatched Vietnamese soldiers. The sergeant, however, is more concerned about inappropriate terminology, and relishes again the chance to speak its name: 'Guns! Alright, this, is an M-16-A1 ... weapon; rifle; piece; or what-have-you. At no time, under any circumstances, will you refer to this piece of metal in my hands as a *gun*: a *gun* is a high-trajectory weapon.' Chastised, the recruit repeats his question, modifying his language: 'Have these weapons ever been used before? To kill people I mean.' 'Not yet', replies the sergeant. A muffled voice insists that, 'They never will, either', and a second senior officer intercedes to make the situation as clear as he feels is comfortable:

We're getting pretty heavy on this discussion right here. It's like discussing religion: I don't discuss it with anybody because I don't believe I have any right to discuss whether you should kill a man or you should not kill a man.

He does, however, go on to do just that, incorporating, like his colleague, an ostensibly pointless list of synonymous terms:

I do know one thing, gentlemen. If a man attempts to shoot me, kill me, slay me or murder me, I definitely will attempt to stop him in the fastest way possible. There's a lot going on about this nowadays, and I do believe you got a right to sound off about it, but what I'm saying is, when you get out in the jungles in Vietnam, I don't believe the thought of killing a man will enter your mind when you get hit from three sides ... You probably won't have anything on your mind but 'survive, survive, survive'. The man is out to kill you, gentlemen ... If you [think] he's not going to kill you, you're going to Cam Ranh Bay in a body bag ... If you want to get back from Vietnam, then you'd better learn how to use this black lickin' stick, and use it properly.

The truth about the M-16-A1, for all the discursive pedantry employed by military trainers to eulogise it as a triumph of engineering, is that it was not a reliable weapon in the arena of Vietnam; dirt, water and debris clogged its intricate mechanisms on many occasions, leaving troops vulnerable to attack by Viet Cong and NVA armed with the simpler, sturdier and easier to clean Kalashnikov provided by the Soviets. Far from being the American soldier's trusted friend – the venerated 'black lickin' stick' – the M-16 was, in the field, a despised liability, as noted by this anonymous veteran:

[The M-16] was a piece of shit that never should have gone over there with all the malfunctions ... I started hating the fucking government ... There were times when we'd rather use [enemy] weapons than our own. I once took an AK-47 from a dead NVA and used it instead of my Mattel toy [M-16]. (Quoted in Shay 1994: 17)

Obviously, this man survived to tell his story; he was, however, understandably aggrieved and left permanently distrustful of hierarchical superiors. The soldier quoted above saw the provision of faulty weaponry as a betrayal by officers whose seniority meant that they themselves were not dependent on deficient rifles. The sergeants' 'black magic language'² when describing the M-16 in *Basic Training* might well be symptomatic of a desire to mask any doubts and interpolate any potentially undermining discourse by destroying the recruits' trust in their own linguistic ability; if the soldier loses faith in his weapon, something psychologist Jonathan Shay describes as 'more richly invested with emotion and symbolism than any other material objects he is likely to use' (1994: 141), then he is ineffectual as a military functionary. Tautology inculcates what the inexperienced troops will not be qualified to contradict until they arrive in the squalor of Vietnam: above all the M-16 must be trusted, loved and addressed correctly, because its owner's life, honour and success in combat depend on it.

After a short scene featuring men marching (*Basic Training* includes many such scenes, rightly construed by most critics as redolent of *High School's* messages about 'keeping in step'),³ Wiseman cuts to a rifle range, outdoors. A senior officer demonstrates the firing of an M-16, resting the butt on various parts of his body, to the amusement of the trainees:

Next he will unlock the weapon, and put the butt on his thigh, and fire one round downrange [the demonstrator fires – there is impressively little recoil]. He will next put the butt of the weapon – this is the one I like – in his groin [there is laughter from the trainees]. Now if this hurts, let's face it, he's a married man, he's not going to do this [more laughter, and the demonstrator fires again, from a phallic angle]. And when I say now, he will fire all twenty rounds on automatic [the man fires a short burst, and the recruits (in inserted close-ups) gasp in awe].

Meaning, as is often the case in Wiseman's films, is imparted in this scene by both the pro-filmic content and Wiseman's textual selection and appropriation. The explicit aim of the pro-filmic event is to reassure the trainees that the M-16 is



The gun as mechanised phallus in *Basic Training* (1971)

comfortable and 'loyal', a miracle of the high-tech age that can only hurt the enemy; secondly, and maybe reflexively, the officer sexualises the rifle in the minds of his adolescent audience – it becomes a potent machine capable of ejaculating death, and a paradoxical, permanently readied lover and penis; thirdly, Wiseman, in his insertion of facial and mechanical close-ups as the guns discharge, suggests that we are indeed witnessing a ritual celebration of mechanised carnality: 'Why', asks Richard Fuller in reviewing this scene and the one previous, 'would you ever again need a woman?' (quoted in Atkins 1976: 106). The army, as poet Adrienne Rich wrote in 'Caryatid: Two Columns' in 1973, empowers young trainees like they have never been empowered before:

The capacity for dehumanizing another which so corrodes male sexuality is carried over from sex into war. The chant of the basic training drill: 'This is my rifle, this is my gun [my penis]; this is for killing, this is for fun' is not a piece of bizarre brainwashing invented by some infantry sergeant's fertile imagination; it is a recognition of the fact that when you strike the chord of sexuality in the ... [male] psyche, the chord of violence is likely to vibrate in response; and vice versa. (1979: 114)

For the recruits, this jovially implied endowment of the weapon with sexual meaning is humorous, and exteriorisation of a shared response bonds them as 'mature' cohorts; in the army's psychology of persuasion, though, it has a deeper purpose: to reach and stimulate the primal psyches of the civilised 'gentlemen' whose nature is being denuded in order that they might become soldiers, men of strident

instinct. 'In retrospect', observes Barry Keith Grant of *Basic Training's* gun scenes, 'Kaminsky's mad monologue in *Titicut Follies* about the connection between American military aggression and sexual pathology would seem to possess an unsettling quality of prophecy' (1992: 93). Rather than proposing a *direct* anthropological link between territorial assertion and male instinct, however, Wiseman, in *Basic Training*, chooses to expound upon the psychological means by which those who are susceptible can be manipulated.

One way to engage young men's interests is with base symbolism – visual similes appeal more directly to our cognitive faculty than relatively abstract political or ideological terms. Although the 'silent majority' of Americans at home still supported the war as a righteous crusade whose ends were essential to US interests, the anti-war voice, with its colourful slogans, brash films and rock music backing, was by far the loudest and most resonant in the young. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) was one of several fiction films released in the late 1960s to feature ballistomaniacal protagonists fighting authority figures. For Clyde, the gun – in lieu of intercourse – becomes an ersatz means of releasing sexual energy; for the boys at Fort Knox leaving their girls behind, it may yet come to take on similar import in rendering sex into aggression. It is not surprising, given the politically charged nature of the times and the militancy of domestic dissenters like the Black Panthers, that the US Army wished to reclaim the discourse of weaponry for itself and channel worship of the gun toward fighting faceless enemies overseas (see Hoberman 1998). In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, Sergeant Tower tells his recruits: 'This an M-16 rifle ... You got to love this rifle, gen'l'men, like it you pecker and you love to make love' (Rabe 2002: 169). Rabe – in an unsubtle mode that Wiseman swiftly abandoned – juxtaposes action and sound to underscore the connection between sexual urges, technology and warfare: as we see and hear the sergeant, stage left, Pavlo, at stage right, is seen having sex with a prostitute. 'To some people', claims a veteran, 'carrying a gun constantly was like having a permanent hard-on. It was a pure sexual trip every time you got to pull the trigger' (Baker 1982: 146). In *Basic Training*, the officers both perpetuate this dangerous, unhealthy association and deftly exploit a perhaps natural, inextricable link between male concepts of sex and destruction. As Loren Baritz writes, 'The power of technology to convert boys into men, to bestow potency in the weak, caused many young American males to think of machinery and sex as the same thing' (1998: 52). More sinisterly, so Baritz hypothesises, such notions were not confined to hormonal youngsters in the lower military echelons: 'The war's leaders in Washington had similar, if vastly more sublimated, attitudes. It was partly the thrill of domination, but it was more than that. They loved weapons' (ibid.).

In one revealing scene, the M-16 is once again positioned as a phallic totem endowed with a protective aura. The parents and siblings of an eager recruit visit their prodigal kin, and lavish upon his gun an almost obscene veneration:

Mother: Don't touch it! Nobody touch it! Nobody touch it! Isn't it ... Ooh, it's a beauty – M-16. Don't touch it! It's so beautiful.

Older brother: How much does it weigh?

Recruit [proudly]: Six pounds ... Hundred and fifty-five dollars.
 Mother: Is it clean?
 Recruit: I'm almost done.
 Father: You better do it right, gotta get it exact.
 Mother: Spotless, it has to be spotless ...
 Recruit: Twenty rounds, in three seconds; nine hundred rounds in less than a minute [the smiling younger boys look impressed, and inspect the weapon] ...
 My elevation is fourteen and my windage is fourteen ... I feel good.
 Father: The only thing is you do what you're supposed to do at all times.
 Mother: If you don't come out of here and become a true man, by the time you're done here, you'll never be a man ... A true American soldier.
 Recruit [kissing his little sister]: Happy birthday, tyke!

Evidently, as Wiseman communicates here, the boy is fitting in and is well on his way to manhood, via his conforming to the training programme and appreciation of the literal (if not the symbolic) power of his 'beautiful' M-16. The father seems keen that his son 'gets it exact', offering encouragement to the younger man so as he might better prove his commitment to what Baritz identifies as contemporary affinities of the 'masculine' American:

The teenage boy cruising the streets in his tail-finned car in the '50s, or on his roaring motorcycle in the '60s, was training himself to love machinery, and to use the internal combustion engine as a surrogate for sex or as the means to make himself more sexually attractive. The more powerful the machine, the stronger the connection. The most manifestly powerful machines are those that kill. (1998: 52)

By turning the M-16 into something symbolically (if perversely) similar to Hendrix's guitar, an instrument of dramatic sexual potency, the army hoped to give its fledglings a sense of purpose and potential that was weakening rapidly for those engaged.

In 1966, years before de-escalation was at last effected (by Nixon), even Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara expressed his doubts in a speech that seemed less replete with political rhetoric than the guilty venting of emotion. '[Man has] a near-infinite capacity for folly ... the ambivalence of technology grows with its own complexity', he said. 'The real question is not whether we should have tools. But only whether we are becoming tools' (quoted in Hendrickson 1996: 244). By 1970, senior officers in the field had begun to question whether the war was viable anymore on an ethical basis, and Commander-in-Chief Nixon received letters from such dissenters in quantity. One communication to the president condemned 'a war in which few of us believe. This leaves us with nothing but survival – kill or be killed – as a motivation ... It seems very possible that if the war is allowed to continue much longer, young Americans in the military will simply refuse en masse to cooperate' (quoted in Hammond 1996: 370). Within the ranks, a crisis of faith was growing, and the problem of 'troublemaking' had to be addressed at an early stage in a soldier's career if he was to enter the arena with conviction.

HICKMAN: 'O FOR A MANLY LIFE IN THE CAMP'⁴

In the midst of several scenes featuring bayoneting and boxing – hand-to-hand tests of bodily prowess in combat – Wiseman introduces Private Hickman, a fresh-faced, skinny draftee who wears thick glasses. More so even than Vladimir in *Titicut Follies*, Hickman succinctly represents an embodiment of the processes at work in the institution under scrutiny; we feel – largely because of his physical unsuitability to an army career – that Fort Knox is forcing nature, corroding to create. The trainee fits the stereotype of a 'dork', and is far removed from the broad-shouldered military ideal, Whitman's 'strong man erect' (ibid.). As Grant opines, he is 'a real-life Sad Sack, in the tradition of Charlie in *Shoulder Arms* (1918) and Lou Costello in *Buck Privates* (1940) ... He is, in short, a marvellous found example of the comic misfit' (1992: 91). Hickman is unable, or unwilling, to march in time with his colleagues during drill exercises (once more the theme of keeping 'in step' is revisited by Wiseman), but seems to take this 'deficiency' in good humour: the spectator warms to the incompetent Hickman because of his inability to conform to behavioural models imposed upon him by superordinates and their feral logic. 'Very quickly the situation becomes primitive', remarks an anonymous veteran, who gives a frightening, Darwinist description of life in boot camp as red in tooth and claw: 'The leaders are automatically the biggest ... Everything is relegated to strength ... Everybody understands brute force' (quoted in Baker 1982: 15). Such men as Hickman should not be going to their deaths in Vietnam, of course, but the training given at Fort Knox may convert even the weak into unquestioning stalwarts. As the cliché goes, the army breaks down a boy to make a man; to build a recruit to a new ideal, one must first excoriate the old from him.

'You better think about what you're doing, Hickman, or you'll never make it', says the drill sergeant, contradicting the induction speech about 'native intelligence'; 'Now go and join your chums.' Hickman continues his cakewalk, dragging his feet and grinning in either embarrassment, or bravado, or both. 'You're out of step, Hickman', inculcates the sergeant, enervating the boy in the process. When we next see Hickman, he is being taught how to tie his bootlaces by an officer who concernedly asks him, *in loco parentis*, if he has eaten breakfast that day. Wiseman cuts to another officer making a phone call to the chaplain explaining Hickman's 'motivational problems', and we learn that Hickman has 'suicidal tendencies' and comes from a broken home, a stigmatising provenance in the 1960s. In the chaplain's office, the diffident recruit is asked why he attempted to kill himself by 'swallowing a bunch of pills'. 'All the guys bug me constantly ... Last night, about making the bed ... They threatened to give me a blanket party if I didn't do everything right, ya know.'

So, it turns out, Hickman's smiles were defensive; he was not so much a comic misfit but a bullied child who needed a way out but could see no way of eliciting compassion other than to take a marginally excessive dose of tranquilisers. The common 'cry for help' of Western malcontents was the prevalent means of drawing attention to mental anguish in boot camp: in Rabe's 1969 play, the eponymous Private Hummel, after being attacked by his comrades, attempts something

similar to Hickman. According to an unnamed veteran, 'We had one guy drink a can of Brasso ... I saw a couple of guys snap. But by the time you get to the end of [basic training], you feel like you're the baddest thing that ever walked the earth' (quoted in Baker 1982: 17). As the unnervingly sanguine chaplain (of whom, Benson and Anderson note, a 'bland acceptance of the army' (1989: 178)) says: 'If you fall down in the mud, you have to be willing to get up.' Hickman, the human centre of *Basic Training*, has been broken so that the readying for war may begin.

BENDING STEEL: THE PROCESS OF GETTING AHEAD

Young males of all primate species engage in play fighting. Furthermore, this sort of play heightens imagination, teaches role taking, and affords the child an opportunity to come to terms with war, violence and death.

– Jeffrey Goldstein (1998: 53)

The trainees are seen enthusiastically play-boxing, crawling in the dust and receiving food. One young man is reprimanded by an officious officer for bringing a can of soda, concealed in his pocket, onto the range. 'You think you're real hot today, coming out here with a soda in your pocket trying to sneak one through ... If you don't wipe the smile off your face I'm gonna knock your God damn teeth out ... Get outta here.' After a recruit has bragged to his colleagues about an encounter with a \$15 prostitute, three career soldiers, with reference to the then recently released *Patton* (1970), discuss reincarnation – a major theme of Franklin J. Schaffner's film – and the likelihood of Atlantians having infiltrated NASA. Again, as in *Titicut Follies*, we are encouraged by Wiseman to question the relative sanity of enforcers to their charges; does the army command, if its concerns are not in concert with its juniors', have a viable place in an American scheme of nominal pragmatism and practicality? Wiseman provokes incredulity at the sheer earnestness of a discussion that is not so much speculative as downright fanciful: a prostitute fulfils a basic need; wild imaginings and conspiratorial theories are a symptom of paranoia in the wake of assassinations, national guilt and civil unrest. A professional whose remit is to make war against others – the ideological enemy – must find justification wherever, or however, he can. Karma, for these men who view George Patton as a personification of nobility, is less a theoretical, nontheistic Buddhist tract than a game of tit-for-tat, a way of explaining an unfair and illogical world in the lexis of supernatural justice. They are coming to terms, in their own way, with the cruelty of human life. 'Nobody ever won a war by dying for his country', ran *Patton's* tagline: 'He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.' *Patton* was Richard Nixon's favourite film.

A generation previous to the baby-boomers' had fought a war for what was, by consensus, a noble cause. But things were now different for the more perspicacious and wealthy, who could see the illogic of comparing the two conflicts. One veteran, whose parents held the patriotic view, lamented this short-sightedness by authority figures and admitted his fears:

My old man, when the war came, he says, 'Oh, go. You'll learn something. You'll grow up to be a man. Go.' Shit, if my folks had to send their little poodle, they would have cried more tears over that than over me. But I'm supposed to go, because I'm a man. (Quoted in Baker 1982: 13)

Most blue-collar, rural and patriotic youngsters, however, were 'seduced by World War Two and John Wayne movies', and the notion that fighting for his country is 'what a man does with his life' (Baker 1982: 12). (John Wayne and Ray Kellogg's *The Green Berets* had instilled both training for and warfare in Vietnam with this sense of 'duty' and adventurous Americanism. Almost universally condemned by critics as a virtual recruitment advertisement, patriots see *The Green Berets* as a morally rightful tract against Communists.)⁵ Successful trainees, like the boy with the M-16 in *Basic Training*, felt good with their new mission in life as 'true American soldiers' because they were sequacious products of the system; in other words, they were *High School's* true success stories out to get 'the other dumb bastard' because that was what popular culture and their parents had told them was right. Tough, white, all-American movie star John Wayne was a role model for many GIs; as he killed marauding 'Injuns', so his idolaters slew 'gooks' in a real-life movie of their own. Blacks, however, still marginalised as they were in many ways (if not as hated by whites as the Vietnamese), had no such idol to whom they might look – America had not created one.

Wiseman follows the M-16-worshipping vignette by cutting to Lt. Hoffman's office, and to the first of two similar scenes featuring black recruits who, in contrast to the white trainee we have just seen flaunting his gun, are not keeping in step, and not accepting easily their military remit. Hoffman says to a private: 'I understand that this morning you failed to make reveille [bugle] formation with the rest of the company. It is my intention as your commanding officer to give you an article 15 for failing to make reveille. Now, I inform you that you do not have to accept this article. You may, if you wish, request a trial by court martial; this is up to you.' Against the wishes of the lieutenant, the recruit opts for the court martial, and to 'go to jail, period'. It would appear that the soldier would prefer anything – even incarceration – to continuation of his military service. The second scene reiterates and expands upon this theme; this time, though, the private is eloquent and persuasive, drawing attention to uneasy truths about race relations in the US Army of the late 1960s.

Private: I'm takin' the court martial. Actually, the thing that I did, it's minor, it's less than minor...

Sergeant: You slept on fire guard, right?

Private: No, I just ... I just refused fire guard ... To each his own...

Sergeant: In a combat situation, if you don't do what you're told sometimes, you can be shot, too.

Private #2: He might be a good soldier.

Private: But we're not in war. You're talking about being in war. I don't want no medals. I don't want to be here, period. I don't want no medals.

I want my life. That's my medal, and my heart. I want to function, out in society, not in here. Outside.

Sergeant: This is your country, too.

Private: No, it's not. No, it's not. Now you, now let's be frank with each other. Now you know it's not my country ...

Sergeant: A man without a country, huh?

Private: Right.

The private has not 'made his peace with war' (Benson & Anderson 1989: 191), and sees no reason why he should go along with the army's intentions. 'He's trying to break me', says the resilient recruit, '[but] that's just like trying to bend steel. He's gonna wear his own self out.'

Washington Star journalist Paul Hathaway spent several months interviewing black soldiers in South Vietnam, concluding that the vast majority were unhappy with the military's treatment of them, and with the attitudes of 'hicks' – uneducated and economically lower-class whites – who constituted a high proportion of America's troops. Many black people understandably decided that they were fighting 'a white man's war', 'and wondered whether they should be home fighting for their own people' (Hammond 1996: 175–6). By early 1970, a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee had begun investigating inter-racial disturbances; the delay was attributed, by black columnist Carl Rowan, to 'arrogance on the part of white liberals within the Johnson administration who believed they knew more about black problems than did blacks themselves' (quoted in Hammond 1996: 177). Denial was in itself exacerbating the problem:

Information officers, for their part, often found themselves caught between the fact of continuing racial tension and their superiors' apparent inability to define the scope of the problem ... Learning of an increase in the number of racial incidents during the summer of 1970, the chief of information for U.S. Army forces in South Vietnam, Col. Alfred J. Mock, thus argued vehemently against any announcements to the press. (Hammond 1996: 181)

'The mere acknowledgement of a rise in racial incidents would serve no useful purpose and be self-defeating', Mock told the deputy commanding general, in an effort to quell public doubts about the army's supposedly good record in the way of race equality (quoted in *ibid.*). Wiseman, ever cynical about media representation, seeks redress here: by his inclusion of the lengthy, taut dialogue between the black trainee and his sergeant, he gives voice to the black soldier in Vietnam ('a man without a country') and asks if it really is their America, too. 'Leaders avoid talking about a war which is being fought every night in barracks and other places where our soldiers gather', said Lt. Col. James White during a February 1970 briefing (quoted in *ibid.*). Likewise, the sergeant in *Basic Training* is unwilling to continue this 'self-defeating' discourse, and leaves the room having changed the subject and asked the now chagrined private to wax a floor. Jonathan Shay

puts it in simple terms: 'Men segregated themselves rigidly along racial lines in the rear ... Racially motivated killings and riots were common in Vietnam. American soldiers in the rear were not safe *from each other*.' (Shay 1994: 60)⁶

Hoffman, however, is clearly getting along well in the army. He is promoted, in the subsequent scene, from lieutenant to captain, while his family look on (or at least this is Wiseman's editorial implication) proudly. 'You have equal opportunity now', declares the officer conducting the ceremony, and, by phrasal conversance, Wiseman refers us to the black soldier in the previous scene: Lt. Hoffman, unlike the trainee, is a man *with* a country, who⁷ will go 'all the way down the line' as a true American soldier, a man of provision and virility. As Hoffman's mother says, holding his baby, 'I think he's found his niche in the world!' We cannot disagree. Another natural warrior, the sergeant and veteran who has just told the black trainee that it was his country, too, addresses the company in a bid to instil some national pride with mention of the boys' 'forefathers, and theirs before them':

They fought to keep this country free. They got your independence; it all started back, way back then about the Boston Tea Party, and it kept working up, we fought many a hard battle ... No matter where they put me over there, I'll do my best. And if some of you men come over there, I'll risk my life to save yours if you're in a spot. And I expect the same of you, 'cause that's the way I was trained, and that's the way I'm trying to train you. We take care of our people over there, believe you me. I know. I've seen a lot of young men like you that didn't make it ... They went out there to do a job. I've seen some of them try to save another life, and they got it. This is part of combat – the part we don't like.

Benson and Anderson, though acknowledging the absurdity of the sergeant's final words ('what part of combat *do* we like?') (1989: 194) note that the speech is a sincere means of conveying the idea of the army as arcane brotherhood, the fraternal nature of which demands that lives are offered up: 'I am only a body doing a job', 'I am not worth it'; Bob Walters' words resonate through the scene, a reminder that all must be subsumed to the greater good of the army if one is to be an effective soldier.

Once more the trainees march, before they are subjected to a simulated gas attack. They wear masks until they are told to remove them, and then choke, vomit, cry and expectorate as quietly as they can manage.⁷ Yet another scene of marching follows, including a low-angle shot of legs, boots, arms and fists as they seem to merge into one like the limbs of a centipede, totally in sync as an organ of one organism. 'Left, right, left', chants the sergeant, as the young men – a unit now – move towards a huge American flag and its emblematic potency. The recruits, still synchronised, are seen massed in an auditorium to watch two didactic films (which we do not see) that are introduced by a portly officer:

Our first one is an old one, but it stars some of your favourite characters such as Robert E. Lee and, urr, General Andrew Jackson – it's on the achievements and traditions of the United States Army. Our second one, which I know you're looking

forward to, in which some of you may play a part in the next one, is on Vietnam – the reasons why we're there, and how we got there.

The legendary forefathers ('your favourite characters') are invoked as the exceptional soldiers they were, even though Jackson was a slaveholder who sent three thousand Native Americans to their deaths during the Trail of Tears, and Lee a Confederate whose loyalty lay with Virginia and not Lincoln. By now, we may sense an Orwellian purpose in the army's jingoistic melding of domestic history to a uniquely modern, overseas war – a conflict pursued not in the name of change, but for the furtherance of a regime pleasing to America's elite. 'Our dead revolutionaries', as Carl Oglesby mused to an anti-war Washington crowd in 1965, 'would [today] wonder why their country was fighting against what appeared to be a revolution' (Oglesby 1970: 183).⁸ The announcer continues:

The objectives of these two movies are first of all, for the first one, to find out the winning tradition we have in the United States Army. If you think about some of the teams in sports – which I know you follow – either amateur or professional, all the great champions that you can ever thought of [sic] never went undefeated the whole time. The United States Army has never lost a war: it is undefeated. Think about that. That's quite a record and you're part of this army at this time; it's up to you to carry on this tradition.

Yet in a few years, the great champion America, whose endemic hatred of losing is epitomised in *High School* via 'Casey at the Bat', would 'strike out' in Indochina.

Basic Training's closing scenes depict the trainees' physical practice for what awaits them, and are less dependent on dialogue than is usual for Wiseman. After they are lectured about the offensive potential of a Claymore mine, and how many casualties they inflict ('eight per cent of US kills'), the film follows the final few steps of the recruits' progress from placid boys to fighting men. Hickman reappears as a volunteer in a demonstration of how to kill a man by strangulation or bludgeoning; he is by now assimilated, and welcomed back into the fold with hearty applause. We see Hickman having camouflage paint applied, ready for an exercise, and realise that, without his glasses, he is as his comrades: no more or less a handsome potential hero ('PAVLO MOTHERHUMPIN' HUMMEL!') (Rabe 2002: 53). At night, the boys patrol the forest, feeling for imagined mines and ducking under barbed wire. Guns are fired, obstacles are surmounted, and there is no doubt that the course has almost run because the recruits are obviously *enjoying* it. On the infiltration field, the trainees move in concert; in the forest, they move together as a pack of hunters, the memories of nine weeks ago wiped by highly effective schooling.

GRADUATION

Basic Training culminates in a ritual whose typically Wisemanian function – for both the film and Fort Knox – is to demonstrate the training process's perfection

as a 'mechanism of assimilation' (Janowitz 1972: 167). Heralded by a bugle call, the graduation ceremony begins with a brass band-led parade. Wiseman employs a montage technique here that conveys, through rhythm and selection, the pomp, uniformity and pride on display. First we see the lone bugler in close-up, his polished, fixedly horizontal instrument shining in the sun; a drummer then raps his snare, again shot in close-up; a conductor keeps time with suitably vigorous precision; and the Stars and Stripes is held aloft at the front of the assembly, as Wiseman zooms in on a flag-bearer's bumptious expression. The physical mechanics of generating a percussive prompt – a regular beat to which all the recruits are now happily marching – become important for Wiseman here; in its metronomic rigidity, this music (with which Wiseman synchronises his cuts) urges the troops towards their collective destiny, guided by a tradition passed down through generations of American militarism. If through circumstance or upbringing one had either no alternative or no inclination to offer defiance, then the army, as always, offered a more concretely graspable objective: acceptance into the fraternity of the warrior.

Lt. Hoffman introduces the winner of the American Spirit of Honour Award, 'in recognition of outstanding qualities of leadership, best expression of the American spirit, honour, initiative [and] loyalty'. The square-jawed recipient takes the stage to give his acceptance speech, and he is, as Benson and Anderson opine and as we must expect, a 'blandly handsome ideal soldier', who delivers a succession of clichés imbued with predictable, 'earnest wholesomeness' (1989: 198).

Whether one prefers to call today's exercises 'graduation' or 'commencement', it matters not. But may I suggest to you keep both words in their individual connotative and denotative meanings in mind today. 'Graduation' signifies an end, while 'commencement' is of course a beginning ... We came here from different places with different backgrounds ... we arrived in blue jeans, sandals, tennis shoes, and t-shirts. We are now emerging as trained fighting men in the uniform of the US Army.

Wiseman inserts a shot of assembled graduands, all of whom look nearly identical at even a short distance. The director then moves in to frame their faces, but we do not see anyone we recognise from earlier scenes – Hickman, for example, or the good son with the M-16. We do, though, realise that although the soldiers' faces are still disparate, their fixedly severe countenances are not. The private continues:

We are now at the end of basic training. We leave the classes we've had, the weapons we've fired, the friends we've made, and the officers and drill sergeants who've gained our respect ... For some [the army] may be a sojourn of a year or two, for others a way of life. However, it is now up to each of us to carry on in the tradition of those who have gone before.

The award which I have the honour and pleasure to receive today is entitled 'The American Spirit of Honour Award'. This is what we are now entrusted with and must carry forth: the American spirit of honour. It was born in the snow of Valley Forge, nurtured midst the smoke of Gettysburg and San Juan Hill ... When fascism reared

its ugly head, the American spirit came forth and slew the dragon ... And now South-east Asia. Laying aside the political controversy surrounding this conflict, we see once again displayed that American spirit of honour: fighting men dying for their nation and democracy ... Lord, give us the strength to meet the challenge. I thank you.

The audience claps with a reverential lack of verve, and the commanding general thanks the speaker – presumably for his appropriate ‘expression of the American spirit’ – by shaking his hand and saying, ‘Well said, son.’

American ‘honour’ is evoked and any pertinent meditation dismissed in favour of rhetorical comparisons to entirely different campaigns. The phrase ‘the weapons we’ve fired’, nestled as it is between terms such as ‘friends’ and ‘respect’, is indicative of the private’s conditioned attitude to firearms and their new place in his life, as is his romanticising of Gettysburg, the bloodiest battle ever fought on American soil. Our ‘favourite characters’, heroes of what Walter A. McDougal calls the ‘victory culture’ (1997: 86), again are summoned to validate new actions by evoking old deeds (which more fiery historians have argued were essentially predicated on ‘Indian hating and empire building’ (ibid.)). It is at least acknowledged that some of the recruits (now ‘fighting men’) will be killed, but their lives will be lost not for their nation’s security, unity or sovereignty, but for a cause that was, for most, more obscured by the passing of a decade than Valley Forge’s was by a lapse of nearly two centuries.

Stanley Hoffman argues that Americans commonly use history as a ‘grabbag from which each advocate pulls out a “lesson” to prove his point’ (quoted in Jervis 1976: 217), and this is frequently borne out in *Basic Training*.⁹ If fascist Germany was a ‘dragon’, a dehumanised catchall of mythically evil proportions, then Vietnamese Communists could not be so labelled for fear of ‘controversy’, false accusation or improper professional conduct along racial lines (in the field they remained for the Westerner exotic, wily ‘gooks’ – the mysterious Other; see McDougal 1997: 205).¹⁰ The recruits’ civilian clothing – ‘blue jeans, sandals, tennis shoes and t-shirts’ – has been stripped away; they are commencing a new life away from the discourses and paradigms of what they know, and away from an environment of relatively cosseted safety. During 1970, a period of supposed ‘de-Americanisation ... with all deliberate speed’, 6,065 Americans were killed in Vietnam (Nixon 1978: 741). When these fresh-faced adolescents get to Cam Ranh Bay (the real point of ‘commencement’), they will forever be ruined; if they make it back, the traumas of a nightmarish ‘sojourn’ will never leave them.

CONCLUSION: CAM RANH BAY IN A BODY BAG

The same revolutionary belief for which our forebears fought is still at issue around the globe, the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God ... Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

– President John F. Kennedy (1962: 7)¹¹

You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both.
– John Ruskin (2004: 14)

Basic Training, like so many of Wiseman’s films, is about a (or *the*) ‘system’, a force so powerful and relentless that it can send naïfs like Hickman to Vietnam and show no compunction in so doing. *Basic Training*’s conclusion implies a beginning of sorts; as witnessed in this ritual ‘commencement’, the graduands are expertly transmogrified, and the hopes of the early 1960s similarly become, at decade’s end, disintegrating memories of misguided idealism and illusory political progressiveness. As the Right resurged to fill the vacuum created by the New Left’s implosion and the undeclared war went on, Wiseman criticised not just functionaries, but the broader issues that lay behind self-interested US policies of military containment.

The senior officers, of course, are only themselves components, politically impotent and gagged by a duty to serve the interests of their employers – successive and mostly liberal presidents who feared embarrassing Cold War defeats and heeded ‘domino theory’’s ominous prophecies.¹² Wiseman duly does not scapegoat the army for strategies begun by Truman in response to multifarious global events; indeed, sharing James Alden Barber’s opinion that to ‘blame all that is bad in our foreign policy on the man in uniform ... is an evasion of the real issues, and no more likely to contribute to a solution to our problems than is any other form of scapegoating’ (1972: 309), the filmmaker orchestrates his narrative around a central premise of inexorability. ‘This film’, remark Benson and Anderson of *Basic Training*, ‘is not about Hickman, or the rifle-rack soldier, or the man who hired a prostitute in Louisville. It is about a system of basic training that, whatever happens to those particular men, will continue’ (1989: 200). We may or may not remember the many faces Wiseman has shown us, but we can be sure that they will not be the last victims of the American system’s methods.

Television networks in the late 1960s began to breach Department of Defense vetoes and broadcast material critical of US conduct and ‘imperialist’ motives. Although always denounced as disreputable or seditious by patriots and government representatives, these films (that were frequently shot in the field of combat) nonetheless exposed disingenuous falsehoods perpetuated by State Department spokesmen.¹³ Overt anti-war rhetoric was becoming commonplace, and an almost *de rigueur* tactic employed by fervent documentarists working in territories both hostile and friendly.¹⁴ Characteristically, Wiseman did not make an unequivocal case for cessation of engagement, instead looking beneath specific iniquities to the causal malaise within not the Pentagon but the unnamed ‘system’ at play. The chaplain in *Basic Training* asks for God’s help, as if America’s aspirations to govern and police the world were a divine right; ‘Lord, give us the strength to meet the challenge’, echoes the Spirit of Honour Award-winner, evoking an assumption held by his ancestors that Nature and God concurred in their endorsement of proselytising and territoriality. Jefferson envisaged a future in which ‘our rapid multiplication will ... cover the whole northern if not southern continent, with people speaking the same language, governed by similar forms, and by similar laws’

(quoted in Perkins 1993: 170), a longing common to early American statesmen that would later be crystallised in John O'Sullivan's phrase 'manifest destiny'.¹⁵ As the 'empty' continent was filled – and the natives subdued by gunpowder – a politico-economic ethos based on capital security grew to encompass an isolated, insular nation suspicious of most revolutions or insurgencies despite its own heritage.

As John Quincy Adams said in his Fourth of July address of 1821: 'America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy ... she might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit' (quoted in McDougal 1997: 36). Pearl Harbor, of course, forced America to abandon its isolationist stance that reached a crest in the 1930s; after World War Two, the 'welfare-warfare state'¹⁶ began a campaign of global meliorism that would become the ostensibly benevolent motivation for the Vietnam War, a conflict Harry G. Summers describes as

the international version of our domestic Great Society programs where we presumed that we knew what was best for the world in terms of social, political, and economic development and saw it as our duty to force the world into the American mould – to act not so much as the World's Policemen as the World's Nanny. (1984: 229)

Kennedy's inaugural boast that Americans would 'pay any price, bear any burden', is well known; but, he elaborated further:

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required – not because the Communists might be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich. (1962: 7–8; see also Riddell 1987: 6)

Wiseman's core contention in *Basic Training* is that a country such as America, despite good intentions, has no God-given right to assume control of other countries, or its own young men's destinies, because the great 'City on the Hill' is riddled with contradictions, folly, hypocrisy and an overwhelming sense of its own divine duty to 'truly light the world' (Kennedy 1962: 10). Sermons like Kennedy's were basically well-meaning, but invited intellectual criticisms aimed at problems within the United States of crime, civil disorder, inequality, extensive bureaucracy, drugs and injustice – valid complaints that find a voice in Wiseman's early films. As Carl Oglesby of SDS iterated in 1965: 'This country, with its thirty-some years of liberalism, can send 200,000 young men to Vietnam to kill and die in the most dubious of wars, but it cannot get 100 voter registrars to go into Mississippi' (quoted in Teodori 1970: 184). By 1970, the social revolution proposed by the New Left and the wider Movement had not yet been realised: the system, gradually and surely, prevailed.

The processes revealed in *Basic Training* reflect the larger society's functions and maintain a ceaseless, insidious momentum that drives the officers towards their own, selfish fulfilment whilst compelling the recruits to acquiesce. Hoffman sacrifices his right to a political voice for the chance to climb a career ladder and achieve status amongst his colleagues;¹⁷ the chaplain sacrifices his morality to play a part in the desolation of his captive flock and, with no less hypocrisy than a television evangelist, denounces materialism and then 'offers salvation in exchange for a full collection plate' (Benson & Anderson 1989: 195). The majority of recruits, fighting as they were for the interests of richer men (whose own lives and sons were never in danger), were being used by a state that so cherished 'freedom' and detested poverty that it was willing to send thousands of its own poor to their deaths to establish American ideals in a small, ex-French colony in Indochina.

Unlike the Hollywood and Office of War Information films the film frequently evokes, the putative rite-of-passage narrative of *Basic Training* ends in a confounding suggestion of cyclical and inevitable subsumption; the viewer is not offered a satisfying resolution or even the certainty that any of the film's until-now prioritised subjects do eventually graduate. We are left wondering, 'What happened to Hickman, or the man "without a country"?' Wiseman followed the recruits for the full nine weeks, but chose not to focus on familiar individuals at the film's end, as to do so would imply that *Basic Training* is centrally about individuals, and less about an unstoppable process by which America fights to proliferate values that Wiseman deplures. When the soldiers we expect (or hope) to see do not appear, we infer that they have been, as Wiseman insinuates, perfectly effaced by the system, and are no more important in the scheme of things than any other graduands of boot camp during this or any war. The implication here is not, as the National Mobilization Committee asserted in 1968, that America then possessed 'one of the most reluctant armies in histories [sic].' Wiseman's contrary illustration of basic training is that, after nine weeks of 'bullying and blinding', its outcome is successful and the soldiers proud and ready. Paul Potter asked the March on Washington:

What kind of system is it that justifies the United States or any other country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for its own purpose? What kind of system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, leaves millions upon millions of people throughout the country impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of American society, that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work, that consistently puts material values before human values – and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world? What place is there for ordinary men in that system and how are they to control it, make it bend itself to their wills rather than bending them to its? (1985: 220)

Answers to these questions, as Wiseman suggests in *Basic Training*, might be found in the paradoxes of the American Way: the timeless need to impose prescribed stability on disorder, make a garden out of a wilderness, and trade freely at whatever cost to moral integrity; the Promised Land was also a Crusader State,

and the Garden a seedbed for industrialisation. 'We embrace contradictory principles with equal fervour and cling to them with equal tenacity', writes Eugene V. Rostow. 'Should our foreign policy be based on power or morality? Realism or idealism? Pragmatism or principle? Should its goal be the protection of interests or the promotion of values? Should we be nationalists or internationalists? Liberals or conservatives? We blithely answer, "All of the above"' (1993: 22). In 1972, Democrat George McGovern would fight the presidential election on a platform of total and immediate withdrawal from Vietnam; he subsequently garnered the lowest share of the popular vote ever achieved in a two-way contest.

Frederick Wiseman, perhaps the most sagacious of American documentarists, continues, like so many commentators and artists first emergent in the 1960s, to query the machinations of the system in his own, less than blithe but never less than extraordinary rejoinders to Samuel Smith's hymn:

My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee we sing:
Land where our fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride,
From ev'ry mountainside
Let freedom ring!¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Culture-Bound

American film does not merely have a history – it also *is* history. Movies are a continuous inscription and interpretation of American experience through time and in the world. Films are traces of specific moments in specific spaces mediated by human beings who are always culture-bound.

– Vivian Sobchack (1980: 293)

The true revolution of the Sixties – more powerful and decisive for Western society than any of its external by-products – was an inner one of feeling and assumption: a revolution in the head.

– Ian MacDonald (1994: 24)

This book's rhetorical design is three-tiered. It has been my intention to explicate the content of the films under discussion by providing immediate socio-cultural context; to posit the direct cinema filmmakers within their epoch's most salient political and intellectual imperatives; and to trace the roots from which direct cinema emerged as extending further into American thought than technological, dramaturgical or anthropological analysis has so far allowed. The transformative bearing of the 1960s on documentary form was catalysed by factors other than an urge for aesthetic probity, and beyond a response to didacticism and television's lacklustre treatment of actuality. Had reactive observationalism come to fruition outside the United States, it would have been quite different in intention and scope; indeed, it is possible that the direct cinema movement *could not* have sprung from any other time and place than the American Sixties. The fibre of direct cinema, it follows, is predicated as much on a philosophical reawakening as on the portability of equipment: roving camera-sound systems, developed at first to assist orthodox journalistic or anthropological endeavour, eventually became totems of a new-found cinematic transcendence.

The films I have appraised are canonical works. They comprise a broad, chronological sample of direct cinema's most cherished and remembered records not because of a disregard for Robert Drew's post-*Crisis* achievements, but in order to contemplate why some direct cinema productions of the 1960s abide, whilst others do not. The Maysles brothers, D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, Michael Wadleigh and Frederick Wiseman attenuated their modes of expression to incorporate and comment upon what mattered about their nation as it entered a period of discursive change and existential craving; they outgrew the Living Camera tem-