

**Negotiating Meaning Making: Benson and Anderson's  
*Reality Fiction: The Films of Frederick Wiseman***

James Roberts  
Georgia State University

Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman, 2nd edition  
Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson  
Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002  
409 pgs.

Thomas Benson and Carolyn Anderson's second edition of *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman* is the kind of book that, like the first edition, achieves more than its explicitly stated goals. Ostensibly an investigation into how Wiseman's films invite certain responses in spectators, *Reality Fictions* ends up developing a well-rounded understanding of something generically referred to as a 'rhetorical approach' to film study. With the expansion of rhetoric beyond speech and composition, this move toward rhetorical film study has gathered force in recent years, as evidenced by the positive reception of Benson and Anderson's first edition of 1989. Moreover, the text also provides, through a close examination of the films, a thoughtful investigation into how film, documentary film specifically, makes meaning.

More thoughtfully than most in the field, *Reality Fictions* sets a plan for the textual analysis of film from a rhetorically motivated perspective. In their introduction, Benson and Anderson write that "we take the rhetorical study of film to be an inquiry into how the film invite response . . . searching the texts not for what they 'mean' but for the ways in which they induce the action of meaning-making in a willing spectator" (xv). The specificity of this approach enables the authors, when they get to the close analysis, to stress their encounter with the films rather than "translating" them for the reader. The authors' joy at this engagement is evident throughout the book; the reader thus comes to appreciate the films as a result of this enthusiasm and is shown precisely how a rhetorical approach, when understood with such clarity, can amplify understanding of textual engagement.

As with all, Chapter One remains identical from the first edition, and in it the authors lay the groundwork of their rhetorical perspective, the bearing it has on their inquiry, and the consequences for such an approach. (The lack of updates in the body chapters is perhaps a frustrating element to readers already familiar with previous edition.) The first step in their method is to understand that the rhetorical critic investigates a film as *de facto* a shared, "constructed invitation to a complex experience of thoughts and feelings" (3). Films do not exist independently; they are not private experiences, even when viewed alone; and, they bring about certain types of experiences through their construction. Benson and Anderson never lose sight of the idea that the tools and techniques of cinema, as part of reality, are intricately woven into the fabric of meaning making. It is this constant reminder that enables the authors and, thus, the readers to discover how Wiseman implicates the subjects of his film, himself, and the viewer into the filmic experience.

Frederick Wiseman is one of the most successful independent documentary filmmakers since the 1960s. From his first documentary, *Titicut Follies* (1967), Wiseman has been able to produce films with an amount of freedom not granted many. This freedom has not always meant liberation from social norms and legal wrangling. *Reality Fictions* offers in Chapter Two a history of the circumstances under which Wiseman's films have been made. Mapping a trajectory through the specific challenges of releasing *Titicut Follies*, this chapter investigates the issues surrounding the "relation of social documentary to its subjects and audiences" and traces the legal difficulties concerning the film's release (6). The legal case opened many issues concerning the very issues of 'freedom' that Wiseman cherishes; but it provides Benson and Anderson the opportunity to investigate how rhetoric (the generation of meaning) gets mobilized in legal, journalistic, popular, social, and scholarly settings. The issues concerning meaning making were at the heart of *Commonwealth vs. Wiseman*, as they are at the core of any rhetorical inquiry; and the authors go to great lengths to remain dedicated to understanding how it is that 'meaning' is created, troubled, analyzed, consumed.

Benson and Anderson continually reference their thesis that Wiseman builds into his films invitations to meaning making by explicitly revealing for the reader how the director does this. Chapter Three takes as its aim *High School* (1968) and asks the question plainly: "How does Wiseman draw upon the skills and contexts of his viewers to invite them to experience a particular complex of meanings as they view *High School*?" (110). What follows is a close reading of both the formal and the material (which the authors claim are always "at war" with one another and the specific encounters of such engagement). Yet, this chapter is not unique in the book in its attention to the relations between form and matter or to the relations between that conflict and the audience that experiences the film. Chapter Four, likewise, reconstructs how a film (1971's *Basic Training*, in this case) "invites" interpretive actions from the viewer. One of the important elements that connect this chapter's analysis with the previous is the delicate manner in which the authors treat the historicism with which one views films about these topics made in the years they were made. That is, Benson and Anderson examine the high school kids of the late 1960s and the Army recruits of 1971 with a type of attention that neither belittles nor eulogizes the personal or the political. This move is a real feat, it seems, given the political/social context of those years. Like Wiseman, the authors do not reduce the films to conventional (historical) formulas.

One effective writing strategy that the authors employ throughout *Reality Fictions* in order to construct precise arguments is to do more than provide extensive quotes or written reconstructions of the films. Further into the rhetorical investigation, Benson and Anderson offer breakdowns of major dramatic units of the films. The films are segmented into "scenes" that offer the authors and readers a fresh viewing strategy that prompts a narrative form not necessarily noticeable from straight viewing experiences. Where this amount of attention might bog down lesser writers, its force in *Reality Fictions* allows greater insight into the films without encouraging discouraging remarks from those who feel this is "over analyzing." Indeed, this type of breakdown allows greater access to the relation of form and matter and the relation between viewer and film. In the chapter on *Basic Training*, for example, this scene-by- scene breakdown prompts the authors to recognize movements not readily available to the casual spectator: "these scenes begin to set up the terms of our relation to the material; we are not following particular

men from one scene to the next and so we pay attention not to the continuity of characters but to the immediacy of what is before us and to its place in a more abstract process” (149).

Chapter Five works through two Wiseman films: *Essene* (1972) investigates the private commitment of religious devotion and authority of monastery life; 1973’s *Juvenile Court* deals with the relation between psychology and law by following several youths’ moves through legal and psychological institutional systems. The common thread that runs through these analyses concerns Wiseman’s treatment of various forces labeled “psychology” in contemporary institutions. If the outset is similar in these investigations, so, too, is the conclusion (at least as it concerns the director): “Wiseman uses narrative in a reflexive and ironic way, in which our suspicion of institutional hierarchy extends to a suspicion of narrative itself, so that both appear likely to be unreliable and to be a distraction from the reality that is present before us” (228). The particulars of these two seemingly disparate films provide the segue to the next chapter, which once again reminds us of the chief aim of the rhetorical critic: “to pay close attention to the communicative potentials of symbolic forms, to understand not only the forms themselves but also what listeners, readers, and watchers are likely to make of those forms” (229). It is this imperative that directs the authors through their next film, *Primate* (1974).

Never satisfied with a “topic” in a traditional mode, Wiseman always seems more interested in an intersection of the human and the world. Thus, in *Juvenile Court* he delves into the making meaning of truth and how we, as viewers, interact and construct another truth from what is present before us. Similarly, in *Primate* Wiseman examines not so much the activity of laboratory animal research as he does the consequences of human inquisitiveness. Therefore, as we are ‘investigating’ researchers ‘investigating’ animal behavior and bodily function, we are simultaneously ‘investigating’ ourselves and the human being. Thus, this film enables Wiseman (and Benson and Anderson as well) to engage “how facts can be recontextualized into complex meanings and how audiences can be actively engaged in the process of constructing meanings” (229). And, as the authors continually remind us, this search (for the constantly renegotiated terrain of meaning) is the heart of their inquiry and of rhetorical criticism in general. They achieve this aim of close analysis so well that filmmakers, as well (obviously) as those interested in rhetorical inquiry, are well served by paying close attention to their queries. Like Wiseman, Benson and Anderson work all sides of the fault lines between film and viewer, art and social discourse, reality and fiction.

The attention to thesis, the ever-present direct inquiry to support that thesis, and the guide-like manner in which the authors tour Wiseman’s films join to make a book that might not ever be outdone in Wiseman studies. It might come as a frustration to the reader familiar with the first edition that there isn’t more in the way of updating the discussion of films released since the first edition was published. Films such as *Belfast, Maine, Public Housing*, and the revisitation film *High School II* deserve the same rhetorical reading and critical attention Benson and Anderson give so carefully to the other films. Perhaps that will be a wholly new volume.

---

**Citation Format:**

Roberts, James. "Negotiating Meaning Making: Benson and Anderson's *Reality Fiction: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*." *Enculturation* 5.1 (Fall 2003):  
[http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5\\_1/roberts.html](http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/roberts.html)

**Contact Information:**

James Roberts, Georgia State University  
Email: [joujhr@langate.gsu.edu](mailto:joujhr@langate.gsu.edu)