

DIRECT CINEMA: OBSERVING AMERICA IN THE 1960s  
*Frederick Wiseman's Law and Order (1969)*

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I think when my films work,  
they work because they place the viewer in the middle of the event  
and ask the spectator to think through their own relationship  
to see what they're seeing and hearing.  
– Frederick Wiseman  
*Independent Online, 2002<sup>1</sup>*

*Law and Order - The movie*

The words “Law and Order” on a black background. Then, several grainy mug shots of men with hard expressions on their faces flash shakily across the screen. Abruptly, we hear a voice ask, “Do you know what you’re charged with?” as we now see a close up of an obviously uncomfortable man as he denies the charges that he “beat this boy, hittin’ him with a gun, and committing sexual assault on him.” The scene lasts for several minutes. Next, another man sits and asks a different detective for help, “or he’ll take matters in his own hands.” Then we listen and watch as a woman talks on the phone and spills out her anger at the police for arresting her. Later, a young, angry white couple with a baby argues with their landlady. A young black man resists arrest, and police throw him up against their patrol car as neighbors watch. For the next 80 minutes or so, we continue to watch these short scenes unfold – domestic arguments, lost children, two policemen sitting in their patrol cars next to each other and talking, more interviews at the police station. We move from scene to scene without narration and without a running storyline or major character to follow. Then it’s over.<sup>2</sup>



*From Law and Order (1969)  
Directed by Frederick Wiseman  
Zipporah Films*

## *Direct cinema in 1960s America*

Direct cinema had been made possible by developments in equipment – facilitating mobile synchronized-sound shooting on location. The equipment had helped documentarists open new worlds, involving spontaneous communication. At first they had focused on the famous, but the spotlight had shifted to the lowly, filmed at junctures of stress. Such material, while dramatically compelling, could also be revealing, reflecting stresses of society on the individual.

– Erik Barnouw

*Documentary: A history of the non-fiction film, 1983*<sup>3</sup>

*Law and Order*, which won an Emmy for Best News Documentary in 1969, is one of the first films created by Frederick Wiseman, a producer / director who has continued to spend most of his long, respected career recording everyday life in a wide variety of American public institutions – including mental hospitals, high schools, welfare institutions, and juvenile courts. *Law and Order* follows the routine activities of the Kansas City Police Department as they interact with people inside and out of a district station house in an area hard hit by violence during the April 1968 race riots that wracked cities around the nation.

The film is still considered an acclaimed depiction of the direct cinema documentary filmmaking style, sometimes known as *cinéma vérité*, that came of age and evolved in America in the 1960s. *Law and Order* includes no narration or music or titles – just a series of unrelated, unrehearsed and unscripted scenes of policemen and suspects that are allowed to unfold in their own real time and in their own words without the jumpy editing of today's *Cops*. This observational style of filmmaking continues to influence filmmakers to this day. My interest in exploring how *Law and Order* works as particular example of the direct cinema style came about in large part because in 1968, I was fourteen years old and living in Kansas City near the very inner city area in which the film takes place.

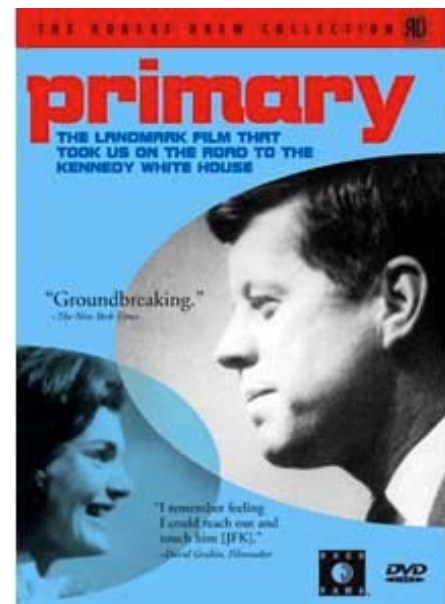
*Direct cinema – a film style whose style had come*

It is no accident that cinéma-vérité emerged at a particular moment in the history of technology, a moment equipment became available that made it possible to affirm such a philosophy by filming people going about their lives of speaking and silence.

– William Rothman

*Documentary Film Classics, 1997<sup>4</sup>*

To get a deeper sense of what *Law and Order* reveals, it is helpful to understand how direct cinema evolved during the 1960s and what this style of filmmaking and subject matter meant to Frederick Wiseman as he took up his camera in the second half of the decade. In the late 1950s in America, a new generation of documentary filmmakers had become excited about the possibilities of film technologies that were just becoming available. Documentaries at that time were mostly authoritarian, with narration by a “newsman, omniscient in tone,” and because most of these films were shown on network television at that time, they tended to “play it safe.”<sup>5</sup> Filmmaker Robert Drew devoted a great deal of time during that period focusing on two questions: “Why are documentaries so dull? What would it take for them to become gripping and exciting?” He finally settled upon the idea that what documentaries could do best was “convey experience,” letting “viewers experience the sense of being somewhere else, drawing them into dramatic developments in the lives of people caught up in stories of importance.” However, this new form of filmmaking did not come easily. “It would take me five more years to conceive and develop the editing techniques, assemble the teams, reengineer the lightweight equipment and find the right story to produce for my first TV documentary.”<sup>6</sup>



*Primary (1960)  
Executive Producer Robert Drew*

In the late 1950s, some filmmakers had already begun to rid themselves of heavy and unwieldy 35mm cameras as lighter 16mm cameras became available. They could

now take their equipment out into the world and observe and record human events more directly and with less intrusion than had been possible before. Soon after that, the steadying effect of using a tripod was abandoned. The introduction of faster film stocks with greater light sensitivity and advances in film processing also allowed filmmakers to shoot in more situations and with less artificiality.<sup>7</sup> Although the lighter cameras and improved film stocks gave them greater freedom to film subjects out in their environments, what held filmmakers back from real freedom to record reality as it unfolded on location was the problem of synchronized-sound shooting. At this time, sync sound required that the camera and recorder be attached by cables, and that the recorder and microphone be connected as well.<sup>8</sup> When filmmakers could travel into the world without the cumbersome sound cables that had always been necessary for sync sound before, their options would be endless.

To work on a solution to this technical problem – as well how to “convey experience” on film – Drew formed a group at *Time-Life, Inc.*, in New York in 1958. With him were like-minded people who would become some of the leading direct cinema filmmakers in America – Ricky Leacock, Donn Alan Pennebaker, and Albert and David Maysles. Finding solutions was a slow process, but as Leacock noted, “The important thing is that we were experimenting. All the rules were new. We were, in fact, developing a new grammar which was entirely different from that of silent filmmaking.”<sup>9</sup> There were many discussions as they worked through this new kind of storytelling. Drew argued that “the right kind of documentary programming should raise more interest than it can satisfy, more questions than it should try to answer.”<sup>10</sup>

Drew and his fellow filmmakers were not interested in continuing the established tradition of making authoritarian pronouncements. Jeanne Hall notes that Pennebaker’s philosophy of filmmaking, like Drew’s and Leacock’s, “grew out of a liberal concern for the proper role of the press in democratic societies.” Instead of preaching, they wanted to film life’s events as they unfolded and let the viewers come to their own conclusions about what they had seen. As Pennebaker said, “You don’t have to label them, you don’t have to have the narration to instruct you so you can be sure and understand that it’s good for you. You don’t need any of that.”<sup>11</sup> Their efforts at creating a new form of filmmaking that broke with traditional documentaries finally paid off when, technical difficulties and all, they were able to produce *Primary* (1960), a

film which captured Hubert Humphrey and a young John F. Kennedy behind the scenes as they campaigned during the 1960 Wisconsin Democratic primary election.

With Leacock, Pennebaker, Al Maysles, and Terrence McCarney-Filgate doing most of the shooting and Drew carrying the tape recorder, they created one of the first direct cinema films in America. When it was completed “nearly everyone involved in the making of *Primary* felt that it marked a real breakthrough in their filming.”<sup>12</sup> Drew felt the results justified their belief in the power of creating a film that told itself through actions as they occurred, without intervention from the filmmakers. “Though burdensome by today’s standards, the equipment made it possible for the first time for us to move the sync sound camera-recorder freely with characters throughout a story. [...] With twenty hours of candid film in hand, I was able to plan the editing of a story that would tell itself through characters in action, with less than two minutes of narration.”<sup>13</sup> After the film’s completion, Leacock remembers the sense of elation. “We made a film that captures the flavor, the guts of what was happening. No interviews. No reenactments. No staged scenes and very little narration.”<sup>14</sup>

The new freedom of movement of camera and sound that allowed filmmakers to follow and film people as they moved around also led to a visual style that was much less formal than traditional documentaries. “The stylistic elements of the film – the restless, wandering movements of lightweight, hand-held cameras; the blurred, grainy images of fast, monochrome film, the preference for (even unintelligible) synchronous sound over authoritative voice-over narration; and the impromptu performances of apparently preoccupied social actors – epitomize early American *cinéma vérité*.”<sup>15</sup> Although many, including Hall, refer to this style of filmmaking as ‘*cinéma vérité*’, American filmmakers of the decade preferred the term ‘direct cinema’, which was used first by Maysles and adopted by others.”<sup>16</sup> To Wiseman, “*cinéma vérité* is just a pompous French term that has absolutely no meaning to me.”<sup>17</sup>

Whether it is called *cinéma vérité* or direct cinema, this “realistic” way of observing and capturing the world on film stemmed from the filmmakers’ desires and efforts to reveal the “truth” about the America around them – not through the heavy-handed style of contemporary documentaries, but by letting their subjects speak for themselves and by letting people make up their own minds about what they had seen and heard. As William Rothman argues in *Documentary Film Classics*, “In *cinéma-vérité*

films, no assertions have absolute authority. [...] 'Truth' is to be revealed, not asserted by a narrator whose authority is not to be questioned."<sup>18</sup>

The importance of letting people make up their own minds is a large part of what drew Wiseman to the direct cinema style of documentary. With his first documentary film, *Titticut Follies* (1967), a film exploring the daily interaction of patients and doctors at the



*From Titticut Follies (1967)*  
Directed by Frederick Wiseman  
Zipporah Films

Massachusetts' Bridgewater State Hospital for the mentally insane, Wiseman started on a path that would lead him to become one of the most prolific and acclaimed documentary filmmakers of his generation. Although much is sometimes made of Wiseman's having graduated from Yale Law School and the effect this might have had on his films, he dismisses the idea. "I never practiced and I never liked it. I decided to make movies because I was always interested in that."<sup>19</sup> Yet, he has also said that while he was teaching law at Boston College, he used to take his students to the Bridgewater State Hospital, knowing that many of them would become judges and district attorneys and he "wanted them to see the inside of the kind of institution they might someday be committing someone to."<sup>20</sup> Consciously or not, it is this idea – that observing something directly could help one make better personal judgments about its meaning – that has influenced other direct cinema filmmakers and Wiseman's own filmmaking choices, both in subject matter and in filmmaking style.

With *High School* (1968) and *Law and Order* the very next year, Wiseman continued to take advantage of the modern technologies of smaller, more maneuverable cameras and portable synchronized sound recording to show the everyday world around him. "It just seemed to me so obvious that here's this new technology through which you could make a record of ordinary experience. And ordinary experience has in it all the elements of great drama – if you happen to be lucky enough to be around when it's happening and recognize it for what it is."<sup>21</sup> Wiseman has continued for thirty five years to find drama in the lives of ordinary people interacting with large social institutions, with his latest documentary, *Domestic Violence* (2002), focusing on "The Spring, Tampa," a Florida shelter for abused women and their children.

However, when he started his documentary career in 1967, Wiseman was just developing a sense that institutions in America were relatively unexplored territory in film, with groups of people coming together under a certain set of societal rules, and that there “may be enough interesting things out of which to find a film. And what goes on in that particular place might reflect in some way the things going on outside.”<sup>22</sup> He was also “reacting against some of the early sync-sound documentaries, where the subject had always been a famous actor or a famous criminal and one person was followed. I thought it would be more interesting, at least for me, to make movies where the place was the star.”<sup>23</sup>

Wiseman has always tried to find something valuable to show others in the lives he has caught on film, despite the fact that he may no longer completely believe that films can influence social issues. “I think in the beginning I was naïve about them [*Titticut Follies* and *High School*, and their impact on the country at large in terms of social change]. I don’t think you can measure the impact of any single work.”<sup>24</sup> His goal, like other direct cinema filmmakers, is to present information – filmed without scripts or direction – for people to make up their own minds, which in and of itself may have more influence than he acknowledges. “My principal obligation is to make as good a movie as I can and try to fairly represent the complexity of what went on. That means sometimes the films are long, it means that sometimes the scenes are long.”<sup>25</sup> To accomplish this, Wiseman shoots a tremendous amount of footage, which he then fashions into a story. “You can’t even anticipate what people are going to say or do, in the terms of being on or off at the right time. [...] If your gut instinct is telling you you’ve gotta shoot, then you shoot.”<sup>26</sup>

Wiseman also doesn’t buy into the idea that the people he is filming act differently before the camera. At least not in his experience. “I don’t think that the camera really changes the way that people behave. [...] If they agree to have their picture taken... most of us in life don’t have the capacity to act differently.”<sup>27</sup> He believes that, rather than ignoring the camera’s effect, once they agree to be on camera they will act in ways they feel are appropriate to act, or they wouldn’t do it. For example, in *Law and Order* there is scene in which a detective continues choking a prostitute who pushed a detective on the stairs, uncomfortably past the point where she has given up struggling. “I suppose you could argue that if we hadn’t been filming he



might have killed her. But I don't think so. I think he thought that was an appropriate way to punish a woman who knocked an undercover cop down the stairs." In fact, Wiseman goes on, "I think that if the camera did change behavior, it would tend to push it in the direction of blandness."<sup>28</sup> And in another scene we do see a detective sit at his desk and struggle to control his anger at a young black man who keeps verbally pushing the detective to take action against someone the young man feels is causing trouble in his neighborhood.

Wiseman also believes that films become the creation of the director during editing, but argues that he strives as much as possible to eliminate any bias by shooting without a script and by letting the scenes play out on their own without adding any narration. "To take a simple example, you could cut to a one-line that's really good. But I think the one-liner that is really good is much better if it is submerged in a context, so the viewer has to grope for it a little by participating in the scene."<sup>29</sup> Yet he doesn't deny that he is still telling a story, albeit not in the traditional sense with a story arc and a protagonist. Editing is a "long and selective process. I do feel that when I cut a sequence, I have an obligation to the people who are in it to cut it so that it fairly represents what I felt was going on at the time, in the original event. I don't try and cut it to meet the standards of a producer or a network or a television show."<sup>30</sup>

Although *Law and Order* takes place in Kansas City, Missouri in the highest crime district in the city – and most viewers would generally receive that information in some form before viewing the film – that information is never spelled out within the film itself. There are no titles or voice-over narration that tells us when and where the film takes place. We don't follow one particular character, and the scenes don't seem to fall in a particular order. The film takes on the feeling of being representative of police in any urban area, dealing with the same situations in any poverty-stricken, high-crime area. As Stephen Mamber writes, "Taken out of time, the films become less journalistic. While one could argue, for instance, the relative merits of the Kansas City Police Department versus those of other cities, the nonchronological structure argues that *Law and Order* is a film about the police and not a film about the Kansas City Police."<sup>31</sup> Yet, *Law and Order* did take place in a particular place and time, and those circumstances help explain the behavior of both the police and the people they came into contact with in the course of their routine days in 1968.

*Kansas City in the 1960s*

Black students, protesting the Kansas City Board of Education's refusal to close schools on the day of Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral, marched to City Hall on April 9, 1968.

There police dispersed demonstrators with tear gas which triggered a riot that turned the black community into a combat zone.

– Sherry L. Schirmer & Richard D. McKinzie  
*At the River's Bend, 1982*<sup>32</sup>

In 1967, there were mixed signals about the state of race relations in Kansas City. As Rick Montgomery notes in *Kansas City: An American Story*, on the one hand there was a tendency, at least on the part of city leaders, to believe that things were going well. Mayor Ilus B. Davis told the city's new human-relations director that Kansas City had had "an unusually peaceful breakdown of racial segregation," since World War II. The city, the mayor said, "is western enough to be fairly flexible in its attitude toward people." Even *The Call*, Kansas City's black-owned and operated newspaper, "looked on the positive side, publishing a special supplement that promoted 'equal opportunity employers' in the metro area." Jobs were no longer limited to strictly menial positions, and by 1965 the percentage of black workers at the local General Motors plant had risen from .036 percent in 1945 to 8 percent. "'Today, in the 1960s,' *The Call* said, 'the doors are wide open to young Negroes who stay in school and learn a trade or skill.'"<sup>33</sup>



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Yet, "not all black Kansas Citians shared *The Call's* warm feelings toward Mayor Davis,"<sup>34</sup> as unemployment rates in Kansas City remained twice as high for black residents as for white ones. And a 1966 report by Kansas City's Equal Opportunity Commission noted that when black men did find jobs, on average they "still earned 20 percent less than white men."<sup>35</sup> In addition, it had only been three years since the passage of a 1964 ordinance that would allow anyone access to any public accommodations in the city. To encourage passage of the ordinance, the Kansas City Commission on Human Rights had written that it wanted to "forcefully argue" that

such rights had always existed for all citizens, but “practice, custom, and habit have combined to provide a situation in which the reaffirmation of this right by government action is necessary.”<sup>36</sup> And despite the ordinance’s passage, “remnants of Jim Crow continued to plague African American’s use of public facilities” in Kansas City, as some businesses refused service or closed down and reopened as private clubs.<sup>37</sup>

An even more significant problem for Kansas City was the entrenched history of segregated housing. Montgomery notes that for years leading up to World War II, blacks had been kept within certain neighborhoods – and out of others – by restrictive real estate covenants as well as social pressures. By the mid-1960s, black families were moving beyond “once-strictly defined black neighborhoods,” and as they were funneled into specific areas by real estate agents, white families were steered out of those same areas. “Faced with declining property values and a perception that minority neighborhoods had higher crime rates, panic selling set in as white family after white family moved rather than face the prospect of living as the only whites in an all-black neighborhood.” The figures from one neighborhood tell the dramatic story of Kansas City’s rapidly changing neighborhoods. In 1950, only two black persons lived along with 5,638 white persons in a census tract that had long been a white neighborhood. By 1960, the tract was 60 percent black and by 1970, it was 94 percent black.<sup>38</sup>

In an examination of the 1968 race riots, Eric Juhnke found much to indicate that a poor relationship between the police and the people in these changing neighborhoods was also a factor leading up to the riots. In 1966, there was one lone black member on the police board of commissioners, and blacks made up only 5.4 percent of the officers on the force by 1968. Without an official liaison between the black community and the city police to help bring them together, the two groups became more alienated. Although Police Chief Kelley did establish “storefront police centers” in black neighborhoods in February 1968, it did “little to improve the police department’s image among black Kansas Citians.” Despite this effort, recalled Alvin Brooks, who served as a police detective under Kelley during the early 1960s, Kelley was “not a very race conscious person, not to the point where he made any inroads in improving the lot of black police officers, and therefore many people on the police department were racist.” Kelley set a hard-line tone for the department in dealing with potential riots in the city, and that, combined with long-standing frustrations among the black community about

jobs, schools, housing, and access to public accommodations “created a recipe for violence in the days following the King assassination.”<sup>39</sup>

News coverage in *The Kansas City Star* and *The Call* for the week of the riots, not surprisingly, presented two differing viewpoints that reflected the differing perceptions within the white and black communities. *The Star's* headlines straddled a line between reporting on the violence and the precautions that were being taken as National Guard troops were called out – “Call 690 more into Riot Duty: Bringing total to 3000 on anti-riot duty” – with trying to maintain a sense that things were under control – “Uneasy Calm in City.” There were reassuring statements from the police that even though they were exhausted, their goal was to protect all citizens, in spite of dealing with sniper fire and unprovoked violence. The lieutenant colonel in charge of community affairs, “said the stress and strain was felt by everyone from patrolmen to commanders. ‘Work will go on, however, and plans of operation will not differ from last night. There will be no methods used that have not already been used, and the tactic is to maintain the peace and protect the lives of every citizen.’”<sup>40</sup>

The headlines in *The Call*, on the other hand, reflected the anger and disappointment of the black community in the government and police in particular. One headline read, “Says Police Incited Riot in Kansas City” in referring to the police use of tear gas at an afternoon gathering of black youths at the Holy Name Church basement, the purpose of which was to ease the growing tensions on April 9. The article, which begins by noting that its author “deprecates rioting in any form,” makes the point that “there is simply no excuse for frenetic and immature response of the police to the activities of these children. Imagine the police dispensing tear gas in the girls’ restroom of [mostly white] Southwest High School.”<sup>41</sup> While other headlines in *The Call*, such as “Answers Sought by Citizens,” were less inflammatory, they still reflected the sense of frustration and confusion that existed throughout the black community as they wondered why unarmed black men were shot and killed by police.

A few months after the riots, *The Kansas City Squire* interviewed several people within the community for “31<sup>st</sup> Street and Prospect Six Months Later: A Special Report on How Things Stand after April’s Riots.” Although the report noted there had been an initial sense that the community would pull together with the common goal of “healing the wounds,” a little more than six months later it found that “people there seem

confused on where they're headed." Although a few people answered that they were doing better, most painted a disappointing portrait of an area in decline, with many responses reflecting growing frustrations over safety, jobs, education, and finances. Older people no longer felt safe on the streets after dark, fearful of the "punks" who now preyed on the weak and elderly. As Leslie Earl Allen told *The Squire*, "The biggest problem is with the kids. They aren't coming up right somehow. The police pick up kids for doing something wrong, and then right away they let them go without punishing them at all. Everybody knows that the kids will turn right around and do the same thing." Although some youths found help in government-sponsored programs, many more "concentrate[d] on solacing their frustrations with marijuana and pep pills."<sup>42</sup>

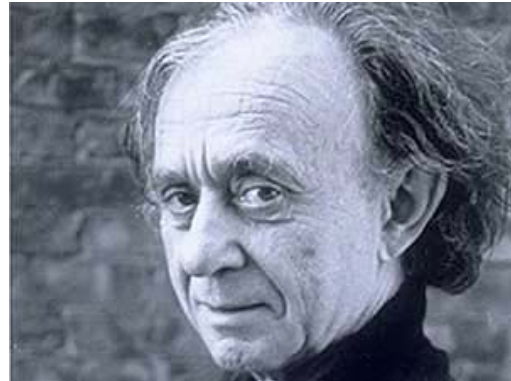
Three years later, the "Final Report: Mayor's Commission on Civil Disorder" noted that while its purpose was to direct action "not simply toward the avoidance of similar disorders, but toward continued resolution of problems that precipitate such disorders," that "to date, these new insights on the part of various groups have not coalesced into complementary efforts at problem solving. Instead we have increased alienation on the part of the poor, minority groups, and youths; increased violence displayed in fire arms purchases, correctional institution disturbances, and bombings." Drug use was increasing as well as abuse of legal narcotics.<sup>43</sup>

This was the bleak world that Wiseman entered when he came to Kansas City to film *Law and Order* and to hopefully capture the daily lives and perspectives that participants on both side of the law were faced with every day.

*Law and Order – what can we learn from direct cinema?*

Well, first of all, I am trying to make a movie.  
Within that context, and as one aspect of it,  
I am trying to present as complex an analysis of the situation as I can.  
How that analysis is used and  
the extent that it works for others is up to them.  
– Frederick Wiseman  
*DoubleTake Magazine Online, 2002*<sup>44</sup>

As *Law and Order* jumps directly from the opening sequence of mug shots into an interview in a police station, it starts to become apparent we are not watching a traditional documentary. Early direct cinema techniques are obvious – grainy, monochrome footage; unsteady camera movements. But what seems most unusual is that there is no narration or voice-overs; no interviews; long scenes take their time to unfold. It takes awhile to become accustomed to the slower pace and the realization that there will be no authoritarian voice to help explain what we’re seeing. Gradually, we realize we are observing real people as they actually deal with often troubling, occasionally humorous, always complex situations that many of us don’t ever participate in or view within our daily lives. Yet, for the people we are watching in *Law and Order*, it is a daily reality. It is this “true complexity of reality” that Wiseman strives to film.<sup>45</sup>



*Frederick Wiseman*

Although Wiseman himself also admits that he “started out with a certain prejudice against the police, derived from national publication of various incidents concerning violence and riots,” the film ends up as a balanced portrayal of the police as well as the criminals and victims.<sup>46</sup> As we watch these individuals simply being themselves in difficult situations, they all end up painting a more complex portrait than we might have originally suspected would come through. Wiseman says that he may have started the film sharing the attitude of many his contemporaries that cops were “pigs,” “but after you ride in a car for 30 seconds, you realize the piggery is not restricted to the police. Just as goodness and kindness is not restricted to the people the police come in contact with. And you realize that police behavior is just like other forms of human behavior. They often do good things, and occasionally do very cruel things.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite being filmed in a high crime area only months after rioting in which “six black people were dead, scores wounded, and \$915,000 worth of property had been destroyed,”<sup>48</sup> and where community relations had been severely damaged, the characters in *Law and Order* make very little direct mention of the rioting and its

consequences. As two white policemen discuss the possibility of getting caught in the middle of another possible clash being planned for that afternoon at one of the city's black high schools, one of them mentions that he "wishes they'd put [tear] gas into all the cars like they talked about doin'," continuing that he felt that officers would "use common sense" before throwing it. The other officer shakes his head and says he isn't so sure about everyone having common sense.

This leads to a brief discussion about what had happened to them during the rioting, with both indicating that it was a tense, confusing situation. The officer who wanted tear gas in all cars said he "threw his share," while the other officer had held off. Almost as an afterthought, the officer who wasn't so comfortable with using tear gas mentions that he was called in front of Internal Affairs for hitting a priest, but the other officer quickly says that it wasn't his fault. He'd been provoked. Their discussion about the riots seems as if it were something they still thought about, but not as major factor in their daily lives, and thus it doesn't play a major role in Wiseman's film. As M. Ali Issari notes, "the real impact of the film lies in the very natural, often drab, sometimes sordid daily routine of doing a necessary job."<sup>49</sup> And yet by allowing these routine daily moments to unfold, Wiseman manages to give us a picture of many of the issues that faced Kansas Citians who lived and worked in the city's midtown area in the late 1960s.

We observe family dysfunction – black and white – in a variety of forms as people in poor economic conditions argue among themselves, often with the police called in as referees. We watch a frightened, elderly black woman sit in police car as a white policeman searches for her stolen purse in the rain outside. A young white cop befriends some young black boys, who hang on his car window, comfortable and joking with him, and we get the sense that this kind of interaction would go a long way toward healing some of the wounds in the city. As a black youth complained about Chief Kelley's "storefront police centers" during the riots, "'the officers sit in those offices and wait for the people to come to them. They should have to go further than this. They should walk the neighborhoods and meet the people in the streets.'"<sup>50</sup>

We see the police at roll call as they point out the need to be respectful when speaking to people within the community – and we hear the frustration of a policeman who feels he is being singled out for not doing so. A belligerent drunk swears at a

patrolman, and in another scene, an elderly lady identifies the neighborhood drunk who is passed out on the sidewalk. A policeman checks on the status of someone who had threatened to kill him and his partner earlier as they arrested him. We hear cops talking about how little they get paid, and we see them coming to the aid of a poor, but feisty elderly black woman determined not to get out of a cab until the cab driver gives back the 90 cents she feels he overcharged her.

But we also see the detective continuing to choke the black prostitute, and uncomfortably wonder if, as Wiseman argues, the policeman is behaving in a way he believes is appropriate, even as the camera continues to film.<sup>51</sup> We watch a young criminal taunt the police because he knows he will be released back on the street because the police can't hold a juvenile, while a policeman, who has little patience with him after he put up a fight resisting arrest, tells him to straighten up so he can avoid being killed like his cousin. We see a flash or two in the young man that shows he might just get it, but then the bravado returns as he knows he will soon be released. And, we can think about the people living in his neighborhood who are frustrated by so many situations just like this and who blame the police for not keeping him in jail, without seeing that it might not be their decision.

And, so it goes. We watch these issues unfold through the people who live them – those who call the police or have the police called on them, and the police who respond. There is a sense that we are seeing a fairly honest portrait, both on the side of the police and those they come into contact with in the neighborhoods they patrol, and this forces us to see that the issue is not a clear cut one of right and wrong. We observe people in power and those with absolutely no power interacting in routine daily situations – and we see the strengths, weakness, determination, humor, frustration, inability to cope, anger, despair, embarrassment, and dignity of people on both sides of the issue. By refusing to give us a point of view, Wiseman makes us realize, however frustrating that might be, that *Law and Order* – as opposed what we see on today's good versus bad *Cops* – is often a murky, gray area with good people on both sides of the issue.



*Law and Order – nothing is black and white*

I don't know the answers.  
I'm interested in the complexity of our experience.  
– Frederick Wiseman  
*Cinéaste, 1994*<sup>52</sup>

The final scene in *Law and Order* reflects the helplessness felt by a young black man in the midst of a domestic dispute, as well as by the policemen who know they can only try to sort out, but never solve this problem in a few minutes. On a sunny day, standing by the curb in an older, yet fairly well-kept neighborhood, an angry, young black man struggles to make two policemen understand that his wife won't let him see his daughter – and that she takes her anger at him out on the little girl. “Cuz, when she gets mad at me, she hits my kid twice as hard.” The wife holds the little girl, but doesn't speak. We don't know why she is trying to keep the man away from his daughter. The woman's friend tries to speak, but he is cut off. The mother walks away. The police simply keep repeating to the young man, who is dressed nicely and speaks well, that he must get a lawyer to plead his case before a judge. “We can't do anything about it.” The young man almost cries in frustration. “I don't have the money for that.” The police agree it isn't fair, but repeat that he needs to get a lawyer. Shaking his head, angry yet powerless to take action, the young man says, “I ain't never been in trouble with the law.” The officer responds, “Don't start now.”

The last shot we see in *Law and Order* before the patrolmen drive away, awaiting yet another call, is the young man silently turning and running away down the sunny sidewalk. This is just the final glimpse at one of a myriad of scenes throughout the film that make us struggle to make sense of what these people's lives have to tell us. We're given no easy answers about good and bad, right and wrong, hope or despair for the future. We have to work to figure out what the film means to us, bringing our own experiences and beliefs to the complex everyday events we have just witnessed. And that's exactly what Frederick Wiseman wants us to do. So, although I was able in some ways to recognize the Kansas City I knew as a child, through Wiseman's portraits I found myself drawn more into the difficult daily struggles of the people who were, in fact, my unknown neighbors those many years ago.

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- <sup>1</sup> Frederick Wiseman 2002B, Interview with Nathan Gelgud, "True Crimes: DoubleTake Career Award Winner Frederick Wiseman brings *Domestic Violence* and *Law and Order* to this year's fest" (*Independent Online*, 4 Mar. 2002, 9 Oct. 2003) <<http://www.indyweek.com/durham/2002-04-03/movie.htm>>.
- <sup>2</sup> *Law and Order*, Videocassette, Dir. Frederick Wiseman, Zipporah Films, Inc., 1969, 81 min.
- <sup>3</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* Revised Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 248.
- <sup>4</sup> William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 110.
- <sup>5</sup> Barnouw, 225-27.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Drew, "A Neiman Year Spent Pondering Storytelling," *Neiman Reports*: Fall 2001, Vol. 55 Issue 3, p45, 15 Oct. 2003, Database: Academic Search Elite. <<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=5411863&db=afh>>.
- <sup>7</sup> M. Ali Issari, *Cinéma Vérité* (Michigan State University Press, 1971) 153.
- <sup>8</sup> Barnouw, 234-36.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Leacock, "Life on the other side of the moon," (*Film Culture*. Winter 96, Issue 79, p11, 6p) Database: Academic Search Elite. <<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=9611030579&db=afh>>.
- <sup>10</sup> Drew.
- <sup>11</sup> Jeanne Hall, "Don't You Ever Just Watch? American Cinema Verité and Don't Look Back," *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, Eds. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998) 225.
- <sup>12</sup> Stephen Mamber, *Cinema Verite In America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, MA & London: The MIT Press, 1974) 30.
- <sup>13</sup> Drew.
- <sup>14</sup> Leacock.
- <sup>15</sup> Hall, 224.
- <sup>16</sup> Barnouw, 241.
- <sup>17</sup> Frederick Wiseman 2003A, Interview with Kaleem Aftab and Alexandra Welz, "Fred Wiseman." (*Film West: Ireland's Film Quarterly Online*, Jul-Sep 2003) 31 Nov. 2003. <<http://www.iol.ie/~galfilm/filmwest/40wiseman.htm>>.
- <sup>18</sup> Rothman, 110.
- <sup>19</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1998B, Interview with Christina Rathbone, "It's All One Long Movie," (*DoubleTake Magazine Online*, Fall 1998) 9 Oct. 2003. <<http://www.doubletakemagazine.org/mag/html/backissues/14.wiseman/index.html>>.
- <sup>20</sup> Mamber, 216.
- <sup>21</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1998A, Interview with Chris Buck. "Do Look Back: The Story of Cinéma Vérité," (Popped.com Online, 1998) 5 Dec. 2003. <<http://www.popped.com/articles98/cinemaverite/veritewiseman.html>>.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1998B.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Frederick Wiseman 2002A, Interview with Nick Poppy, "Frederick Wiseman: The grandfather of cinema verite..." (Salon.com Online, 30 Jan. 2002) 5 Dec. 2003. <<http://www.salon.com/people/conv/2002/01/30/wiseman/print.html>>.
- <sup>26</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1998A.
- <sup>27</sup> Frederick Wiseman 2003A.
- <sup>28</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1998B.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Frederick Wiseman 2002A
- <sup>31</sup> Mamber, 221.
- <sup>32</sup> Sherry Lamb Schirmer and Richard D. McKinzie, *At the River's Bend: An Illustrated History of Kansas City*, (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1982) 218.
- <sup>33</sup> Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kaspar, *Kansas City: An American Story*, Ed. Monroe Dodd (Kansas City: Kansas City Star Books, 1999) 292.
- <sup>34</sup> Eric Juhnke, "A City Awakened: The Kansas City Race Riot of 1968," *Gateway Heritage*. Winter 1999-2000. Vol. 20 Issue 3. (Missouri Historical Society) 32.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 34.

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- <sup>36</sup> "Analysis of Proposed Kansas City Public Accommodations Ordinance 29153," Kansas City Commission on Human Rights, Mar. 1964, Kansas City Missouri Public Library: Special Collections. Vertical File: Desegregation.
- <sup>37</sup> Juhnke, 35.
- <sup>38</sup> Montgomery, 300.
- <sup>39</sup> Juhnke, 34-36.
- <sup>40</sup> "Uneasy Calm in City," *The Kansas City Star*, 11 Apr. 1968. Kansas City Missouri Public Library: Special Collections. Vertical File: Riots and Disturbances.
- <sup>41</sup> "Says Police Incited Riot in Kansas City," Editorial, *The Call*, 19-25 Apr. 1968. Kansas City Missouri Public Library: Special Collections. Vertical File: Riots and Disturbances.
- <sup>42</sup> Susan White, "31<sup>st</sup> Street and Prospect Six Months Later: A Special Report on How Things Stand after April's Riots," *Kansas City Town Squire*, 8 Nov. 1968, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (22-24) Kansas City Missouri Public Library: Special Collections. Vertical File: Riots and Disturbances.
- <sup>43</sup> "Three Year Report," (Kansas City) Mayor's Commission on Civil Disobedience, Aug. 1971. Kansas City Missouri Public Library: Special Collections. Vertical File: Riots and Disturbances.
- <sup>44</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1998B
- <sup>45</sup> Frederick Wiseman 2003B, Interview with Stephanie Curtis, "Wiseman's Follies." (Minnesota Public Radio. 6 Nov. 2003) 20 Nov. 20003. <[http://news.mpr.org/features/2003/11/07\\_kerre\\_wiseman/](http://news.mpr.org/features/2003/11/07_kerre_wiseman/)>.
- <sup>46</sup> Issari, 127.
- <sup>47</sup> Frederick Wiseman 2003B.
- <sup>48</sup> "Call 690 More into Riot Duty," *The Kansas City Star*, 11 Apr. 1968. Kansas City Missouri Public Library: Special Collections. Vertical File: Riots and Disturbances.
- <sup>49</sup> Issari, 127.
- <sup>50</sup> Juhnke, 35.
- <sup>51</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1998B.
- <sup>52</sup> Frederick Wiseman 1994.

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University of Missouri – Kansas City  
9 December 2003

A&S 513: Methods of Inquiry  
Decade of Dissent: the 1960s  
Dr. Mary Ann Wynkoop