

THE POETRY OF REALITY: FREDERICK WISEMAN AND THE THEME OF TIME

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Employing a textual analysis within an auteur theory framework, this thesis examines Frederick Wiseman's films *At Berkeley* (2013), *National Gallery* (2014), and *Ex Libris* (2017) and the different ways in which they reflect on the theme of time. The National Gallery, University of California at Berkeley, and the New York Public Library all share a fundamental common purpose: the preservation and circulation of "truth" through time. Whether it be artistic, scientific, or historical truth, these institutions act as cultural and historical safe-keepers for future generations. Wiseman explores these themes related to time and truth by juxtaposing oppositional binary motifs such as time/timelessness, progress/repetition, and reality/fiction. These are also Wiseman's most self-reflexive films, acting as a reflection on his past filmmaking career as well as a meditation on the value these films might have for future generations. Finally, Wiseman's reflection on the nature of time through these films are connected to the ideas of French philosopher Henri Bergson.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Frederick Wiseman Background.....	3
Chapter Breakdown .....	4
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	6
Auteur Theory.....	6
Literature on Frederick Wiseman .....	9
CHAPTER 3. <i>AT BERKELEY</i> .....	15
CHAPTER 4. <i>NATIONAL GALLERY</i> .....	36
CHAPTER 5. <i>EX LIBRIS</i> .....	57
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION.....	79
REFERENCE LIST .....	82

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Frederick Wiseman has been making documentaries for over fifty years, yet, even his oldest films still resonant with us today. Though he has maintained a similar filmmaking style throughout his entire career, his films have covered a multitude of subjects and themes. However, in recent years, several of Wiseman's films seem to share a thematic connection to the subject of *time*. Employing a textual analysis within an auteur theory framework, this thesis examines Frederick Wiseman's films *At Berkeley* (2013), *National Gallery* (2014), and *Ex Libris* (2017) and the different ways in which they reflect on the theme of time. The National Gallery, University of California at Berkeley, and the New York Public Library all share a fundamental common purpose: the preservation and circulation of "truth" through time. Whether it be artistic, scientific, or historical truth, these institutions act as cultural and historical safe-keepers for future generations. Wiseman explores these themes related to time and truth by juxtaposing oppositional binary motifs such as time/timelessness, progress/repetition, and reality/fiction. These are also Wiseman's most self-reflexive films, acting as a reflection on his past filmmaking career as well as a meditation on the value these films might have for future generations.

The three films grapple with questions that relate to time in several different ways; be it the institution's maintenance of their "mythic" legacy and reputation as "renowned cultural hubs" (Kyburz), to their present financial difficulties and uncertain future. They also reflect on time more philosophically and examine issues surrounding the very nature of history, progress, and reality. *At Berkeley* looks at a university's mythic reputation and questions the very idea of progress. *National Gallery* examines how works of art both embody opposing elements of timelessness and decay, and how these classical works of art remain meaningful to people today.

Lastly, *Ex Libris* interrogates historical narratives and the past, illustrating the elusive and imaginative quality of the past with its endless interpretations.

Finally, Wiseman's reflection on the nature of time through these films will be connected to the ideas of French philosopher Henri Bergson. Born in 1859, Bergson's philosophical career was a reaction against rationalism and Kantian philosophy (Lawlor and Leonard). His three most important books, *Time and Free Will* (1889), *Matter and Memory* (1896), and *Creative Evolution* (1907), all deal with the nature of time, reality, and knowledge. Wiseman's work can be linked to Bergson's critique of scientific rationalism and modernity's spatialization of time. For Bergson, life and time are continuous and bespeak a "qualitative multiplicity" instead of a "quantitative" homogeneity (Lawlor and Leonard). Bergson makes a distinction between "pure time," or "real time," and "clock time." John Ward writes that clock time is a quantitative time "conceived of as a series of discrete, homogenous points which are one-directional. This is time on a spatial model: the time of intellect" (9). Pure time, on the other hand, is "heterogeneous time which is multi-directional, and in which past, present, and future time are fused and continuous. This is time of intuition; and paradigmatically the chronology of our mental lives which has been so thoroughly explored in literature from Joyce to the practitioners of *le nouveau roman*" (Ward 9). This pure time is a qualitative time that presents "the essence of life which is *duration*." Duration is defined as "that state in which our present and our past are one: in which our lives are a continuous stream of becoming and never something made or finished" (Ward 10).

In some ways, Wiseman's film form speaks to this adherence to continuity, or "pure time." John Ellis says in *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* that, "The work of Frederick Wiseman allows events on the screen to unfold as far as possible in the real time it took to record. He extends this concern to refusing to allow extracts to be taken from his films for any

further creative purpose, even for the making of a film about his work” (58). Though Wiseman obviously edits these sequences down, they give the illusion of happening in real time. His mosaic-like structure also communicates a sense of “wholeness” in that it seems to cover all aspects of an institution. However, Bergson’s ideas are not only reflected in Wiseman’s film form but in the content of his films as well. The central idea connecting all three films is that *the past is present*. Indeed, according to Bergson, there is no separation between the past and the present.

### Frederick Wiseman Background

Originally trained as lawyer, Frederick Wiseman made his nonfiction film debut with *Titicut Follies*. Released in 1967, the film looks at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Bridgewater and its “treatment” of the mentally disordered prisoners. From there, Wiseman went onto make nearly one film a year, most of which focus on a U.S. public institution and range from high schools (*High School*, 1968) to welfare offices (*Welfare*, 1975) to military boot camps (*Basic Training*, 1971). He has also explored broader subjects such as neighborhoods (*In Jackson Heights*, 2015), parks (*Central Park*, 1990), and whole towns (*Monrovia, Indiana*, 2018). In recent years, Wiseman’s focus has shifted to looking at places associated with the arts and humanities such as the three films examined here as well as *La Danse* (2009) and *Crazy Horse* (2011). His films are almost always funded by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), as well as various other sources, and screen on PBS after the usual festival run.

Wiseman’s filmmaking style is often compared to the direct cinema approach that began in the early sixties with the invention of lightweight cameras and synchronous sound. Characteristic of both direct cinema and Wiseman’s filmmaking style is a “fly-on-the-wall” positioning of the filmmaker as well as a lack of voiceover narration and interviews. Wiseman



has kept a style similar to the direct cinema approach all throughout his career. However, the philosophy of direct cinema to capture reality as objectively as possible with the belief that this is possible through the “fly-on-the-wall” approach is not shared by Wiseman who rejects the label “direct cinema” and instead has called his films “reality fictions” (Benson and Anderson, *Reality Fictions* 36).

### Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature surrounding auteur theory and Frederick Wiseman. Chapter 3 on *At Berkeley* illustrates how the past is held onto and memorialized through “time capsules.” This critique of the spatialization of time (Bergson’s “clock time”) is also a study on the dichotomy between progress and repetition. This conflict is not totally resolved in the film for time is both presented as a constant progression to a desired goal and an endless, cyclical repetition. However, one thing that is clear is the importance the past has on the present for Berkeley is haunted by its progressive past, for better or for worse, and this affects the way people act in the present.

Chapter 4 on *National Gallery* continues with this emphasis on the past by looking at “old” works of art and complicating their “oldness” by showing art restorers and art docents constantly refreshing and relabeling paintings so that they resonant with people in the present. But this grounding of the paintings in time through “quantitative” language potentially hinders their “qualitative” timelessness.

Chapter 5 on *Ex Libris* largely dispels the common belief that libraries are a thing of the past by showing their vital importance in contemporary society and their goal of rectifying inequality through education and access to information. The film is also an investigation into history and how historical narratives shape the present. Similar to the paintings in *National*

*Gallery*, history is presented as a “living thing” that is constantly being reevaluated and altered by the present. Chapter 6 consists of the conclusion.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Auteur Theory

The beginnings of auteur theory can be traced back to Alexandre Astruc's 1948 essay "The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Style." Astruc writes about the concept of the "camera-pen," a metaphor that encourages filmmakers to literally "write" with the camera by utilizing its distinct visual language instead of relying on a script to dictate the look of the film (Astruc 352). French critics and filmmakers were influenced by Astruc's ideas and many of them would go on to be major figures in the creation of the French New Wave, such as Francois Truffaut.

Francois Truffaut's 1954 essay "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" expanded upon Astruc's ideas of filmic authorship. Truffaut's essay criticized a popular and critically acclaimed strand of French cinema that remade French literature classics into "predictably well-furnished, well-spoken, and stylistically formulaic films" (Stam 84). He saw this as a screenwriters' cinema that only used film to tell a story and not as a means of creatively using *mise-en-scene* to express a filmmaker's ideas (Stam 84). His reverence for American directors, such as Nicholas Ray and Orson Welles, contributed to many Hollywood directors being reevaluated and given the status of auteur by French film critics (Stam 84).

French film criticism in the 1950s and 60s showed an explosion of interest in auteurism, mostly due to the French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma's* embrace of the term (Stam 85). André Bazin's article "La Politique des auteurs," published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1957, defined auteurism as "choosing in the artistic creation the personal factor as a criterion for reference, and then postulating its permanence and even its progress from one work to the next"

(Stam 85). Auteur critics traced consistencies and motifs in a director's filmography in an attempt to understand that filmmaker's unique vision and style. Critics differentiated between auteurs and non-auteurs by the terms "mise-en-scene" and "metteurs-en-scene." Mise-en-scene directors "used film as a part of self-expression," whereas Metteurs-en-scene referred to filmmakers whose dedication was to the script and "dominant conventions" (Stam 85). But Bazin warned against a "cult of personality" that would uncritically value a director's work solely on the basis of their brand as a "master" filmmaker (Stam 88). This will become a concern for later theorists writing about auteur theory.

Andrew Sarris was the first major advocate for auteurism in the United States. In his landmark essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," Sarris gives us "three criteria for recognizing an auteur: (1) technical competence; (2) distinguishable personality; and (3) interior meaning arising from tension between personality and material" (Stam 89). Many American critics challenged Sarris' definition of an auteur including Pauline Kael who, in her 1963 article "Circles and Squares," attacked his criteria for being too vague (Stam 89). The critics also lambasted auteur theory for not acknowledging the collaborative nature of filmmaking (Stam 90). In 1977, Sarris wrote a follow up essay in response to the criticism revolving around auteur theory titled "The Auteur Theory Revisited." In his essay, Sarris attempts to reveal the original intentions of auteur theory by looking back on its historical context. He explains how auteurism was a reaction against an elitist dismissal of Hollywood cinema at that time, and that this theory helped American critics "reclaim the American cinema" (Sarris, "Revisited" 357). Sarris acknowledges one of auteur theories' biggest criticisms, the cult of the director, by admitting that he wished he had put more "emphasis on the tantalizing mystery of style than on the romantic agony of the artists" (Sarris, "Revisited" 357). But he believes that his original ideas were greatly

misinterpreted, that auteurism was never about the personality of the director but about the filmmaker's unique use of mise-en-scene (Sarris, "Revisited" 358). Sarris ends the essay by stating that he sees auteurism as less a theory than as a "tendency" (Sarris, "Revisited" 361). Film theorists later attempted to ground auteurism into a stricter theory by connecting it with structuralism.

In 1969, Peter Wollen attempted to combine auteur theory with structuralism in his book *Signs and the Meaning in the Cinema*. This kind of methodology, later termed auteur-structuralism, involved examining a filmmaker's filmography for repeated dichotomous relationships and how those binaries reflect the filmmaker's ideas (Stam 123). His chapter on auteur theory discusses the films of Howard Hawks and John Ford and the types of themes found throughout these directors' filmography. For example, John Ford's films often deal with nature versus culture dichotomies (Wollen 371). Though these themes are inherent in the very nature of the Western genre, it is *how* Ford uses them that makes him an auteur. Auteur-structuralism recognizes, like Barthes, that the director is working with an anterior language, but it is how he arranges and manipulates that language that make him an auteur. Auteur-structuralism is useful in looking at Wiseman for he is working with an anterior *reality* and shaping it to communicate certain ideas. Robert Stam says how the auteur-structuralists "looked for hidden structuring oppositions which subtended the thematic leitmotifs and recurrent stylistic figures typical of certain directors as the key to their deeper meaning" (Stam 123). For this textual analysis, an auteur-structuralist perspective is used to discover the underlying binaries and leitmotifs featured in *At Berkeley*, *National Gallery*, and *Ex Libris* and how they reveal Wiseman's attitude toward the concept of time.

## Literature on Frederick Wiseman

One of the earliest writings on Frederick Wiseman's filmmaking style is Bill Nichols' 1978 paper "Fred Wiseman's Documentaries: Theory and Structure." Nichols was the first to describe Wiseman's films as "mosaics" as opposed to traditional linear narratives ("Fred Wiseman's Documentaries" 17). Nichols also explains how Wiseman manipulates the temporality of a scene to make it seem like it is all happening in real time when in fact it has been carefully reconstructed. He says,

Wiseman's formal organization relies heavily upon the ability to mask potentially huge gaps in the real time of the pro-filmic event within the sequences. A good example is the scene with the psychiatrist in *Hospital*... the scene, uncut, lasted an hour and a half. On screen it lasts approximately ten minutes and yet appears to cover virtually the entire encounter (Nichols, "Fred Wiseman's Documentaries" 22).

As mentioned earlier, this illusion of real time is in some ways related to Bergson's idea of "pure time" for it seems to capture the "wholeness" of the situation.

One writer who has taken a different approach to looking at Wiseman's films is Dan Armstrong. Armstrong uses a Marxist lens and views Wiseman's work as a critique on American dominant ideology. In his 1983 paper titled "Wiseman's *Model* and the Documentary Project: Towards a Radical Film Practice," Armstrong writes about the mid-career film *Model* (1980) and how the film "self-reflexively examines the codes and conventions of cinematic and photographic representation" (2). Though this thesis will not be using a strictly Marxist approach, Armstrong's writings on Wiseman's use of self-reflexivity will be useful in understanding how Wiseman also uses self-reflexivity in these most recent films.

Armstrong has also written an insightful paper on *Welfare* (1975) titled "Wiseman's Cinema of the Absurd: *Welfare*, or "Waiting for the Dole." He writes, "Wiseman's absurdist "reality fictions" (his term for his films) dialectically construct reality...while situating

spectators to participate actively and lucidly in the production of political meaning” (Armstrong, “Wiseman’s Cinema” 2). This absurdity, Armstrong writes quoting Eugene Ionesco, is a “political absurdity” which falls in “the arena of “the historical absurd” marked by a profound “gap between ideology and reality” and is not to be confused with the “fundamental absurd” of an ahistorical human condition” (Armstrong, “Wiseman’s Cinema” 3). Armstrong says, “Wiseman’s films are dark comedies not of the human condition but of the social conditions of our time and place” (“Wiseman’s Cinema” 3). What makes Wiseman’s earliest films still feel meaningful and relevant to people today is their blend of the universal with the particular. Documentary film as an art form is unique in that it captures historical reality as it is happening and can be repeatedly viewed again. Wiseman both fully situates his films in their specific time period and place while at the same time making the films feel relevant and important in our contemporary situation by their “real time” immediacy and universal themes.

The most extensive examination of Wiseman’s work is Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson’s book *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*, first published in 1989. The authors analyze Wiseman’s films using a rhetorical approach and examine how the films affect the audience through rhetoric instead of attempting to argue for the films’ ultimate meaning. They write, “We shall, in this inquiry into Wiseman’s films, attempt to retain an attitude that is interrogative rather than declarative or imperative” (Benson and Anderson, *Reality Fictions* 3). With this approach, the author’s cover nine films by Wiseman: *Titicut Follies*, *High School*, *Basic Training*, *Essene* (1972), *Juvenile Court* (1973), *Primate* (1974), *Welfare*, *Canal Zone* (1977), and *The Store* (1983). Benson and Anderson write how “Wiseman has always dismissed claims of cinema verite or film truth by documentarians as presumptuous at best and described his films as “reality fictions” or “reality dreams,” thus calling attention to their paradoxical

nature” (*Reality Fictions* 36). This opposition to objectivity is a common characteristic throughout all his films. Benson and Anderson write,

In the typical Wiseman institution, objectivity is not about objects, or about reality; it is, rather, about managing humans by a strategy of naming them as if they were objects. For Wiseman, an objectivity that consists in fixing humans into labels is at the heart of all his films, displayed as a strategy by which humans evade the pain and the responsibility of actually looking at one another (*Reality Fictions* 268).

In the three films examined here, Wiseman is largely reacting against rationalization and people’s tendency to label transcendental aspects of life through language.

However, language has always been a central aspect to his films as well. Writing in their analysis of Wiseman’s film *Model* (1980), Benson and Anderson say,

No other filmmaker has more to say to us about the American language than Frederick Wiseman. In film after film he has shown us the structure and uses of the American idiom, inviting us to listen, at length, to conversational passages that most other filmmakers would have left on the cutting-room floor. Although Wiseman’s films are visually complex and informative, he has never bowed to the oversimplified notion that films are essentially visual: speech has always been central to the world of Wiseman’s films (“Rhetorical Structure” 31).

A large part of this analysis involves examining the ways Wiseman juxtaposes dialogue with images to communicate meaning as well as the placement of these dialogue-centered scenes within the context of film as a whole. Indeed, *At Berkeley*, *National Gallery*, and *Ex Libris* mostly consist of various lectures, speeches, and protests thereby forcing the viewer to focus more on the content and placement of the various dialogue than each film’s visual style. This is not to say that each film’s visuals will be ignored in this thesis, for they are also vitally important to understanding the films, but that they often play in tandem with the dialogue, implicitly reaffirming or undermining that which is being said. Of course, being a nonfiction film, Wiseman did not tell those who he was filming what to say, but his inclusion and juxtaposition of these speeches create a dialogue that is intentionally crafted by Wiseman to communicate a



particular meaning. For example, though *At Berkeley* is a four-hour long film, Wiseman only used one-sixtieth of the two-hundred and fifty hours of raw footage, spending fourteen months to edit it all down (“A program about "At Berkeley," a new documentary by Frederick Wiseman,” 00:12:50-00:13:00). When asked what he would have put in the fifth hour, Wiseman replied “Nothing” (“A program about "At Berkeley," a new documentary by Frederick Wiseman,” 00:17:19-00:17:26). For Wiseman, who has almost unlimited creative control over the length and direction of his films, every shot is there for a reason.

Richard A. Schwartz writing on *Central Park* (1990) in his 1995 paper “Frederick Wiseman’s Modernist Vision: *Central Park*” discusses how the film is greatly about language and that this is apparent from the very beginning of the film with a scene that involves “a city worker reviving a man who has overdosed on some drug” by attempting to get him to talk. Schwartz says “Here, the man’s ability to produce words literally becomes a sign of life. The seriousness of his condition is determined by his ability to use language. Wiseman amplifies on this point shortly after, showing a drama coach encouraging his students to think about properties of words” (226). Schwartz says how Wiseman establishes “relationships between the word and the visual image that go beyond what any of the speakers had in mind,” and how Wiseman often “uses this technique to illustrate the words in action” (226). He cites the example of a scene in which a “clergyman discusses how God gave man dominion over the earth” and Wiseman cuts to a scene of people gardening showing them “literally exercising their dominion over the earth” (Schwartz 226). Realizing how Wiseman plays with the interaction between image and language is especially important for understanding his more “talky” later films including *At Berkeley*, *National Gallery* and *Ex Libris*.

Schwartz also proposes that Wiseman's cinema is a modernist one. Referencing Bill Nichols' idea of Wiseman's films as "mosaics," Schwartz remarks how Wiseman's films resemble the nonlinear narratives of modernist poets and novelists such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. Talking about T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," Schwartz writes, "Instead, borrowing from Wagner, Eliot unifies his poem through leitmotifs—images, themes, and relationships that reappear and interweave throughout his work. Wiseman also uses leitmotifs to shape his view of his subjects and reflect his concerns and attitudes about them" (224). For the films examined in this thesis, Wiseman's modernism works on two levels: form and content. His nonlinear narratives and editing bespeak a modernist form while the content of these films also bring up modernist questions such as the relativity of time and the abstractness of reality.

Lastly, one author who has written extensively about Wiseman's work is Barry Keith Grant. Grant looks at over twenty films by Wiseman, from his earliest period to the middle of his career, in his book *Voyages of Discovery* (1992). Grant notes Wiseman's "ambiguous" style, saying, "Structural complexities, shifts in tone, and the absence of the traditional Griersonian voice-over commentary in Wiseman's film heighten their ambiguity" (Grant 32). The author groups the films together by their thematic similarities. For example, one chapter is titled "You and Me" and includes the films *Essene* and the four films that comprise the *Deaf and Blind* series. This chapter examines the transcendental and spiritual aspects of these films and how they create a sense of empathy within the viewer. Another chapter titled "American Madness" includes early films such as *Titicut Follies*, *High School*, and *Welfare* and groups them together through the films' critical examination of Kafka-esque bureaucratic institutions and the hypocrisy of those who work in them. Although each Wiseman film is unique, Grant shows how

some share thematic commonalities, and this thesis proposes that Wiseman's most recent films do as well through their emphasis on the theme of time.

The analysis of Frederick Wiseman and his films for this thesis is most aligned with Barry Keith Grant's approach which sees Wiseman as an auteur and focuses on finding the thematic motifs within his work through textual analysis. Though auteur theory is somewhat problematic in regard to documentary film form since documentarists are working with reality and chance, Barry Keith Grant gives a convincing argument for using it as a framework for examining Wiseman's work. He says,

His work is distinctively original, revealing a consistent style and attitude as immediately recognizable as that of any pantheon director. In conventional auteurist terms, his work clearly reveals the "stamp of the director's personality." Wiseman's films tend to emphasize the human face as dramatically and insistently as those of Ingmar Bergman, while his periodic insertion of hallway and street shots is a stylistic device as consistent, and as important, as Yasujiro Ozu's cutaways. Auteurists like to quote Jean Renoir's remark that a director always makes the same film; Wiseman, similarly, says his documentaries about institutions "are always the same film, by and large," and that they "are all one film that is 50 hours long" (Grant 4-5).

Indeed, Wiseman's films have a distinct style and personality of their own that distinguishes them from being simply labeled as products of direct cinema. Wiseman is predominately a post-production auteur for his style and personality mostly emanate from the way he edits his films. The sheer amount of footage he captures requires him to make significant cuts and to only show what he deems to be important to the final film. Though there will always be a certain amount of "surplus" when presenting the content of reality that goes beyond the intent of the filmmaker, the arrangement of that content is decidedly shaped by Wiseman and this is what makes him an auteur.

## CHAPTER 3

### *AT BERKELEY*

*At Berkeley*, shot in 2010 and released in 2013, examines Berkeley campus life from the perspective of the students, teachers and administrators. A large part of the film revolves around the financial struggles of the “world’s greatest” *public* university and just how “public” it remains. But the film is more than just about the university’s present financial woes. Wiseman explores Berkeley’s “mythic” past and reputation, along with its uncertain future, and how these distant temporalities effect Berkeley today. As with all of Wiseman films, dichotomous themes reoccur and build upon one another, commenting on and rebuffing each other as the film progresses by visual and aural juxtaposition. *At Berkeley* can be broken up into three thematic leitmotifs labeled Reputation, Progress-Repetition, and Conformity-Rebellion. Wiseman suggests that Berkeley is haunted by its progressive past, a past that has been turned into an objectified ‘time capsule’ similar to how present-day Berkeley is considered more private and commercialized. At the same time, Berkeley is threatened by a dehumanizing type of progress that values standardization and efficiency over all else leading to the film’s critique of rationalization. In the end, the “true” Berkeley sits somewhere between fantasy and rationality, similar to Wiseman’s own filmic “reality fictions.”

The first major scene of *At Berkeley* introduces many of the major themes that will be present throughout the film. It begins with a professor giving an orientation of the history of the university to a small group of people in a rather nondescript and colorless room. Framed in medium shot, the speaker says, “What is it about Berkeley that stands out that is different from some other universities?” The speaker goes on to retell a popular story of how the university was founded by “two gamblers and a saloon keeper” who one day decided to create a university. “In

reality, this is a huge myth” she says in that it did not actually happen that way but that “it is a myth that is true in a sense that there is something about Berkeley that’s different from Harvard.”

She says,

This is not a colonial university founded by a bunch of puritans who thought it would really be a good idea to have an institution that was a model for higher learning. The truth of Berkeley is that indeed it was modeled on Harvard and Yale and it did indeed, at least in its early days, have a number of ministers or ex-ministers sort of hanging around but...what it did have was a sense of imagination, a sense of the future, a diversity that was always present and, in a sense, somehow, I think, no matter how you think about it of an ideal and that ideal really was something that people should be able to study even if they weren’t members of an elite...and the whole idea that somehow this would be for the future of the state of California and the future of a very diverse population.

First, this scene comments on the legacy and reputation of Berkeley and invites the viewer to question the dominant narrative given about the university and its past. Second, it introduces the theme of conformity versus rebellion in that she comments on how Berkeley is different from Harvard and Yale in that it is a public university instead of a private one and that it was (mythically) rebellious in this way. Third, the theme of progress is alluded to through her emphasis on Berkeley being a school “for the future.” These themes will come up again and again in the film and will take on greater and more nuanced meaning as the film progresses.

As is shown in the other two films as well, money and funding are the major threats to the institution’s legacy and reputation. The next scene following the orientation is of a budget meeting taking place in a nice-looking white building where the viewer is first introduced to key figures of the Berkeley administration that will show up again and again in the film, including then Chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau. Birgeneau talks first, going over the steady decline of state funding Berkeley has been experiencing. Shown in medium close-up, he says:

A really important part of our challenge is: as less and less of our funds come the state government how do we, first of all, maintain our preeminence but, secondly, how do we guarantee our public character? Because we must not compromise on that. As I’ve said

often, the country has many great private universities, Stanford, Harvard, etc., and it doesn't need another one, it needs great public universities.

The maintenance of a reputation is incredibly important to not just Berkeley but also the National Gallery and the New York Public Library. Each of these institutions attempt to maintain a “public character” that communicates inclusion and openness while at the same time becoming more privatized and “elitist” behind the public eye. Commenting on this tension, Javier Panzar writes “This is clear from the get-go when Birgeneau explains that the state of California contributed just 16 percent of UC Berkeley’s budget. This is a university increasingly public in name only, striving to maintain what administrators call its ‘public character’” (Panzar).

Another major leitmotif in the film is this dialectic between progress and repetition. This dichotomy is often expressed through generational divides between the Berkeley faculty and the current Berkeley students. An interesting juxtaposition of different generations of Berkeley students reflecting on the history of Berkeley happens early on in the film. The first segment involves a classroom discussion on U.S. policy and socio-economic class issues. One young student mentions how in the past, “They asked students in the sixties why they went to school and they said ‘I want to learn more about life’ and people want to go to school now cause they want to make a lot of money.” A few segments after the classroom discussion is of an administrative meeting with a professor talking about his experience of going to Berkeley in the sixties as a graduate student and how back then Berkeley was seen as a “large bureaucratic factory...in which students are being churned out as units, work units, for society.” He ends by saying how the university has “come a long way since then” even though the current students still have to deal with minor “bureaucratic” inconveniences.

This interesting discrepancy between two different generations of Berkeley students and their perception of their school brings up the idea of repetition. The young student complains

about the capitalistic purpose of school now and how, back in the sixties, it was about finding oneself. But this comment conflicts with a professor's own direct experience of that time who says how the university was a bureaucratic nightmare with the sole purpose of pumping out good workers. Do all young people believe their university to be a bureaucratic factory and that it is simply a generational custom? Later in the same administrative meeting, another member discusses the differences between an organizational structure based on relationships and one based on process and performance. He talks about the difficulty of shifting a focus away from relationships and to "Predictable, repeatable, and provable, processes." After a rather long speech on why process and repeatability are better for organizations than reputation, another professor speaks up saying "What you're talking about is corporatizing...the structure and that...gets an enormous amount of resistance, never mind the rest of what you said." What is ironic here is the fact that the previous professor and student are complaining about the very thing the "Predictable, repeatable, and provable, processes" speaker is trying to push, i.e. rationalization, thereby bringing together the different generations of students against a timely (or timeless?) issue. Here, Wiseman muddles the distinction between progress and repetition.

Of all the three films, *At Berkeley* speaks the most directly about the concept of time. Indeed, one of the multiple lectures Wiseman shoots is about the very nature of time. The lecture begins with the professor saying, "The question is how do you understand time?" He then goes on to talk about how "everything you understand, you understand through your brain and your body. All concepts are physical." But since time is an ephemeral thing that one cannot perceive, one must rely on metaphors, repetition and space to measure and conceive of time. He says "You can measure [time] in terms of days, you know, the sun goes across the sky. You can measure it in terms of the water clock, you have regular drips...What you're doing in time is comparing

some events with some regular, iterated cycles.” But he also says we have other metaphorical ways of understanding time that see it as a linear and spatial dimension. He uses examples such as “time will come,” “the time is since gone,” “the flow of time,” and “the passage of time.” He says “You also have the metaphor for time as a linear dimension that you walk along, something on the ground. So, you can do things on time in a certain amount of time and so you get ambiguities of these two metaphors. You get either Christmas is coming up on us or we’re coming up on Christmas, you get both of them.” Even our very conception of time is founded on two opposing ideas of it as a repetition or linear progression.

Not long after the time lecture, Wiseman shows what appears to be an English class sitting in a small classroom discussing Thoreau’s *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* around a long table. The professor reads aloud a passage from *Walden* that says, “Over this great expanse there is no disturbance, but it is thus as once gently smoothed away and assuaged as when a vase of water is jarred rumbling circles seek the shore and all is smooth again” and asks the students (who all seem to be female except for one student) what this might symbolize. One female student responds with:

Ponds are, like, there’s something that can’t be disturbed by humans or all the faults of humans or the frailties or impurities of humans...ponds will be there throughout all time and Walden pond has probably been there forever and has seen the past of civilizations and it will be there after were gone and it’s just like...I guess, holier than humans can ever be because it isn’t effected by anything that drags us down.

After remarking on the student’s comment, the professor begins talking about Emerson, nature, and Thoreau’s horror at seeing himself as an “eating thing” that must kill in order to live.

Referring to the original quote, he says “So if we go back to this disturbance of serenity...right above that, again, the disturbance has to do with animals eating each other in the pond.” The professor says how the poem is really about “killing” and “murder,” quoting Thoreau’s line of



how "The thrills of joy and thrills of pain are indistinguishable." He explains that though it might be hard to see this carnage because it is happening at such a small level, our perspective of nature as "pure" or "peaceful" is actually a "congenial little fantasy."

In essence, this scene is about Berkeley itself and its timeless image and legacy. From the outside, Berkeley presents itself as a kind of utopia. Ben Kenigberg's review for the *A.V. Club* noticed this saying "As in his 2010 film, *Boxing Gym*, Wiseman depicts the overall environment as a kind of utopia, a theme emphasized by the student activities he includes—a performance of *Our Town*, a discussion of *Walden*" (Kenigsberg). Indeed, others recognized this "timeless" quality about Berkeley with Ben Sachs writing for *The Chicago Reader* saying "From classes to sporting events to protests, events are presented from a perspective that might be deemed eternal. Wiseman's images of the Berkeley campus—with its classical architecture and green, sprawling lawns—evoke Renaissance paintings of ancient Athens, emphasizing the timeless values that universities aspire to uphold" (Sachs). But this "eternal" facade is challenged once Wiseman enters the classrooms and the administrative meetings discussing the university's financial woes. Kenigberg later says "If Berkeley is a utopia, it's an unsustainable one, forever trying to reconcile the irreconcilable" (Kenigsberg). Berkeley, like Thoreau, is itself an "eating thing" that maintains its appearance of "preeminence" through the sacrifice of its students and faculty in the form of high tuition and furloughs.

Continuing with the idea of Berkeley as a utopia preserved through time, many critics writing about the film refer to it (and also Wiseman's filmography in general) as a 'time capsule.' *The Daily Californian* says, "It seems as if Wiseman intends this film to be a time capsule of sorts for life at UC Berkeley at this particular moment" (Panzar). Leslie Felperin used this analogy as well when writing about the film for *Variety*: "At Berkeley positively brims with

moments that seem to resonate with recurrent themes in Wiseman's work, particularly when someone discusses creating time capsules to record how people really lived at a certain time. What else are Wiseman's films but time capsules of a sort?" (Felperin). To a certain extent, this is true; Wiseman's films are like time capsules for they capture a specific time and place with relative objectivity. However, Wiseman's films go beyond being simple time capsules because of their quality to remain meaningful to contemporary audiences regardless of how long ago they were filmed. Darren Hughes writes about this idea referencing Wiseman's early film *High School* (1968). Hughes says:

Rather than a top-down statement of administrative priorities, *High School* is a kind of tangential conversation between Philadelphia teenagers and the adults who were charged with educating and enculturating them. As a result *High School* remains compelling today. The film is a time capsule of a tumultuous moment in American history, to be sure, but it's too human and too deeply felt to ever become a dusty museum piece.

The idea that all of Wiseman's films remain just as relevant to us today as they did back then will be explored more in the next chapter, but it is worth noting the comparison between his films and time capsules.

Time capsules also operate on a thematic and metaphoric level in this film. When critics discuss *At Berkeley* as a time capsule, they usually refer to a specific scene from the film that involves time capsules. Wiseman films a stage actor giving a monologue from the play "Our Town" that is about creating a time capsule in their town "for people to dig up thousand years from now." The monologue describes the different types of items the townspeople would put in the time capsule, such as a copy of the New York Times and a Bible. The actor then goes on to say how all we really know about ancient civilizations is "the names of kings" and "wheat contracts" and not how ordinary people actually lived. The actor says he is going to put "a copy of this play" into the time capsule "so the people a thousand years from now will know a few

simple facts about us, more than the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh flight. See what I mean? So, people a thousand years from now, this is the way we were. This is the way we were in our growing up, and in our marrying, and in our living, and in our dying.”

The next scene directly following this monologue shows a couple of older “hippyish” men doing yo-yo tricks outside with swing music playing in the background. This juxtaposition comes off as humorous because of the contrast in tone. The film progresses from a contemplative wistfulness to the anticlimactic and prosaic silliness of men playing with yo-yos. It is as if Wiseman is making a self-reflexive joke saying ‘You want to see how we were? Here you go.’ Not only is this juxtaposition funny but it also connects a couple of ideas that have been developing in the film. The yo-yo sequence is reminiscent of an earlier farmer’s market/street fair scene for they both hint at Berkeley’s counterculture past. In the earlier scene, swing-style music is similarly heard in the background as Wiseman cuts from close-up to close-up of items being sold at different booths such as incense, tie-dye shirts, and beanies. The last shot is from the other side of the street looking in on the street fair and shows how the street fair has been closed off from normal traffic with barricades.

In many ways, the street fair is a time capsule of Berkeley’s past. Wiseman focuses on the items whose iconography brings to mind sixties hippie counterculture, with the music in the background reaffirming this emphasis on the past. The sixties were an unusual time in the United States with many utopian ideas being seriously talked about and even practiced. Though the actual reality of the sixties was much different, people still view that time in idealistic ways. Stephen Greenblatt in writing about *At Berkeley* for *The New York Review of Books* reflects on his own time at Berkeley saying “I arrived in Berkeley in the fall of 1969 and stayed until 1997. It was love at first sight. There was a magical lightness about it all that amazed me after the neo-

Gothic heaviness of Yale, a sense of youth and freshness and infinite possibility” (Greenblatt).

There is a certain “innocence” to the sixties, an innocence constructed after the fact in light of what would come after. Dan Armstrong, commenting on Wiseman’s shifting political perspective, says,

To what extent and in what ways major historical events “outside” Wiseman’s films shaped these changes of political perspective “inside” them is difficult to gauge with any precision. But some relation to changing prospects for rapid and positive social change is clear: as the anti-war movement and black rebellion of the sixties and the emergence of the women’s movement in the early seventies to Watergate, economic and imperial decline, and the emergence of Reaganism and the New Right, Wiseman (like many on the American left) lost a great deal of his innocence. And that “loss of innocence” can be traced in his oeuvre (“Wiseman’s *Model*” 4-5).

In *At Berkeley*, however, this “innocent” past has now become objectified and commodified.

Wiseman shows this in the street fair scene both through the selling of sixties iconographic merchandize and its literal separateness from modern society using barricades to close off the outside world.

A similar idea and scene have been found in Wiseman’s work by Bill Nichols. Writing on Wiseman’s film *Model* (1980), Bill Nichols discusses the use of different temporalities featured in the film. Concerning one scene of Wiseman filming a pantyhose commercial shoot, Nichols writes “[Wiseman’s] long takes, the inclusion of “empty” moments and repetitive actions (multiple takes of the same shot by the camera crew he observes, extended shots of onlookers who simply look on, for example) generate a sense of exhaustive observation (we must have seen everything that could be pertinent since we have seen so much that isn’t)” (*Representing Reality*, 95). However, when the viewer eventually sees the finalized commercial which Wiseman shows in its entirety, one is surprised by the drastic compression of time found within it and its repackaging of that time into a commodity. Nichols says “The effect although it comes first and is presented in the manner of a readily available, contemporary life-style, is retroactively placed

in the future. It is an effect-in-waiting. It can belong to your future if you trigger it now by buying the specified commodity” (*Representing Reality*, 98). Nichols describes these different temporalities saying, “A teleology that seems so tenuous or indeterminate in Wiseman’s representation of the historical world becomes absolutely clear: the future you want (the future we want you to want) is yours and here is exactly how to obtain it” (*Representing Reality*, 98). The commercial points to a utopian future for the spectator by implicitly suggesting that by purchasing this pantyhose, one will find happiness in life. But it more importantly shows how time is compressed and reconstructed into a commodification. In some ways, the street fair vendors selling the items from a bygone era are an inverse of the pantyhose example. Instead of offering one the future, the street vendors offer one the objectified past.

This objectification of time as a time capsule (or as time caught in an endless repetition) starts to be applied to the students themselves and also plays into the rebellion-conformity motif repeatedly featured in the film. Soon after the street fair sequence, Wiseman shows a scene in which a professor recites the E. E. Cummings poem “Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town” to a medium-sized audience in a nice-looking room covered wall-to-wall with books. The poem abstractly traces the life of a human being, from birth until death, with repeated stanzas such as “spring summer autumn winter” and “autumn winter spring summer” that reflect the cyclical quality of nature in comparison with the human life cycle. The next segment, Wiseman shows a lecture on the effects that the body’s microenvironment has on cancerous cells. Preceded by a Bird’s-eye view shot of students walking across campus (bringing to mind small ants), the professor recounts her own experience with attempting to publish a new idea and the difficulty she faced with disrupting the status quo. She tells them to “think outside the box” saying “Don’t listen to your professors, don’t listen to your textbooks, they are dead. They don’t know what

they're doing. They're very conventional. They do incremental. Anybody who wants to say something important gets shut down. And they should, because they should go and prove it, which is something I have done.” The first hints of actual protesting are shown soon after this lecture with Wiseman briefly showing a small march, foreshadowing the much larger march that will take up most of the last hour of the film.

Wiseman seems to be suggesting that the university promotes rebellious “outside the box” thinking by arguing that this is the only way things can truly progress. Indeed, this has been communicated in several different scenes and is suggested as a product of Berkeley’s past social activism. However, a dichotomous juxtaposition is formed between this scene and one involving a lecture on insects. After showing a campus tour for perspective students between these two scenes, Wiseman cuts to a professor discussing the movement of insects away from their home and the costs and benefits of doing so. The scene metaphorically suggests the process of freshman leaving home and going to college. Though the university promotes individuality and rebellion, the very nature of going to college sounds eerily like the migration pattern of insects.

The poem by E. E. Cummings is reinforced with more meaning through the juxtapositions of these sequences. Students are encouraged to stand out from the crowd and be a rebel, but the reality is that there is a new crop of students “migrating” from home to Berkeley every new “autumn winter spring summer” semester. Richard Brody, writing in his review for the film for *The New Yorker*, says,

In “At Berkeley,” Wiseman, looking admiringly at the historic seat of student radicalism, comes up against the impossibility of a radical university—because real radicalism isn’t something that responsible administrators unwilling to renounce the proper administration of the university itself, and maybe even to put its very existence at risk, can foster. The paradox of the movie is that of the good student—the better the university does its job, the less likely its students are to defy the institution and the wider set of values and policies that it embodies and, ultimately, reinforces.

The distinction between these two opposing acts, conformity and rebellion, that the university promotes become more ambiguous and muddled when the film explores mass protest.

The major protest mentioned earlier (referred to as the October 7 rally) begins with a speech by one of the protesters saying to the large mass of protestors standing outside, “In a movement, you are no longer you, now you are us.” Continuing with the emphasis on collective action, the speaker cites examples from the 1960s and 1970s of successful protest movements. The next speaker states that “UC should be free” how “it was once, in past generations.” He says “How much did Mario Savio pay to attend the University of California, when he stood on these steps and spoke to people not so different from yourselves? It was free!” The speeches end and the march continues with Wiseman showing long shots of the protest moving past students lounging on the grass, eventually making their way to inside the university library where they collectively decide to make camp.

Wiseman then cuts to outside the library, showing students sitting on the grass reading quietly while the sounds emanating from the protest become fainter and fainter. This ironic contrast between the loud protestors inside the library with the quiet readers outside on the lawn brings to mind the discussion on *Walden* and of a placidity hiding chaos. But this contrast also reflects Wiseman’s actual experience of being at Berkeley. This can be gleaned from an interview with Darren Hughes with Hughes commenting how, “That campus, probably more than any other in America, has a tradition of inter-generational conflict and direct political action. The ghost of Mario Savio haunts your film in complicated ways” (Hughes). Wiseman responds saying “See, but that’s interesting, because one of the things I discovered while I was there was that most students, I mean 85-90% of the students, don’t participate in those things.

But because of what was going on in the '60s, there's this *myth* about Berkeley. My *guess* is that even in the '60s most of the students weren't participating. And certainly not now" (Hughes).

The next several minutes involve the faculty and administrators attempting to craft a response to the protester's "list of demands" and deal with the overall situation. After the response has been written, Wiseman then goes back to showing the protesters in the library. A student with a communist sickle and hammer painted on his face reads aloud the university's broad and noncommittal response to a booing crowd. Not sure what to do next, the microphone is passed around for others to address the crowd with their "plan." The first student discusses how this "community of resistance" should remain in the library "so that we have a space that's our own to organize from and make bigger and better plans from here on out." The next student to get the microphone states "I propose that the first thing we discuss be what our goal is, and what we're hoping to accomplish with what we're here today. And then once we settle on a goal, then we can talk about the kind of tactics that we want to employ to reach it." After the second student suggests some possible goals, such as getting "more money from the legislature," a third student receives the microphone and says things that rather contradict the previous student. He says "I just want to say I don't think we should just be focused on the dynamics of logistics. This is a movement. This is a struggle. Capitalism's not doing too well. We have to start politically discussing what is the trajectory of this movement. Are we simply asking for more money, 'cause I'm not. We need to start discussing what is the ultimate goals of this movement." After commenting on how capitalism is "reshaping education," a fourth and final student is shown in the same shot grabbing the microphone and saying, "I think that it's really important that we develop some sort of institutional memory for what we're doing and for why we're doing it."



The last shot of this scene is of a photographer taking pictures, a self-reflexive nod to Wiseman himself who is in the process of creating said “institutional memory.”

As can be gathered from the different protestor’s speeches, no one really knows quite what they are doing. Some are saying how they need to collectively settle on a goal whereas others want to focus more broadly and use the protest as a symbolic act against capitalism. Overall, the march is presented as mostly unsuccessful. However, the scenes leading up to the march have as much an influence on the audience’s lack of confidence in the protestor’s credibility as the protest scene itself does.

Their inability to settle on a specific goal reminds the audience of an earlier scene with former United States Secretary of Labor Robert Reich lecturing on effective leadership in figuring out your team’s “goal” and the importance of your team receiving honest feedback so as not to “lose sight of its goal or mission or purpose.” Wiseman also shows a football game just prior the protest, naturally drawing comparisons between the two activities. In an administrative meeting directly before that football game, George Breslaur discusses how to be a successful advocate in a university is a combination of “passion with discernment.” Though passion is an important driving force, discernment is also required, saying how “The coin of the realm in academia is rational argumentation and marshaling of evidence” and not “cheerleading.” Serena Golden writing for *Inside Higher Ed* states “Successful advocacy, Breslauer says, requires the use of evidence and logic, not ‘mere cheerleading.’ While Reich and Breslauer are not speaking about student protests, the scenes stand in direct contrast to those of the October 7 rally, inviting the viewer to reflect on why the protesters’ efforts fail” (Golden). Indeed, this is even done with the football game itself for by placing it directly before the protest (and soon after the “mere cheerleading” comment) creating an implicit connection with Wiseman seeming to compare the

protest to the same sort of energetic and oppositional collective behavior as the football spectators.

In an administrative meeting about the October 7 rally, Chancellor Birgneau, after commenting on how well everyone handled the “unusual” protest, says:

It was classic oppositional politics. I mean, there was no underlying philosophy. In fact, I have a friend of mine who’s a historian who was here in the ‘60s commented to me that, as a serious thing, as a historian who’s interested in these issues, that somehow or other, and I’m gonna sound really old here, protests I’ve participated in my life, serious protests, were about the Vietnam War... You know, we looked at serious issues, and we took serious risks, actually, right? And they were very focused; it was one issue at a time, whether it was the war in Vietnam, Civil Rights, you know, weapon systems or what have you. Now, protests have just become sort of fun out in Sprawl Plaza, right, with a list of demands, quote unquote demands, that some are even contradictory, actually, which are all over the place.

Birgneau quickly dismisses the student protest as “contradictory” and frivolous. He looks back on his own past, arguing how protesting back then really was about important issues. Based on the demonstrator’s speeches in the previous scene and the scenes leading up to it, the viewer is encouraged to side with Birgneau on this point. Having had the opportunity to witness these Berkeley faculty and administrative meetings, the viewer has come to realize just how complex the financial situation truly is, thereby making the protestor’s demands seem rather unrealistic and unfair. After this post-protest administration meeting, it seems clear where Wiseman’s sympathy lies as well. In the interview with Darren Hughes for *Senses of Cinema*, Wiseman says about the protestors how, “It was amazing to me how *badly* wrong they got [the facts] at Berkeley, because to make a principled demand for free tuition at this point . . . it’s a *fantasy*. It wasn’t a question of the university withholding. Free tuition just wasn’t in the cards” (Hughes). If Wiseman’s opinion of the protestor’s was not clear in the film, it is in this interview.

Wiseman seems to be critical of the idea of change and progress. A central tenant to this thesis is that these three films show Wiseman reflecting on his own legacy and reputation.

Though *At Berkeley* is the least self-reflexive of the three, one still sees self-reflexive moments in this film such as the *Walden* scene. When thinking about Wiseman's past filmography, it is important to note that his films have often been extremely critical of the institutions he is filming. Though he denies it, films such as *Titicut Follies* and *Primate* obviously sought to create change through exposing the ugly things happening in these institutions. However, his own perception of the lack of change these films have achieved (especially *Titicut Follies* which landed him in a long and ugly court battle) has likely helped facilitate this bitterness toward the idea of change and progress. Documentary film, as opposed to fiction film, places more emphasis on the possibility of social change through filmmaking. Many documentaries are made to shed light on a specific issue. But Wiseman has said in the past that he does not think his films can effect change, saying "I come away with doubts about the capacity to motivate people to what is usually called large-scale social change" (Atkins 56). In the same interview, Alan Westin asks Wiseman "Did you start off in 1967 with such pessimism?" Wiseman replies "No, it's developed as I've made more films. I no longer have the view that I had in the beginning that there might be some direct relationship between what I was able to show in these films and the achievement of social change. Nor have I observed any particularly successful strategies of change, as they're called" (Atkins 56).

Even though Wiseman seems to point a critical eye at the idea of "large-scale social change," he does include scenes that make this stance more ambiguous. Toward the beginning of the film, Wiseman films a guest lecturer give a talk about the importance of ordinary people in creating social change. The lecturer says how "Textbooks focus on those who are the celebrities, those who are the great men and women" but that it is really "the pressure from ordinary folks that is the force for change." However, in the previous scene, Wiseman films a discussion

between a man in a wheelchair, two graduate students and their professor over a robotic legs prototype. Essentially, the viewer is witnessing a small group of very specialized individuals attempting to create a new technology that allows for wheelchair users to walk again without the use of crutches. How this reaffirms the statements made by the lecturer in the next scene is that these are “ordinary people” who are doing something that could have a fundamental change on people’s lives.

But this is only true if the viewer sees these graduate students as “ordinary.” The technical prowess and knowledge to create such a machine is not an ordinary kind of intelligence which is demonstrated in this scene by the technical language used by the professor and students. Wiseman highlights this again toward the very end of the film by shooting an astrophysics class. The instructor, Saul Perlmutter who received the Nobel Prize in 2011, talks about dark energy and the expansion of the universe. The lecture is completely incomprehensible to most people who watch it and that is part of Wiseman’s point for he is showing a group of incredibly gifted individuals at the forefront of scientific change. Though they may not be household names, they are far from “ordinary” either.

But even when it does come to large collective action by ordinary people the film is not completely dismissive. When the viewer thinks Wiseman is more aligned with the Berkeley administration’s disapproval of the October 7th student protest, he shoots a moderate student group discussing the protest with an administrator. The students complain about how the protest disrupted their studying and caused general annoyance on Berkeley campus. One student then asks the administrator about a similar recent protest that the protestor’s claim was a success and whether it truly was. The administrator responds saying, contrary to the student’s expectations, that it is quite possible that protest caused such an issue to “sit over the edge.” The student was

expecting the administrator, as was the audience, to say that the protest was not effective and did not achieve its goals. But, in this case, it seems it did.

The real failure of the October 7th protest is not just that it was unfocused, but that the students had one foot in the past and one foot in the present. Berkeley is not (and maybe never was) the utopia that has been time “capsuled” through street fairs. The protestors are influenced by the activist spirit of this past and attempt to emulate it in the present, yet, they themselves are also greatly influenced by the present as well. If the sixties are idealized in such a way as to make them seem unstuck from time, then the present is its opposite.

Mary Ann Doane in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* discusses how modern conceptions of time were influenced by turn of the century industrialization, evolving around the same time as the birth of cinema. She says, “Although the rupture here is not technologically determined, new technologies of representation, such as photography, photography, and the cinema, are crucial to modernity’s reconceptualization of time and its representability” (Doane 4). Never before had mankind been able to “capture” time so successfully. Citing pocket watches, railway travel, and employee punch-cards, Doane states “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, time became increasingly reified, standardized, stabilized, and rationalized” (5). It is at this point that time becomes monetized. She says:

This rationalized time is a time in complicity with notions of the inevitability of a technologically induced historical progress. It is Benjamin’s “homogenous, empty time.” It is also time’s abstraction—its transformation into discrete units, its consolidation as a value, its crucial link to processes of pure differentiation and measurability. No longer a medium in which the human subject is situated (it is no longer *lived* or experienced in quite the same way), time is externalized and must be consulted (the phenomenon of the pocket watch) (Doane 7).

Even though the 1960s were much later into the modern era, people often view them as a reaction against a similar wave of standardization and rationalization found in the 1950s. Of all

the talk from the protestors of camping out in the library as a “community of resistance” and not moving until their demands are met, they eventually end up dispersing at the end of the five o’clock workday. As Leslie Felperin says “In the end, the kids all go home peacefully when the library closes and no one so much as breaks a nail. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, the times, they have a-changed” (Felperin). At the same time, the protestors do not follow the rules of the present either, which, as Reich stated, is about measuring one’s progress toward a goal. This measuring and rationalizing of time are the main hallmarks of the modern era. When Wiseman is being critical, it is not of progressives but of a particular kind of progress i.e. rationalization.

Wiseman’s films are never solely just about the particular institution he is filming but are also a reflection of, and commentary on, the society in which they are situated in. As will be a common thread throughout these films, Wiseman is concerned about the future state of democracy. Berkeley is an institution that aims to uphold its democratic ideals by being a public university that is known for encouraging racial and economic diversity on their campus, and, indeed, Wiseman’s film largely reflects this ideal as a near reality. In an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, Wiseman says how “Berkeley is really best expressed by its admissions policy. A recent survey suggested that no race is in the majority; whites are not in the majority in the student body and as you can see just from the pictures in the film it’s a true melting pot; it’s the future face of America” (Clark). Progress in this way is, of course, venerated by Wiseman.

But this ideal progressivism is threatened by a different kind of progress which is that of America’s greater and greater emphasis on corporate privatization and rationalization at the cost of public funding and educational diversity. In an interview for *The Daily Beast*, Nico Hines asks Wiseman if he believes it is overdramatic to say that all public education is in danger. Wiseman replies:

I don't think it's overdramatic. Not only are the budgets being cut but they are being asked to apply a cost benefit analysis so if there are only six people taking Renaissance history, why teach Renaissance history? That kind of thinking is extremely dangerous because it puts the humanities under siege. There are political implications because if each generation is not educated about the values of the Enlightenment, or what the Founders had in mind in the Federalist Papers, the ideological roots at the foundation of this country, then we become a nation of technocrats (Hines).

This fear is explicitly communicated exactly halfway through the film with a talk at the Free Speech Movement cafe on Mario Savio and American history. The speaker says how,

All too often, Americans seem determined to forget their past. They view themselves as exempt from history. That's most unfortunate. When history is scarcely taught in public schools, when American history ceases to be required in many colleges, when history textbooks are censored to provide students with an antiseptic view of the government of the past, we pay a very high price—historical illiteracy.

He goes on to quote some statistics that depressingly reflect the “historical illiteracy” of this new generation, commenting that “Before we can comprehend the present, or contemplate the future, we need to know something of the past.”

In many ways, Wiseman's whole project with his most recent films is to show how the past is a part of the present. Berkeley is an institution that is haunted by its history, for better or for worse. Instead of interrogating the past, people lazily objectify it by only looking at its surface, or, they completely ignore history focusing instead on creating a more optimized and lucrative future. But what is the goal of this progress? Though Wiseman is not completely disparaging of change and progress, his attitude towards it is still ambivalent. If Wiseman's cynical perception of the young protestors is like that of Chancellor Birgeneau, it is worth noting that they come from the same generation. This again brings up the dichotomy between progress and repetition. Is Wiseman just a part of the generational cycle that views all young endeavors as vain and misguided? Is Wiseman just a bitter old man? Wiseman leaves that up to the viewer, but

his bitterness is grounded in a genuine concern for the future state of Democracy and the humanities, a concern that is expanded upon in *National Gallery* and *Ex Libris*.



## CHAPTER 4

### *NATIONAL GALLERY*

What makes a work of art stand the test of time? Wiseman explores this question along with others in *National Gallery*. For this analysis, three main motifs labeled Time-Timelessness, Language-Image, and Self-portrait are found to be present in the film. I argue that the film acts as a kind of “self-portrait” of Wiseman himself and is his most self-reflexive work to date. It is also a reflection on time and art, specifically how artworks both transcend and fall victim to the passage of time. The theme of language-image deals with how people in the film negotiate the meaning of a painting through rhetoric and narratives. However, this mediation between the spectator and the painting by language is socially and historically shaped, thereby potentially hindering the transcendental quality of the artwork itself. Like *At Berkeley*, *National Gallery* offers a similar critique on rationalization and its tendency to objectify time.

As with *At Berkeley*, Wiseman introduces many of the major themes featured throughout the film in the first lengthy dialogue scene. The audience is also introduced to their first museum docent, figures that will be prevalent in the film. Wiseman usually shows these docent talks by cutting between a long shot of the art docent to close-ups of the paintings to various long shots and close-ups of the museum-goers listening to the docent. Talking about a particular artwork from the Middle Ages to a group of museum-goers, the art docent says, “We know but I think it’s worthwhile trying to remember that the Middle Ages were religious, profoundly religious in a way we cannot really conceive nowadays.” She tells them how this painting would have been originally placed in a church and how that environment would have affected the viewing experience. She describes how there would be “no big windows” just narrow slits for the light to come through, with the painting being mostly lit by flickering candlelight. She explains how this

might give the illusion of movement to an illiterate peasant looking at the painted figures, as if “they were real and could hear your prayer.” She says,

I don't mean to make this sound as crude perhaps as I am but if you will for a moment just imagine that I've brought from my pocket a picture of a sweet, grey, fluffy kitten and I've pinned it here and I've said, 'Here are the darts. Aim for the eyes of the grey, fluffy kitten.' It's just a bit of paper but in some way, you feel that you might, in a peculiar way you can't quite explain, be hurting some fluffy kitten somehow, somewhere. I'm not suggesting to you that in the year 1377 or any time onwards, people feel 'Oh! They're moving, they're real, they can hear me.' But with the same kind of grey, fluffy kitten analogy, I am suggesting to you that there is a very strong attachment between a representation and the thing itself. We're now in the National Gallery having a look quite quietly, thinking about aesthetics and gold and colors made from ground pigment, but what we must remember is how this was originally intended to be seen.

The themes this scene introduces are the emphasis on religion and spirituality (timelessness), the past and the present, the use of rhetoric and language to communicate and relate old ideas to contemporary audiences (“fluffy kitten”), and even the reflexivity of the film by describing the painting as a “moving” picture. These themes will come up again and again as the film progresses.

Also like *At Berkeley*, the next scene directly after this is of an administrative meeting about the museum's "public character," or lack thereof. The first administrator talks about how their “public voice is quite weakly represented” in their meetings and decision makings. Though the National Gallery is about “conservation, research, preservation,” she says it is “also a visitor attraction and I know that word's horrid but we are also that. If our mission is to make our old masters more central to modern cultural life, I think there needs to be more of that dialogue around the audience as the center as well.” After she cites some examples of how they could do better at marketing and giving the public what they want, the other administrator (Nicholas Penny, then director of the National Gallery) says, “You know, I do have some prejudices to overcome. What I don't want is to end up with the gallery producing things to the lowest

common denominator of public taste, but I don't even want the average...I mean, I'd rather have spectacular success followed by a sort of really interesting failure than have, kind of, average.”

This conflict between giving the public what they want and upholding the integrity and prestige of the National Gallery is very similar to Berkeley's own issue of identifying as both a public and elite institution. This scene also begins to show the outside pressure of capitalism to dictate the shape of the museum through the emphasis on effective marketing. A common thread between these three institutions (Berkeley, National Gallery, and The New York Public Library) is that the people working in them have a conscious awareness of their legacy, with much of the decision-making revolving around maintaining the institution's reputation and image. For this film, it is expressed through how the National Gallery negotiates its historical prestige and integrity with contemporary issues such as budgeting and marketing in a more capitalized society. This is made explicit a little later the film in another administrative scene where the administrators are discussing whether to actively partake in the London marathon as a means of raising their profile. Some in the meeting are supportive of the idea whereas others want to maintain the timeless image of prestige of the museum. Though this chapter will not be focusing on the administrative meetings as much as the previous chapter, it is important to understand that both institutions struggle with financial and “public character” issues in similar ways.

Though the very act of writing about *National Gallery* is somewhat ironic due to the film's overall critique of language, Wiseman's characteristic ambiguity leaves room for outliers that reflect the complexity surrounding the issue. This is best expressed in an early scene from the film in which language is presented as an essential element to understanding the art. As can be gleaned from the first administrative meeting, the National Gallery is more than just a place to hang pictures, but is also a place for “conservation, research, preservation,” and learning. This

emphasis on learning is beautifully conveyed when Wiseman films a group of visually impaired individuals being guided through physically textured paintings by an instructor. As they run their hands and fingers across the all-white textured pictures, an instructor describes to them the content of the abstract paintings. It is an incredibly beautiful scene that demonstrates the way verbal communication *can* act as a bridge to help others “see” the art. However, it also works as an analogy for the ways the museum docents and art historians guide people’s viewing experience and understanding of these paintings, telling the museum-goers how these paintings are intended to be “seen” or “read.”

Continuing with this theme, the next scene features a docent speaking to a group of children about a painting depicting the “story” of Moses and all these other “amazing stories in National Gallery paintings for you to see.” A little later, two separate guided tours show the docents describing the paintings as narratives as well, with the first one saying how a painting of Samson and Delilah is akin to a “spy story” while the other docent speaking to a group of teenagers says how “You have to view paintings, or narrative paintings, as early films. And as forms of entertainment.” It is important to note the distinction the last docent makes about these being “narrative paintings” for, indeed, the National Gallery houses mostly pre-modern art with an emphasis on history paintings. These paintings often depict scenes from classic stories and myths in their imagery, and so describing them as narratives is not entirely wrong. However, the docent raises the question of what point in time of the story does the artist depict: “Which moment? What point? What’s the climax?” He ends by saying “Paintings are very, very ambiguous. You can look at them in one way, you can interpret them in another. And as your experiences change. And I know, because I come in here every day, paintings change. And how you look at them changes as well.” This sense of ambiguity inherent to the paintings themselves

is a key element to their aura of timelessness and will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

Though the critics gave *National Gallery* mostly positive reviews, some were annoyed by the lengthier “talky” portions such as these. Jonathan Jones, a British art critic, writing his review of the film for *The Guardian* titled his piece, “*National Gallery: A Crushing Dull Documentary that Lacks an Eye for Art.*” Jones says about the film: “God it’s boring. I love the National Gallery and I was squirming in my seat. Why doesn’t Wiseman let the paintings speak for themselves? Again and again, he films audiences listening to curators or guides give lectures about the National Gallery’s works of art” (Jones). He goes on to say that the film is “crushingly elitist” for it “sees the National Gallery from the management’s perspective,” and how “it looks to me as if Wiseman has let the museum’s press officers tell him what to film. Since the National Gallery employs the least pushy press team around, this guy must be a remarkable pushover” (Jones). This last statement is quite ironic given that Wiseman is known for being one of the few directors to have nearly complete control over his projects, both in terms of production and distribution. Wiseman is also famous for his stubbornness, such as his adherence to the same filmmaking style and refusal to release films rather than change one thing about them (which he did in 1997 with his unreleased film about Madison Square Garden titled *The Garden*), directly contradicting Jones’ assessment of him as a “pushover.”

However, Jones is not entirely alone in his criticism of Wiseman for not giving more screen time to the paintings. Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* says, “The movie spends far too little time looking at paintings” and replaces it with “ear-drowning, mind-deadening, vision-killing flood of official and didactic discourse about art—discourse isn’t merely non-art but the active antithesis of art and an obstacle to seeing” (Brody, “National Gallery”). Similarly, Laura

Cumming writes, “What fills the ears is exactly what blinds the eyes, in fact, and this is the never-ending talk that goes on in the front of the paintings, day after day, as the museum tries to make old masters “relevant to the modern viewer,” in the communications department’s management deadspeak” (Cumming). Most other critics were much less critical of the art docents than Jones and Brody, some even commenting on how interesting and educational they found these talks. However, regardless of the value one places on the content of these discussions about art, the real reason Wiseman spends so much time filming them is because it revolves around one of the central themes of the film; that is, the dichotomous relationship between language and images. Even Brody admits that, “Yet the movie turns out, with a sublime intellectual irony, to be *about* that discourse” (Brody, “National Gallery”), i.e. that discourse being between explaining art or letting the art speak for itself.

Wiseman does not include his own explanation for what the artworks mean, and this explicitly contradicts some of the critics’ (including Jones’) statements that he does not let the art speak for itself. In an interview Arnaud Héé, Wiseman explains his approach to filming the paintings:

How to film paintings? It’s an exceedingly complex issue, especially bearing in mind the large number of artworks. The guiding principle was to break the frame—the framing and hanging of the paintings—in order to step into the picture. To do so, I used an approach similar to making a film, alternating between wide shots and close-ups, and then working on the depth of field in the paintings. On film, the painting comes to life if you don’t see the wall, frame, or card to one side with the artist’s name, title, date, and technical details. Then, the painting becomes an object. My aim was to suggest that the painting is alive and tells a story all of its own (Héé).

Clearly, Wiseman wants the artwork to speak for itself since he tries to “frame” the paintings in such a way that the audience experiences them anew. Barry Keith Grant describes Wiseman’s modernist filmmaking style, a description could equally be applied to how Wiseman frames the paintings. Quoting Viktor Sklovskij, he says, “in order to render an object an artistic fact it must

be extracted from among the facts of life...it must be torn out of its usual associations” (Grant 21). By disassociating the paintings from the “wall, frame, or card” Wiseman is tearing away “its usual associations” i.e. its labels.

In many ways, *National Gallery* is a modernist depiction of realist and historical art. Modernism is more aware of how individual subjectivities shape reality and this is best expressed whenever Wiseman presents a painting. As with “breaking the frame,” Wiseman also often juxtaposes the painting with reaction shot of a single museum-goer looking at (presumably) the same painting (except in the case of the ending which has its own significance and will be discussed later in the chapter). Schwartz writes,

Wiseman, like twentieth-century modernist writers and painters, has discarded the structuring conventions of realism because they distort his vision of reality. Because he knows that every human experience of a situation or an event is not only subjective, it is also interpretative, Wiseman replaces realism’s authoritative narrative structures, which pretend to present absolute truth, with modernist-like “creative interpretation[s] of reality” (224).

When Wiseman shows the reactions shots of the art-goers, he is asking the audience to imagine how this person might be interpreting the painting in front of them. These juxtaposing reaction shots also work in another way for they often reflect some similarity between the painted portrait and the art-goer. Often, it will be an old man looking at a portrait of another old man or a young woman looking at a portrait of a young woman, etc., and this creates a certain connection across time.

However, Wiseman starts to muddle this timeless connection between painting and living human being. In one lecture, a museum docent talks to a group of teenagers about the brilliance of art and how it “encompasses everything,” citing literature, science, philosophy and life itself as examples. He then talks about the timelessness of these paintings and how we can still take inspiration from them even when they from the “17th century, 16th century, 19th century.” This

seems to be aligned with Wiseman's own placement of value on these works of art as meaningful and timeless to us today. However, the docent then introduces a caveat, challenging this perception. The docent says,

Now, I am going to be sort of blunt about this, because it's important that you know this. The collection is founded on slavery. John Julius Angerstein, who had the nucleus of the collection, worked for Lloyd's who were insurers against slave votes. And it's very important that people absolutely understand that a lot of the institutions - whether you're talking Tate, whether you're talking British Museum - a lot of the big institutions are founded from money. And it's something, obviously, that should never be forgotten, and should always be understood. And also Britain's very, very shameful part in that, shouldn't, obviously, be forgotten, either.

The next shot-reaction-shot art-goer/painting montage after this lecture is similar to what the audience has seen before except that all of the art-goers Wiseman shows are people of color. The paintings themselves that Wiseman juxtaposes feature accentuated lily-white models, further driving home the point that people of color have been all but completely erased from historical Western painting. Wiseman is asking the audience to acknowledge the different ways people will understand or value these paintings. A white individual may see only the formal beauty of the paintings and be blind to the fact that the vast majority of them only feature white people, whereas a person of color may come away with an entirely different impression.

The segment between the aforementioned lecture and shot-reaction-shot sequence acts as "connective tissue" between the two scenes. The segment involves a different museum docent talking about Ernest Stubbs' famous horse painting titled *Whistlejacket* (1762). To get such a beautifully realistic depiction of a horse, the docent says how Stubbs would take horse carcasses and literally strip them layer-by-layer revealing the muscles and bones underneath. The placement of this sequence seems to metaphorically suggest that underneath these paintings' "layers" of formal beauty resides an "ugly" past.



Wiseman often leads the audience in a certain direction where they think they know what his argument is and then subverting those expectations with examples that contradict what was shown before. Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson in their analysis of Wiseman's early film *Basic Training* show how he "sets up" the viewer in this way. They cite the example of the inept trainee Hickman "whom we had at first been encouraged to view as a stereotype present in the film for our amusement" later becoming a figure for our shock and sympathy after it is found out that he tried to commit suicide from being bullied by his comrades (Benson and Anderson, *Reality Fictions* 176). Benson and Anderson say, "If we have been tempted to read the film as a story of oppressors and victims, with the recruits cast as the victims, we must now acknowledge that at least some of the trainees are also victimizers" (*Reality Fictions* 177). This scene demonstrates how "Points of view that viewers had perhaps felt safe in assuming as, if not their own, at least the film's—and therefore their own tentative, provisional basis—are challenged and subverted" (Benson and Anderson, *Reality Fictions* 176). In *National Gallery*, Wiseman leads the viewer to think that all these artworks are timelessly relatable to contemporary audiences yet subverts this by revealing the very time-boundedness of these paintings to their historical period.

However, the next scene after the shot-reverse-shot of the lily-white painted figures and the people of color reaffirms again these paintings' relevancy. A docent speaking to a group of school children tells them, similar to the docent before, how paintings are stories told in a single image, and that what separates a painting from a story is time. He says, "But a painting doesn't have time. A painting has the speed of light to tell you the story. It has the time it takes to see the painting. So, telling a story in a painting is incredibly skillful." He then goes on to describe the story behind the painting they are looking at; a Bellini painting depicting Saint Peter Martyr, and his assistant, being assassinated in a forest with woodcutters seen chopping wood in the

background. The docent explains that the woodcutters do not appear in the original story and were added later by Bellini. He says, “A tragic event, perhaps made more tragic, if there are people around who don't recognize what's going on. Who don't see it as a tragedy...I think these woodcutters are partly there to make it even more tragic, because they just keep going on and on and on.” The universal quality of humans to ignore tragedy, or to not even see it, is expressed not only by the content of the Bellini painting, but also through the scene's juxtaposition to the previous shot-reverse-shot montage.

Talk of “layers” comes up again and again in this middle section of the film. There is the reference to layers in the lecture on Stubbs' horse paintings as well as another scene in which a curator talks about Leonardo Da Vinci's paintings as “this process of endless revelation, whereby it's almost as if onion layers are being peeled away and yet you never, ever quite get to the core.” This motif reaches its climax when Wiseman begins focusing on art restoration and conservation. The film discusses the theme of time and timelessness through the physicality of the paintings themselves. These paintings are in the National Gallery because their beauty has stood the test of time and remain meaningful to us today, but the very physicality of these paintings is in a constant state of decay. Wiseman shows many scenes of art restoration where we see experts literally wiping the layers of grime and dust off these paintings, i.e. the evidence of time past. He also shows them applying varnish layers and making incredibly minute changes to damaged portions of the paintings by painting over it. In many ways, the apparent “timelessness” of these paintings is an illusion maintained by the constant restoring.

Not only are the restorers “fixing” damages to the original paintings, but they are also fixing previous “fixes” by earlier restorations. In one discussion about the restoration of a large Rembrandt painting, the specialist who did the restoration says how a previous restorer “over

cleaned” the painting in such a way as to damage its original state. Though the restorers are working on a layer of varnish that allows them to change any alterations by dissolving the varnish, previous varnishes have sometimes not been properly dissolved simply due to the fact that past conservation techniques were less advanced than they are now. Though the restorers claim that “Anything we do should be reversible,” Richard Brody writes how this “poses a basic epistemological question of what we’re actually seeing when we see an Old Master painting—the extent to which curatorial interpretations, no less than the editorial choices and emendations of philologists, are inextricable from the immediate experience of art” (Brody, “National Gallery”). Indeed, in attempting to maintain an artwork’s original image, it is fundamentally altered, bringing up the question of originality and whether it is an object of the past at all.

In his essay “Films of Memory,” filmmaker/anthropologist David MacDougall discusses issues surrounding the representation of memory and the past visually through nonfiction film. Personal testimony of the past might seem automatically dubious, but that physical objects from history are often seen as accurate and authentic representations of the past. However, he says:

Physical objects might be thought to be least subject to such vagaries, providing films with a kind of independent baseline for memory. This indeed is the rationale of many museums. But objects that survive from the past are not the same objects that they were in the past, and they can thus stand for the memory of themselves only obliquely. Unlike an object seen in a photograph, which bears a parallel relation to other objects around it in a specific past context, the patina of age on an old object tends to exaggerate its status as a sign (MacDougall 232).

Wiseman presents the paintings as *living things* that literally age and decay like human beings.

But this aliveness is what also makes them feel so present and vital.

Wiseman’s interest in aging also might reflect his own experience of growing older.

Wiseman was 84 years old at the time of the *National Gallery’s* release, and, at the time of this writing, has released his most recent film *Monrovia, Indiana* (2018) at the age of 88. This

emphasis on time and art situates the film as also a self-reflexive meditation on the different ways people might understand or talk about Wiseman's films after he is gone, as well as the hope that his films will remain meaningful for future generations. In an interview with Wiseman about the film, the interviewer Arnuaud Hée says, "In a general way, throughout the film, we are watching a constant mise en abyme of painting and film" (Hée). Wiseman agrees with this assessment, saying, "Exactly. It could be for that reason the film transcends, in its content, the daily events occurring in the museum" (Hée). In many ways, *National Gallery* acts as a reflection on filmmaking, and of Wiseman's style in particular, offering the viewer a kind of self-portrait of Wiseman himself.

Many of these self-reflexive instances stem from things said about the paintings that sound a lot like someone describing a Wiseman film. One of the first instances of this is when Wiseman shows an art scholar discussing a Da Vinci painting and saying, "It's this wonderful mixture of observation and imagination." Wiseman's films have often been referred to as "reality-fictions" that blend observational cinema with symbolic and metaphorical undertones. Another instance of this self-reflexivity, and one that Arnuaud Hée writes about, is when Wiseman shows the curator of a Da Vinci exhibit saying, "One of the things you do as you start working on an exhibition is to think about what the whole narrative will be but you're also cataloging each work individually so at a certain point it becomes a mosaic perhaps instead of a seamless narrative." Arnuaud Hée says, "The curator of the Leonardo da Vinci exhibition talks about the installation of the exhibition in terms of a "mosaic," which is a term you use yourself to describe the editing of your films?" (Hée). Though it was documentary film scholar Bill Nichols who first described Wiseman's style as a "mosaic" (17), others have often described his work using this word as well.

This self-reflexivity also becomes explicitly apparent to the viewer when Wiseman starts filming other film crews interviewing curators and art critics. Wiseman has done this in previous films with scholars noting it as a reflexive technique. Dan Armstrong writes about Wiseman's use of reflexivity in *Model* (1980) which also features him showing another documentary film crew shooting someone else. Armstrong says,

By referring us to the devices and methods of the documentary, however different from his own, Wiseman reminds us of his own sleights of hand, by which he too creates an illusion giving the impression of reality. In this way, Wiseman moves us from the position of passive consumers of an imaginary reality to the position of distanced, demystified coproducers of the film's meaning, invited to observe and puzzle out the paradoxes and contradictions of the text ("Wiseman's Model" 8).

Wiseman's use of reflexivity in this film is intended to make the viewer see the film as a part of the same dialogue surrounding the paintings. This should not be read as Wiseman comparing himself to Da Vinci or as a self-indulgent experiment, but as an important aspect of the film's overall meaning. Not only it is another "layer" to the film, but it also gains more meaning toward the end of the film when Wiseman begins to critique the explanation of art through language in greater detail.

One particular instance of a scene involving a film crew stands out and will allow for an examination of both the film's reflexivity and its critique on language. As stated early, many critics did not like how the film seemed to be more about people talking about art than of the artwork itself. But many critics missed it when Wiseman was also being critical of people of over-explaining art. This is explicitly demonstrated when Wiseman is filming a TV crew shooting the British art critic Matthew Collings explaining a Turner painting. Wiseman shows them as they prepare for the scene and we see Collings and another crew member deciding, basically on the fly, what Collings is going to say about the painting. When the camera finally

starts rolling, Collings begins his “performance” by passionately describing the use of light and darkness as a metaphor in the painting in a very theatrical manner.

The viewer gets the sense that Wiseman is slightly poking fun at the art critic, and this is communicated through several different ways. First, by showing the film crew setting up the scene and Collings acting “normal,” and then showing the shooting of the scene with Collings performing creates a humorous juxtaposition between reality and fiction. Second, by including this scene later in the film after the audience has witnessed many other people explain art in a much more subdued manner, Collings, in contrast, seems over the top. Wiseman has already primed the viewer to notice how guides frame their explanations to best fit the audience they are talking to at the time. When the audience finally gets to this scene, they are well prepared to notice the dramatized performance of Collings and understand that he seemed to be trying to appeal to a casual TV audience.

The next scene directly after the Collings lecture forms another rather humorous juxtaposition. The scene involves the installation of a painting depicting the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. However, there is a problem: Jesus’ face is covered by a shadow. The rest of the scene is the curator and the workers attempting to adjust the lights so that there is no shadow, and failing for the shadow is being cast by the frame itself. There is something humorously ironic about this sequence, especially when placed directly after the Turner scene. In the Turner scene, the speaker talks dramatically about the painting’s sublime beauty and the transcendent use of light and darkness as a supreme metaphor. In the installation scene, however, shadow is surely not seen as transcendent but as a profane hindrance. But, in a way it, this scene reaffirms the previous speaker’s discussion on darkness and light as metaphor for there is something metaphorical about the installation scene itself. Here we have the embodiment of the spiritual

and the sacred represented by the Jesus painting (light/timelessness) in contrast to the inescapable reality of everyday life (darkness/time). This profane hindrance literally makes it harder for the viewer to “see” the painting, and by placing this sequence after the Collings lecture, Wiseman is hinting at language as a profane hindrance as well.

Toward the end of film, Wiseman begins mixing together the themes of time and timelessness, language and image, and self-portrait. This is illustrated in a scene in which a curator and an art restorer are describing a particular painting to what seems to be a group of young college students. The artwork itself is a Vermeer painting of two maids, one old and one young, preparing food. The art restorer talks first and discusses the process of art retouching. The art curator eventually interrupts and explains that all the retouching the art restorer does to the painting is on top of a layer of varnish. This means that whatever changes he makes to the painting can be wiped away without alternating the original image. The art restorer then says, “It gets to the core whether you feel about this as a document or a kind of archaeological thing or if you want to restore it as an image you read and how confident you are in what you’re doing.” Does one restore a work of art to best represent how it may have looked at the time, or, do you retouch it to bring out what you believe to be the overall meaning within the work? He later says, “The intent was to restore it as a work of art that you read...I don’t want to leave the impression that we believe that our retouching and restorations make the picture look like it did...it’s a balancing act but a restoration is not a renewal.” The art curator interrupts again saying, “Of course, they’re physical objects made of organic materials and the second that they’re finished they start to age and that’s just that.” The art curator then begins to talk about the meaning of the painting itself. He says:

The two women in the foreground are clearly figures from contemporary life and one has to wonder what’s this really about? Are they simply serving people and the meal is going

to go through the hatch and be served in the other room or do they in some way represent a modern-day Mary and Martha? Do you remember the story? Christ comes to visit Mary and Martha and Mary sits attentively at Christ's feet and listens to his teaching while Martha makes herself very busy going about all the chores and then comes to complain that she's been left to do everything and Mary isn't helping and Christ chides her and says 'Martha, Martha. You're concerned about so many things, but Mary's really taken the better path in allowing time to her spiritual development.'

Several things are going on in this scene that reflect to some of the film's major themes. There is the curator applying the meaning of the biblical story to that of the painting and saying how the painting is a contemporary retelling of that biblical story. What is ironic about this is that the curator himself gives a contemporary retelling of the biblical story. In describing the story, he says how Christ "chides" Martha and emphasizes this by repeating her name in a rather informal, comical way. This whole retelling comes off as more a description of a scene from a sitcom than of a biblical story. Indeed, as Wiseman has said in the past, "A lot of the scenes in the films are situational comedy of a very high order" (Benson and Anderson, *Reality Fictions* 262).

When we compare the first half of the scene of the art restorer with the second half of the art curator explaining what the piece means, certain ideas are communicated that go beyond just what they are saying. Essentially, both are talking about the same thing, i.e. the retouching or retelling of art so as to communicate its meaning to a contemporary audience. Wiseman seems to be saying that how art communicates meaning is greatly dictated by its historical time period. The biblical story, the painting, and the curator's own explanation all reflect different modes of communicating a timeless meaning through its contemporary symbols. Ultimately, this choice of rhetoric changes the meaning or impact of the original message.

This sequence is also interesting in that it is a self-reflexive callback to one of Wiseman's earlier films: *Essene* (1972). *Essene* follows a Benedictine monastic community in Michigan and involves similar themes to that of *National Gallery* such as an emphasis on language, religion,



and the past versus the present. Especially prevalent in this film is a conflict between old religious practice and contemporary psychotherapy. Benson and Anderson say how the line separating religious insight (the past) from psychotherapeutic breakthrough (the present) is muddled in this film, with scenes such as a public confession looking rather like group therapy session as well as the very rhetoric used by the monks themselves. Benson and Anderson write, “The language is the language of psychological development, and the context is that of a religious order. Is the person finding psychological adjustment? Or God? Are the two somehow related? Or does one undermine the other?” (*Reality Fictions* 206-207). The authors focus on a key discussion in the film between Brother Wilfred and the abbot that results “in a standoff between a sixth-century religious order and a twentieth-century psychological perspective” (*Reality Fictions* 215).

But an even more direct relationship between these two films is that they both have a scene that involves someone retelling the story of Mary and Martha. The last scene in *Essene* involves the abbot giving a sermon about that very same biblical tale and similarly explaining it using contemporary symbols, this time with the rhetoric modern psychotherapy. Barry Keith Grant, in his analysis of this scene, states,

On the one hand, says the abbot, there is “the Martha quality of egoism,” which seeks to grasp the world through rationality: “It takes it apart, or it leaves it apparently fragmented.” On the other hand, there is Mary, characterized by a “wisdom” that does not depend on the material world: “You don’t possess things, and they do have unity, they have an ecology” (134).

Even the content of the biblical story is a reflection on the content of both films: The labeling and taking apart of the transcendental through language and rationality (Martha) against the ineffability of pure transcendence (Mary).

The problem Wiseman has with using language to describe pictorial art is its tendency to label and, therefore, reduce meaning. Barry Keith Grant writes about Wiseman's ambivalence toward language and its capacity to label saying, "from the labeling of patients in *Titicut Follies* to the nightmarish adherence to procedure in the world of *Welfare*—instances of what Wiseman refers to as "the demeaning way in which words, which are essentially clichés, are used to categorize a person, so that as a result he will be treated as a member of a category, not a person" (133). If one replaces the word 'person' with 'painting,' it is easy to see how this quote translates to *National Gallery*. The issue with labeling art is not only that it curtails the potential meanings found within it, but that it also grounds it in time. Wiseman wants the paintings to feel "alive" and to tell "a story all of its own" (Hée), but when the museum docents overly go into the historical context and meaning of the painting using contemporary terminology and examples, they potentially hinder the timeless quality of the work. What Wiseman fears most is the rationalization of art.

The other issue with applying words to great works of art is that once a meaning has been decided on for a particular painting, its meaning slips away from us. As the film progresses, many of the comments made by others about certain paintings and what they mean start to sound less and less convincing or informative. In one example, a man makes a rather obvious comment about a particular painting and how "There's something visual about it." Toward the end of the film, a lecture on a Vermeer painting succinctly illustrates this dilemma. After explaining how the beauty of the painting has the exact same effect on "us in the 21st century" as it did for people "in the 17th century," the art historian describes the "ambiguity" of the work and its "balance between realism and abstraction." She says, "There's always an element of ambiguity, a question there, that I firmly believe is absolutely intentional on the part of the best artists.

Because it's designed to keep you intrigued, to keep you coming back, to keep your attention on this painting.” The inherent ambiguity of still images is the very quality that entails this sense of timelessness about them. This ambiguity also allows for the viewer to project their own imagination onto the painting, regardless of the historical time difference. As one docent says about 500-year-old Michelangelo painting, “I absolutely do see someone texting on a mobile phone. Of course, that's probably not what everyone else sees at all, but that's actually what can help keep these paintings alive for us - the mystery around what the artist had intended.”

The last few sequences of the film act as a kind of solution or alternative to understanding art through language. The first segment is of a woman reading a poem called “Callisto’s Song” for a camera crew. The poem is based off a painting of Callisto, a nymph from Greek mythology who was turned into a bear and then into a constellation. The poem is supposed to be from the perspective of Callisto as a constellation. Wiseman cuts back and forth between the woman reading the poem and the painting itself, creating a comparison. After she finishes reading the poem, the director of the film crew begins interviewing her. She says “If you like, every poem is a kind of crude translation of something else, our poems never reach what we want them to. You know, we’re always in a way hampered by language and that’s what’s wonderful...so in a way all of my poems are efforts to translate something else and they never quite do. But...the meaning is all in the gaps.” These are the last words spoken in the film. In the next segments the viewer watches a couple perform ballet between two large paintings with classical music being played in the background. One of the paintings is of Callisto, the same one talked about in the previous scene.

The first sequence is about the impossibility of language to accurately describe while the next scene acts as a kind of nonverbal reply suggesting that possibly the best way to describe art

is through art. The dance is an amalgamation of art commenting on art, bringing together four distinct art forms: dance, music, film, and painting. A fifth art, sculpture, is also hinted at through the stiff choreography of their movements, recalling that of statues. Brody says of these last few sequences, “Wiseman shows a higher discourse about art—a musical discourse, a poetic discourse, a balletic discourse. Beethoven comes off as an art critic of the first rank, and the dancers contradict the old saw by happily and meaningfully dancing about paintings” (Brody, “National Gallery”). Philip Brophy also says about this last scene in his review for *Artforum* how it suggests “that the best way to discuss image-making is to transubstantiate it in another medium” (Brophy). Indeed, the very act of Wiseman making this film attests to this theory and is another example of the film’s many self-reflexive elements. The first sequence even suggests the very act of watching a Wiseman film in that “the meaning is all in the gaps.” Wiseman largely creates meaning through juxtaposition and the cut. Not only does the content of this sequence reference this, but the formal juxtaposition of these two scenes demonstrate it in action.

The last several shots of the film are a montage of Rembrandt portraits. How Wiseman films and edits these pieces is somewhat different from how he has presented the paintings in the past. Before, Wiseman would show a painting and the next shot would be of someone looking at that same painting. There would also be a lot of incomprehensible chatter going on in the background of these shots. With the Rembrandt portraits, however, Wiseman does not cut to a person looking at the paintings but instead simply shows us painting after painting. Along with a noticeable lack of noise in this last sequence, these differences stand out to the viewer who has been conditioned to expect a crosscutting between painting and person. The directness of this presentation makes the paintings feel more alive and present, cutting across time. At the very end of the film, Wiseman is truly letting the art speak for itself.

In an interview with Wiseman about *National Gallery*, the interviewer brings up that one of the main themes of the film is language and “the connection between image and the verbalization of the images” (Hée). Wiseman agrees, yet, says, “If I could explain it in 25 words, why make a film? It’s an extremely complex question, and I hope the film raises the issue through the manner in which I edited it” (Hée). Wiseman has made similar comments like this in other interviews when asked to describe his films, but it is especially meaningful regarding *National Gallery*. One could even broaden this question and ask why should one make a film if they could explain it in *any* number of words? Wiseman seems to present us with an answer to these issues, but it is in the form of a question. The question and the answer are embodied by the dancers, the music, the paintings, and the film itself. The very last shot of the film is of a self-portrait of Rembrandt. He ambiguously stares back at the viewer, beckoning them to respond with either a “How?” or a “Wow!” Wiseman hopes we choose the latter. In the next chapter, the film *Ex Libris* will be presented as a further meditation on the dichotomy between past and present as well as a reflection of Wiseman’s attitude toward art, language, and history and its connection to the ideas of French philosopher Henri Bergson.

## CHAPTER 5

### *EX LIBRIS*

*Ex Libris* focuses on the contingent nature of history and how people construct the past through narrative. Three overlapping themes present themselves in this film which have been labeled Rhetoric, Reality-Fiction and Past-Present. Because of Wiseman's modernist style and outlook, rationalism and historical narratives are criticized in this film. Poetry is presented as a potentially more accurate means of describing reality and the past for its blend of reality and fiction bespeak a qualitative truth that is closer to reality than quantitative facts. Referring to the ideas of French philosopher Henri Bergson and the films of Alain Resnais, this chapter shows how *Ex Libris* depicts the past as a part of the present.

As with *At Berkeley* and *National Gallery*, Wiseman introduces the main recurring themes in *Ex Libris* in the first major scene. The film begins with a close-up of a sign that reads "The New York Public Library" and then cuts to a long shot of the outside of the main library in the New York Public Library system: The Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. It then cuts to inside the main hall of the library with a crowd of people watching one of the many "celebrity talks" shown in the film, this first one showing popular scientist Richard Dawkins. Framed from behind with the female interviewer and Dawkins looking toward the crowd, Dawkins begins talking first and says, "My foundation, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science, is actually trying to raise consciousness that there are many, many more people that are not religious in America than many people realize, including politicians realize." After showing a medium close-up of Dawkins facing the camera, Wiseman starts cutting together different close-ups of the people in the crowd illustrating the diversity of those in attendance. Dawkins goes onto say how politicians often ignore the large percentage of non-secular voters which "gets

ignored because it is not vocal enough.” Next, the female interviewer asks Dawkins, “In an interview recently, you said, quote, ‘I don’t think I call myself combative, I think I call myself a lover of truth.’ And I’m wondering, what is your truth?” Dawkins replies that the only reason people perceive him as combative is because he states “simple facts” that are often “disagreeable to people.” He says, “For example, several years ago, about twenty years ago actually in *The New York Times* I wrote ‘Anybody who claims to be a young earth creationist is either stupid, ignorant or insane.’ Now, that is a simple statement of fact. That’s not a polemical statement.” He says there is a distinction between the word’s “ignorance” and “stupidity,” that to be ignorant of something is “no crime” but that people should not be so “loud-mouthed” about their ignorance. The last question the interviewer asks Dawkins is regarding a previous quote of his where he says, “Science is the poetry of reality.” Using the “prodigious, stupefying complexity of single living cell” as an example of this poetic reality, he replies,

We now understand that it came from gradual process, incremental natural selection, lasting over hundreds of millions of years, culminating in creatures like us, with brains big enough to understand the whole process. And we in the 21st century are privileged to live after Darwin, after Newton, after Einstein. And therefore we are privileged to get that into our heads in a way that our ancestors couldn’t. Who could not be moved poetically by that?

This first scene introduces a number of different questions and ideas that will be expanded upon as the film progresses. First, there is the interplay between scientific facts and poetry, reflecting the reality-fiction motif and this juxtaposition between quantitative and qualitative truth with Dawkins using such phrases as “raise consciousness” and science as the “poetry of reality.” Next, there is the focus on rhetoric and language with Dawkins making distinctions between words (“ignorance” vs. “stupidity”) and “polemical” statements. Lastly, there is the motif of past-present with Dawkins discussing our evolutionary heritage and past “ancestors.” *Ex Libris* is predominately about the ways people reconstruct, and reinterpret, history. Though Dawkins says

that humanity has progressed to the point where we have “brains big enough to understand the whole process,” how that process is labeled and narrativized greatly determines its meaning.

Wiseman continues to introduce the theme of reality-fiction in the next scene directly after the Richard Dawkins talk. Moving to a different part of the library, Wiseman shows a long shot of cubicles with librarians answering phone calls. How Wiseman cuts together these calls creates a rather humorous juxtaposition. After a librarian answers the phone with “Good morning, thanks for calling Ask NYPL. How can I help?,” Wiseman cuts back and forth between two different librarians speaking on the phone. Wiseman frames them from the side in medium close-ups, with the first librarian looking towards the left side of the frame and the second librarian looking towards the right side of the frame. This framing and cutting gives the illusion that the librarians are speaking to one another.

The librarians are presented as gatekeepers of the truth, debunking fantastical falsehoods with incredible patience. The viewer hears the librarian’s giving such humorous answers as “A unicorn is actually an imaginary animal, okay? He’s not, it’s not a creature that ever existed.” Behind the first librarian is a sign taped to her cubicle wall that reads, “Do I have to talk to insane people? You’re a librarian now. I’m afraid it’s mandatory.” Yet, the rather monotone and “bored” inflection of the librarians along with the order in which the answers are presented not only creates a humorous juxtaposition but a meaningful one as well. Wiseman continues to illustrate the difference between scientific fact and poetic truth by highlighting reference questions that relate to existential conundrums of the human condition. We hear the librarians discussing religion (“Gutenberg bible is temporarily unavailable for viewing”), death (“I see you’ve got one book on hold called *Working with Bereavement*”) and meaning (“So let me go through the list again. You have...*The Meaning of Life*”). There is also the reference to the past



with the second librarian discussing the “geography and geology of New York City” in the “early 17th century,” as well as the theme of rhetoric and language being expressed by the librarian’s answer to the first historical mention of unicorns in which he says, “The first appearance I have of it is in the year 1225, okay? And it's got the opinion of one ancient monk that..I'll sort of have to translate this from Middle English, which I'm a little poor in. But he's sort of saying that man is a wolf on the outside, but inside himself, he's a unicorn. And they spell it with an E.” This last answer by the second librarian is also revealing in its connection the reality-fiction motif. Humans are not literally wolves on the outside and unicorns on the inside, but there is a certain timeless, qualitative truth about this statement that says something about the human condition (even though they used to spell unicorn “with an E”).

The conflict between the past and the present features heavily in the next major scene. Wiseman shows a woman speaking to a male librarian sitting behind a public desk about ancestry and the best way to find the “place of origin for Herman Herzog.” The librarian recommends looking at immigration papers pertaining to that particular person to find out which specific town in Germany they came from. As said before, the institutions Wiseman films always reflect the larger surrounding culture in some way. What is being illustrated with this scene is the fact that the United States, as we know it today, is a nation made up of immigrants. The film’s references to the United States’ history are also presented chronologically. For example, Wiseman starts out with references to American history that illustrate the first generation of immigrants to come over (such as the example above), and then later shows a lecture that involves second-generation Americans. This symbolic tracing of the history of the United States through the New York Public Library works on several levels. First, the library itself represents a kind of “democratic ideal incarnate” (Dargis) of which the United States tries to emulate. Next,

is the fact that Wiseman chose to film not any library but the New York Public Library.

Wiseman has said in interviews that *Ex Libris* is “a movie about New York” (Aylmer), but New York itself can be seen as a representation of America because of its identity as a diverse melting pot made up of immigrants. Lastly, the library is the perfect vehicle for exploring the physical signs of United States history because of its role as an archive.

The past and present of libraries is also represented in this film as well. Beginning with these early scenes, Wiseman starts showing various library patrons utilizing the library. One thing that becomes blatantly apparent is the emphasis on technology for the majority of the patrons are either shown using the public computers, or, their own personal laptops and smartphones. Indeed, the first thing one might notice about *Ex Libris* are the lack of physical books. Critics noticed this as well, with Anthony Lane asking the question in *The New Yorker* in his review of the film: “Where are the books?” (Lane). Answering his own question about the lack of books, Lane says, “That omission is deliberate, and Wiseman has picked his moment well. Steeped in the study of institutions, he understands the value, and the thrill, of delving into them as they undergo a sea change, and no place could be richer or stranger than a library that is swept up in the electronic age” (Lane). With the rise of the internet and digital media, the general public perception often sees libraries as a thing of the past. A humorous juxtaposition illustrating this shows a woman taking a picture of something in a book with her smartphone. Wiseman then cuts to a long-shot showing rows of bookcases on one side of the frame and rows of people sitting at tables on their laptops on the opposite side of the frame. Wiseman visually illustrates the literal separation between physical books and digital media, i.e. the past and the present.

Libraries are often depicted as sterile, quiet places where one is likely to get “shushed” by some cold-hearted librarian. However, Wiseman’s portrayal of the library could not be further

from this mythical reputation. Manohla Dargis in her review of the film for *The New York Times* says, “In scene after scene, you are reminded that libraries serve as study centers, neighborhood hubs, babysitters and homeless shelters. They offer lectures and concerts, but also provide immigrant services, job fairs and internet services, including through a program that lets users without home access borrow mobile hot spots” (Dargis). The myth that libraries have become obsolete because of the internet is mostly debunked in this film for Wiseman shows how they are so much more than simple “book depositories.” Lane says, “Libraries are now focused less on books than on “people who want to get knowledge,” and the getting, as becomes clear in repeated meetings of senior library figures, is a matter of connectivity, digitalization, broadband rollout, and, my favorite, “e-content licensing purchase strategy”” (Lane). Indeed, this speaks to the identity of libraries as *public* institutions.

However, like with *At Berkeley* and *National Gallery*, this “public” label is questioned in the film. J.R. Jones writes in his review for *The Chicago Reader* that, “In the new information age, the cash-strapped public libraries of America have been derided by some as relics of the past; *Ex Libris* proves that the idea of the library is still going strong, though the idea of “the public” may be another matter” (Jones). Again, Wiseman includes a scene early in the film that involves the administrators discussing the identity of their institution. Addressing a fairly large group of potential library donors, Anthony Marx, then head of the NYPL, explains how the library has always been “a public-private partnership” in regard to its funding. He says, “Indeed, this institution, despite the word “public” in its title, is the quintessential public-private partnership. Literally half the funding of the New York Public Library comes from the public, particularly the city, and half comes from private sources, including people in this room.” The

scene reflects the same situation of the previous institutions as being “public” in almost name only.

Despite this “public-private” contradiction, the NYPL is presented as an institution dedicated to the public good. In the same meeting, Anthony Marx expands upon the important role the library has in today’s ever-connected digital world. He says how millions of New Yorkers “are in the digital dark” because they do not have internet at home, and that, “We could have all the content in the world, but if you don't have connection to it, it does you no good. And this is how people are learning and engaging in the 21st century.” What the contemporary library offers is not just information but more equal access to that information as well as greater community engagement. The last thing Anthony Marx says is, “I believe that education, the access to information, is the fundamental solution over time to inequality. And I think its power cannot be underestimated.” Indeed, inequality is an issue that comes up again and again throughout the film with many of the celebrity talks and lectures dealing explicitly with slavery and racial inequality.

These issues related to racial inequality, slavery, and the past come into explicit focus in the next celebrity talk. Wiseman shows a discussion with Professor Rudolph T. Ware about his book on Islam and slavery. He explains how most clerics living in Islamic countries in the 18th century were against slavery and wanted to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, but that powerful secular figures at the time (who he calls “princes”) stomped down on these protests and even sold many of these clerics into the slave trade. The interviewer comments on how the popular historical perception of Islam is that it was a proponent for slavery. After agreeing with the interviewer’s comment, Ware explains,

So, the short answer is that we were told a lie by late 19th- and early 20th-century Orientalists who suggested that...slavery and Islam were coterminous, and this was part

of a very motivated attempt both to denigrate African societies and Muslim societies. And to monopolize claims on freedom and emancipatory thought within a Western post-enlightenment tradition. So that Islam and African society become coterminous with slavery and despotism, and the white people are to be given credit for everything that was ever liberatory or emancipatory in human thought.

He explains that the ways early scholars depicted Islam was not historically accurate or objective, but rather that it was “polemical” so as to downplay the fact that “some of the genealogies of the values of liberty and emancipatory thought that we hold dear were articulated not just by the ancestors of the European population of this country but by the ancestors of the African population as well.” The talk finishes up with Ware explaining the European international policy in regard to Africa which was “to subvert the just principles of government and turn kings into wolves instead of shepherds amongst their people.”

Throughout the film, Wiseman shows talks and lectures that often deal with critiquing and deconstructing dominant historical narratives. The past is constantly being interrogated by people either coming up with their own historical narratives or criticizing past ones. Indeed, others noticed this focus on history building as well with Nicolas Rapold writing in *Film Comment*, “In these tours and in its quotations, *Ex Libris* considers the question of historical narratives and the myriad ways they’re shaped, maintained, and in turn shape lived reality” (Rapold). Along with introducing the recurring issues of racial inequality and slavery, this scene with Rudolph T. Ware also comments upon the “polemical” nature of formulating history.

Joram ten Brink in his article “Re-Enactment, the History of Violence and Documentary Film” includes a short overview of the debates surrounding historiography. Writing about R. G. Collingwood and his opposition to ‘scissors-and-paste’ history which just copies what past historians have said before, ten Brink says, “The understanding of historical events must be from within the present, because the past is not dead” (177). He discusses how Collingwood was more

concerned with describing historical “processes” than historical “events” since “Past and present don’t occupy separate worlds but partly ‘overlay’ each other” (ten Brink 177). ten Brink writes,

A modern-day historian, Raphael Samuel, has put it in similar terms: “We are in fact constantly reinterpreting the past in the light of the present, and indeed, like conservationists and restorationists in other spheres, reinventing it. The angle of vision is inescapably contemporary, however remote the object in view” (177).

Like in *National Gallery* with the restoration of the paintings, the past is constantly being “reinvented” and reinvigorated in the present.

Also, similar to *National Gallery* and the art docents, language and narrative only go so far in accurately representing the past. In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols writes about the idea of “excess” in documentary texts, defining it as “that which stands beyond the reach of both narrative and exposition” (142). He says, “Does this excess have a name? I would argue that it has a simple and familiar one: history” (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 142). He later quotes American historian Hayden White, saying,

Hayden White, from a formalist point of view, also drives a sharp wedge between the written history (with which the documentary shares a common referential bond) and historical existence as such: “I will consider the historical work as what it most manifestly is—that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*” (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 143).

Nichols says that no matter how in-depth and expansive a narrative of history is, “excess remains” because of the “impasse between discourse and referent” (*Representing Reality* 143). Similarly, Elizabeth Cowie writes, “In its desire to show the real, however, the documentary becomes prey to a loss of the real in its narratives of reality. It is a loss we cannot mourn, but anxiously return to, that is, a reality imagined *before* its fall into mediation, interpretation, narration, presentation” (Cowie 89).

Hayden White in his essay “The Modernist Event” questions the “nineteenth-century historical novel” approach to history, an approach that is based in realism and a clear distinction between fact and fiction, and instead proposes a modernist outlook on history. With realist narrative storytelling there are events, characters, and plot as well as a destined cause and effect. However, with modernism, things just happen. For White, “Modernist techniques of representation provided the possibility of de-fetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose, in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically” (32). He does not mean to suggest that certain historical events did not ever happen but that our interpretation of those events are widely flexible. He says, “In other words, what is at issue here is not the facts of the matter regarding such events but the different possible meanings that such facts can be construed as bearing” (White 21).

In response to Hayden White, Frank P. Tomasulo complicates White’s modernist approach to history in his essay on Rodney King and video evidence titled “I’ll See it When I Believe it.” Equating White’s ideas with post-structuralism, Tomasulo cites the example of the Rodney King lawsuit and how the footage of the police beating him sparked a number of interpretations even though the police were clearly using excessive force. Tomasulo says, “Although a healthy epistemological skepticism about written accounts and the interpretations of the past is an important corrective to dominant ideology, extreme nihilism toward history can undermine belief in even the most settled historical facts, such as the existence of slavery or the Holocaust” (83). Though there is ambiguity inherent in Wiseman’s images, he does not argue that there are no such thing as facts, but, like Errol Morris, that it is people’s interpretations of those facts that are often in question. Though it is important to keep in mind Tomasulo’s anti-

modernist argument, Wiseman, because of his modernist style, leans more toward the theories and ideas of Hayden White.

Not only do people often express history through narrative but how that narrative is told, i.e. its rhetoric, obviously effects its meaning and sense of truthfulness. The importance of rhetoric and performance is made explicitly clear in a scene involving a job fair at one of the library's smaller branches. Wiseman presents a montage of a firefighter, a female construction worker, and others all pitching their profession to a seated audience. All speak about their profession with expressive enthusiasm except for one person who stands out from the rest; a U.S. border patrol officer. The young, white officer speaks with an unenthusiastic voice and is the only one to be shown reading from a script. Though the content of the message is meant to be inspiring ("If your mind is sharp, your body is tough, your soul is driven, you're built for the border"), his halfhearted performance makes it unconvincing.

The theme of rhetoric is also expressed in another scene soon after the job fair sequence showing a guest talk with musician Elvis Costello. The talk begins with a clip of Costello's father doing a cover of the progressive Peter, Paul and Mary song "If I had a Hammer." What is humorous and ironic about this clip is how detached the performance is from message of the song. "If I had a Hammer" is mostly known as a folk song but here the viewer sees men wearing tuxedos and hitting bongos like it is a tropical Bing Crosby number. The outfits of the band members contrast with the workman message of the song and its progressive roots. Performance and message must operate in harmony otherwise you have the insincerity of a U.S. border patrol agent not matching the enthusiasm of his message, or the ironic instance of style over substance in the case of Costello's father's performance.



However, what is also important about this latter scene are Elvis Costello's own comments concerning history and art. The moderator brings up a quote from music critic Greil Marcus about Elvis Costello in which Marcus describes "the key" to understanding Costello's career is his infatuation with "revenge and guilt" and looking "for the most effective way to make trouble." The moderator then asks Costello "Do you think that's true?" in which Costello laughs and replies, "Which part of it?" Costello then goes onto explain his reaction to the quote, saying,

I think he gives me way too much credit. Of course, it's...Professor Marcus, you know, it's his job to create a thesis like that. That's what he does. He writes very, very long and intricate books explaining the connections between various political and cultural movements, and the vividness of that, to him, I won't deny, except that he's covering a period of about nearly 30 years, 25 years. And there was any number of people in my, to myself...I know it's very convenient to put these labels like punk or new wave or angry or, you know, political. But each song has a different occasion for me, and there are different means, and there are different motives. And there are, I hope, different results if you listen to them. And on different days, you can sing them with different inflections.

Not only does Costello touch upon the way rhetoric and performance can change the meaning of a song, he also criticizes the spatialization of time enacted by Greil Marcus by his capsulation of Costello's entire career through language. This criticism recalls the ideas of French philosopher Henri Bergson.

Henri Bergson and his theories on art and time, in many ways, reflect Wiseman's own ideas. John Ward in his book *Alain Resnais, or The Theme of Time* writes about Bergson and the influence his philosophy has had on French filmmaker Alain Resnais. Alain Resnais and Frederick Wiseman may not look very similar on the surface since Resnais's documentaries often include voiceovers, stylistic camera movements, and archival footage. However, they both deal with many of the same themes and ideas in their films. Resnais's fiction and nonfiction films are often about time, memory, and the impossibility of accurately depicting the past. His

documentary *Night and Fog* (1956) especially raises some interesting questions around representing history and will be discussed later in this chapter in conjunction with *Ex Libris* and how both films frame history in the present tense.

John Ward writes how Bergson's philosophy may have the "appearance of scientific rigour," but that this "cannot hide the basically anti-rational and literary quality of his thought, which proceeds more often than not by means of analogies." (7). Bergson is concerned with the spatialization of time through intellect which he sees as a product of scientific rationalism, modernity, and human evolution. Ward says,

A consideration of Zeno's paradoxes taught him that, if one uses intellect to analyse processes such as motion, the only result could be confused notions of inevitability...From this and similar considerations, Bergson came to the conclusion that intellect, which inevitably functioned in a spatial mode, was capable merely of dealing with bits and pieces, and that if it came across a process continuous in time it would proceed to spatialize and so fragment that process (8).

Ward uses the example of music and how its value is lost when one pays attention to the separate notes only and not the piece as a whole. He says how "Thinking is substituted for hearing, and we apprehend the music as analogue to a number of physical objects which must be isolated and intellectually conceived through a partly spatial medium" (Ward 8). Bergson argues that the "The object of intelligence is *matter*" which looks at everything as if "it were a material object" (Ward 8). However, for Bergson, intellect is not the only method for grasping reality and truth for people also have *intuition*. Ward writes,

Opposed to matter is *life*, the vital force, which surges upwards to break free of matter, as a continuous process of becoming in time. Life, which is beyond the scope of intellect, becomes free by organising matter to its purposes as an artists manipulates his materials. This is achieved by *intuition*, which operates within time and apprehends the world not as separate fragments but as continuity. Only through intuition can we grasp the essential wholeness of our lives and realise we are free (8-9).

This conflict between intellect and intuition, quantitative and qualitative, is readily apparent in *Ex Libris*. After the Costello lecture, Wiseman shows an administration meeting in which they discuss “three different pieces of narrative” that they use to illustrate the value of the library to potential donors. A man lists some of them saying, “One of the most arresting figures that Tony uses is, you know, one in three New Yorkers don't have access to broadband at home...The second historic one that we always love is...that Carnegie sought to create a library within walking distance of every New Yorker.” They then start discussing possible ways to quantify the impact that the library has on the larger community. However, one woman criticizes this quantitative focus. She argues that measuring the public's access to broadband internet, for example, should not be the main benchmark for determining the library's value, to which the previous man replies, “There's the quantitative story and there's a qualitative story.” Indeed, Wiseman begins contrasting these “quantitative stories” and “qualitative stories” in the next several scenes.

The theme of poetry starts to come up again and again during this middle section of the film and embodies these “qualitative stories.” In the next scene after the administration meeting, Wiseman shows a “Books at Noon” talk with African American poet Yusef Komunyakaa. The moderator asks Komunyakaa whether he sees himself as a “political poet” in which he replies, “Language is political.” He says that, “the politics are not on the surface of the poem. But, I think, since I use language, the politics are underneath, woven into the emotional architecture of the poem.” The talk ends with Komunyakaa saying, “there is a kind of innuendo, and also it's part of an extended possibility. What I mean by that is that if we are in the rhythm of the poem, we are in the emotional architecture of a poem, and language says things that are direct but also insinuation, the same as a blues singer would.” What is interesting about this scene is

Komunyakaa's refusal to solely be labeled a "political poet" and his understanding that all language is polemical.

In some ways, Wiseman's films act as political, visual poems due to their non-linear and opaque nature. Many scholars have compared Wiseman's style to poetry with Bill Nichols writing, "The whole thus tends toward poetry (metaphor, synchronicity, paradigm relations)—an all-at-once slice through an institutional matrix re-presented in time—rather than narrative" ("Fred Wiseman's Documentaries" 17). But Wiseman, like Komunyakaa, keeps his politics below the "surface of the poem" (or film). In an interview with Titi Yu for the film, Wiseman says, "I didn't set out to make a political film. But because of Trump's idiocies and his lack of respect for immigrants and for minorities, the movie has become in part a political movie because it represents the good part of American life and Trump represents the worst of American life" (Yu). Unlike many popular political documentarists such as Michael Moore, Wiseman does not set out to make political films and this is in part due to his adherence to a modernist approach. Elizabeth Cowie writing about political art says,

In becoming form for a content, art is reduced to the space and time of the represented political event, to a specificity arising in the conjuncture of the historical moment and time, which overturns or subordinates the specificity of the art object and its potential for universalism. Moreover, political art is bound to an act of communication, to saying *this*, whereas modernist art defined itself as engaging in a critique of reason, of the knowable, and of history as narrative (Cowie 98-99).

Relating this back to Bergson, creating art for intentionally political reasons places intellect before intuition.

Wiseman seems to criticize this analytical way of examining the world in another scene also discussing the role of poetry soon after the Komunyakaa talk. The scene involves a young poet doing a poetry reading at one of the branches to a medium-sized audience. Before reading his poem, he talks about *Alice in Wonderland* and how information does not have to be "boring."

He says how *Alice in Wonderland* begins with Alice's sister telling her a "boring" story and this is what instigates Alice to go on "this whole journey into fantasy." He says how this is like his own journey which has been "to take traditional literature and traditional like ideas of what it means to be intellectual and academic and educated" and "make them not boring." He says,

I see all these brilliant, brilliant people in this world who are, who feel the need to package their ideas and their intellect and, in this stringent and traditional way, because that's the way that we're used to digesting it. So, I hope that one of the things that you take from this program is that intellect and academia and literature does not have to be highbrow. It does not have to be elitist. It can develop in an organic and genuine way.

What this young poet is basically describing is Bergson's distinction between intellect and intuition. This "packaging" of ideas is similar to the ways the museum docents in *National Gallery* "package" the meaning of the pictorial paintings with words, or, how Berkeley "packages" its own past through street vendors. All these examples reflect Bergson's idea of intellect and the ways it negatively delineates the wholeness of duration.

The dichotomy between intellect and intuition can be connected to Wiseman's own "reality fictions" which he has used to describe his films in early interviews. Even though he later renounced the label (like all labels that try to describe his work), it is still an apt analogy for his filmmaking approach. Wiseman takes the materials of reality (intellect) and re-contextualizes them through editing to communicate "insinuated" meanings that move beyond their physical representations (intuition). The word "fiction" in "reality fiction" should not be confused with "fantasy," for, in Wiseman's case, fiction here refers more to literature and the types of qualitative "truths" it produces than to true/false dichotomies.

This reality-fiction/poetry motif continues with Wiseman showing a book discussion on the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (one woman says, "It was surreal in many respects, magical realism, but yet there's tremendous, in-depth knowledge of human nature, both good and

bad, in this book”) as well as other, briefer moments of the friction between reality and fiction such as a library worker looking up the Wizard of Oz books for a patron, and a Halloween parade. This mix of reality and fiction reaches a climax in a celebrity talk with Patti Smith. She talks about French novelist Jean Genet and the influence he has had on her own writing. She says how Genet writes “my kind of memoir” in that “It’s a memoir, yet it’s completely true and simultaneously completely false. Because that’s the kind of guy Genet was. But when I say false, I mean, that’s the part that he transforms truth into art. He elevates it as poetry.” She says how she does not normally read memoirs and that she prefers fiction even though she wrote a memoir. She says, “I didn’t want to just sit and write an autobiography. I wanted to, you know, write about real time, which I am living, and the things that are, they’re the truth of my real time. But what is the truth of our real time? It contains dreams. It contains, you know, spinning off. It contains misinterpretation. It contains memory.” Leszek Kolakowski writing on Bergson, says, “He never dismissed the value of science and of analytical reason; he argued instead that by their very nature they are incapable of grasping the facts of creativity and of time” (6). According to Bergson, when solely intellect is used to describe historical reality, something is lost.

Toward the end of the film, Wiseman begins to bring together all these ideas about history, rhetoric, and poetry into the present. An example of this is an administrative meeting about which books to purchase for the library. The general discussion revolves around balancing what the public wants, like the newest bestsellers, with what the public needs such as less popular works that could be culturally important as time goes on. Symbolically, this scene reflects the ways in which the dominant and popular historical narratives often outshine the more complicated and nuanced portrayals.

Wiseman brings racial inequality and slavery into the present with the next major scene involving a celebrity talk with African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates. After showing a huge audience inside the Schwartzman building who are there to see the talk, Wiseman films the moderator and Coates talking about “black-on-black” crime. Coates relabels it “neighbor-on-neighbor” violence since “the vast majority of crime that happens in any community is done by other community members,” regardless of race. Coates then says, “The fact that the black community suffers more crime *is* part of the oppression, it’s not separate from the oppression...it is part of what happens when you have a group of people who over the course of generations have been isolated, segregated, plundered, have had things taken from them.” He says that to think it could be otherwise would be “absurd” because of how African Americans have been historically treated. The talk ends with Coates discussing a book by Barbara Tuchman called *The Distant Mirror* and how it is has a chapter on the ways people talked about serfs in the 14th century. He says,

It’s no different from how people talk about black people, except the substitution for the science, you know, we use for black people, I mean, black people being scientifically, you know, genetically inferior, is replaced by God. That’s really, really the only difference so when you get to that, you say, “Well, damn, this is something about the human condition.”

What is important about this scene is how Coates connects slavery of the past with racial inequality today (“pure time”), and how this continuous inequality reflects just as much something “about the human condition” (“qualitative story”) than a specific moment in time (“quantitative story”).

Continuing with this focus on inequality and rhetoric in the present day, Wiseman shows a scene involving an African American community meeting at the Macomb’s Bridge library branch in Harlem. After showing different shots of the bookcases and DVDs inside the library,

Wiseman cuts to a medium close-up of an African American woman saying to a small group of people (one being an African American library administrator shown earlier in the film), how, “Macomb's Bridge, as you may not know, is the jewel of the New York Public Library.” The woman continues to discuss the purpose of these meetings and how one can get people involved in their beautiful, but “small,” branch. A cut shows a long shot of the meeting with people sitting close together, emphasizing the cramped layout of the branch. Wiseman then films multiple people addressing the group, ranging from a woman talking about how hard it was to raise a stable family when working “12 hours” a day, to a man saying how he learned filmmaking from the library because he “couldn’t afford to go to film school,” to another man saying how his grandmother lost her store because her distributors, who “99% of the time, they’re white,” kept upping their prices.

However, the key thematic connection of this scene to the rest of the film is a discussion surrounding the wordage of a ninth-grade level McGraw Hill geography textbook. A woman says how they do not have things for their children in the community “that show and tell their true history. The only thing we have available for them are textbooks that tell them untruths. Like McGraw Hill, they’re printing untruths about our lives.” She says how a McGraw Hill textbook referred to African slaves as “workers.” The library administrator confirms this saying how they were “literally referred to immigrants...black people as immigrant workers.” With the discussion on the McGraw Hill textbook, Wiseman addresses the viewer in the present time, illustrating the contingency of history with the change of a single word.

Wiseman’s placement of these scenes toward the end of the film is reminiscent of Alain Resnais’s ending to *Night and Fog* for both filmmakers are attempting to bring the past into the present. Writing on *Night and Fog*, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis says how Resnais did not want to



make a documentary about the Holocaust that turned it into a “war monument.” Flitterman-Lewis says, “*Night and Fog* achieves Resnais’s objective; it avoids the limitations of the war monument, whose finality, unproblematic meaning, and instant significance are the result of its capacity to surround history and keep it safely distanced in the past. Instead, the films open structure and unresolved tensions create a space for the viewer that invites contemplation” (197). In many ways, Wiseman is doing the same thing with these three films. As explained in *At Berkeley*, Wiseman is not creating “time capsules” (or “war monuments”) of these institutions as they currently are or as they once were but is forming an “open structure” where thematic juxtapositions create “unresolved tensions” for the audience to work through.

Flitterman-Lewis continues saying how Resnais structures his film in such a way that the Holocaust is not designated to the past, but that this it is something that could happen again and it is the viewer’s duty to make sure that history does not repeat itself. She says how Resnais does this largely through the narration which shifts from past-tense to present-tense, climaxing toward the end with the narrator addressing the viewer directly. Flitterman-Lewis writes,

All of a sudden the narrator’s tone changes, becoming more direct: “*At this very moment, just as I am speaking to you [Au moment où je vous parle...], the icy waters of bog and wreckage fill the hollows of this scene of devastation.*” Time coalesces into a single instant (the present time of the viewing, the film-time of the narration, and the historic-time of the depicted events) at the very moment that the viewer is explicitly addressed (*vous*) by a voice that now belongs to someone (*je*). This voice introduces both social and subjective dimensions while it designates a single instance: *now*. But this is not a moment fixed for all time, for the meaning of the word varies according to each screening of the film (“now” in 1956 is very different from “now” as I write this in 1996, as it will be from “now” at any other moment in the future). In every case it is memory that turns past history into a palpable present (207).

Like Resnais, Wiseman’s cinema is also directed at the present-tense. Benson and Anderson write, “The experience of a Wiseman film is in a fictional present tense. This present-tense quality of the films is one of the rhetorical accomplishments that permit him to direct our

attention at what is actually happening before us, refusing to be distracted by the subjects' justifications, or by what might have come before, or what might be about to happen" (*Reality Fictions* 312). Similar to Resnais, Wiseman is afraid of history repeating itself because people "time capsule" the past *as* past thereby making them unprepared to understand and face the present.

As much as *Ex Libris* is about the past, it is also an urgent warning to people in the present. By the time Wiseman had finished *Ex Libris*, the 2016 presidential elections were over and Donald Trump had become president. Wiseman has expressed his disdain for President Trump in several interviews for *Ex Libris*. In *Filmmaker Magazine*, after the interviewer asks Wiseman whether he believes the First Amendment could be taken away from U.S. citizens in the age of Trump, Wiseman replies:

It can be taken from us in the way the courts interpret it. These judges are being appointed based on their political views, and the ones he has appointed so far are extremely conservative. The fear is that he [President Trump] has this Joseph Goebbels-like technique saying newspapers like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* are "fake news." He has picked up from Goebbels (though he probably doesn't know who Goebbels is) the notion of a big lie repeated over and over again, and that is what he is doing with "fake news" in the effort to discredit legitimate news sources and to magnify the importance of media organizations like Fox News and Breitbart, which are run by his avid supporters (Pritchard).

As illustrated in both *National Gallery* and *Ex Libris*, rhetoric greatly influences how one sees reality. Wiseman fears Trump's emphasis on certain organizations who use a specific rhetoric will undermine free speech and democracy as well as our ability to understand the present reality. What is revealing about Wiseman's comparison of Trump to Joseph Goebbels is Wiseman's doubt that Trump even knows who Goebbels is, i.e. Trump does not know his history. In light of *Ex Libris*, knowing one's history is central to understanding the present.

The last celebrity talk is also the last scene in the film and shows British artist Edmund de Waal in a rather large auditorium talking to a moderator about creativity. The talk ends with de Waal discussing Primo Levi and the importance of method and process. He says, “Be very, very careful when you describe how something is made, how it comes into shape, as process is not to be skated over. The manner of what we make defines us.” This last sentence by de Waal is as close a summation of *Ex Libris* as one can get using language for the film is about how narratives of the historical past shape the present.

In *Ex Libris*, the library is shown to be an inviting place where everyone is welcome, a place for people to share ideas, dismantle lies, and find the truth. Similar to the library’s mission, Bergson’s whole philosophical goal has been to “defend human freedom,” theorizing that freedom could be achieved through intuition (Ward 7). The reoccurring subject of slavery and inequality in *Ex Libris* take on an additional symbolical meaning in the context of Bergson’s ideas and reflect Anthony Marx’s comment that “the access to information is the fundamental solution over time to inequality.” Indeed, “the truth will set you free.”

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In his review for *Ex Libris*, Bilge Ebiri states, "A curious, welcome strain of utopianism has crept into Wiseman's recent projects." He writes,

The early works were anxious, driven, and messily, wonderfully human. In later years...Wiseman's subjects were often large, unwieldy institutions that seemed to be at serious risk of crumbling. But in recent years, I've noticed something far more optimistic and universal in his pictures. Films like *At Berkeley*, *In Jackson Heights*, and *National Gallery* document places and institutions that, despite challenges, fundamentally *work* (Ebiri).

Whether or not Wiseman's recent films truly are more "optimistic" than his previous films, or that these institutions "fundamentally work," there does seem to be a common bond between these most recent films. Wiseman's seemingly optimistic portrayal of these institutions is likely due in-part to his desire to defend these "timeless" public spaces in the current corporatized and digital age. With people spending more time in "space-less" places such as the internet and social media, physical institutions like universities, museums, and libraries are starting to be perceived as having less importance in the fast-paced present day. Wiseman challenges this perception by showing how these institutions have adapted to the present as well as their timeless cultural importance. But that importance is a qualitative one that cannot be defined in only quantitative terms.

However, what truly connects all three films on a thematic level is their emphasis on the idea that *the past is present*. Indeed, this can be gleaned from the interview with Arnaud Héé on *National Gallery*. Héé asks, "Is it possible to see this film as part of a cycle in your filmography encompassing *La Danse... Crazy Horse*, *At Berkeley*, and *National Gallery*? Each, in its own specific way, raises the issue of culture and heritage, and how they can be passed on to others, as well as how places of culture and knowledge adapt to the world." Wiseman replies, saying, "I am

primarily guided by circumstance. I want to film in the largest number of places possible, to capture contemporary life, in the time that is given to me to work and live. In *National Gallery*, contemporary life is strongly linked to the past” (Hée). Each of the films examined in this thesis focus on a different aspect of time, yet, each come to the similar conclusion that the present “is strongly linked to the past.”

Not only is this overarching theme communicated through the content of the films, but it is also expressed by Wiseman’s own filmmaking style. Wiseman crafts his films in a “present-tense” (Benson and Anderson, *Reality Fictions* 312) and this quality makes even his oldest films feel vital and relevant to people today. This feature is also one of the reasons why his films are important for it ensures their longevity and allows for future generations to look back on their history in a way that feels engaging. Unlike a history textbook, Wiseman’s films are not hampered by the linguistic rhetoric of an omnipresent narrator, allowing for more ambiguity and interpretation. Though Wiseman’s own perspective is embedded in his films, his opaque and modernist style invite the viewer to come up with their own ideas.

Henri Bergson’s ideas on time and knowledge are useful in grounding these films within a philosophical framework. Though Wiseman says he never starts with “a thesis” or a theory, Bergson brings to light some of the insinuated meanings found in the films. The binaries proposed by Bergson (such as the distinction between pure time and clock time, intuition and intellect, life and matter) are all thematic leitmotifs found in these films as well. Though there seems to be more ambiguity between the binaries in Wiseman’s films, Bergson muddles the dichotomies as well. Leszek Kolakowski writing about these dichotomies, says how, “All of Bergson’s other distinctions meet with the same fate: at the outset they seem clear-cut and

deprived of all intermediate zones, yet in the final analysis we see that each side carries within it a shadow of the other” (23).

This ambiguity can be seen in Bergson’s critique of language and its relationship to intellect. For Bergson, language is inherently incapable of perfectly describing reality. Kolakowski writes “language, as a part of our intelligence, is essentially a set of abstract signs; its task is to classify objects, to dissolve them into conceptual classes; uniqueness...is beyond its reach. No real object can be exhaustively depicted by the enumeration of the various classes to which it belongs, as their number is infinite” (18). However, Kolakowski later says that Bergson’s separation between intellect and intuition is “less rigid” and that language “can overcome to some extent its limitations and open a path to another, non-Platonic understanding of reality” through poetry (19). He says, “A poet uses language in a way which in fact runs counter to its normal function in order to convey something that might evoke in the reader his own intuitive perception; the latter is not properly communicable but a great artist’s effort can bring it closer to its expression than an analytical description might ever be able to” (Kolakowski 32). Frederick Wiseman invites viewers to directly experience the past *as* present through his extensive film library of historical reality told through visual poetry.

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