

## PREFACE

**T**he first edition of *Voyages of Discovery* was written in 1990 and published in 1992. At that time, Wiseman had made twenty-five feature-length documentaries, produced one fiction film (*The Cool World*), and directed another (*Seraphita's Diary*)—already a formidable output by any standard. Since then, Wiseman has made an astonishing twenty more films, his work deepening thematically and emotionally even as he has explored new directions. (At the time of this writing, his most recent film has been *Un couple*, released in the fall of 2022.) At the same time, there has emerged a more discernable trajectory in the films, as Wiseman has moved from muckraking to meditation, with respect, even love, for the people he films becoming more pronounced. One sees this dramatic shift in sensibility emerging in the 1980s with the *Deaf and Blind* films and *Near Death*. Discussion of *Near Death*, released as I was finishing the first edition, seemed then an appropriate way to end the book, but with time and the benefit of hindsight, it now seems more of a turning point.

Further, Wiseman's cultural status has shifted considerably since *Voyages of Discovery* was first published. At that time, because his films did not show in commercial venues, they were known primarily to film scholars, students, and professionals in the various fields (for example, education, medicine, social work, law) that they address. Now, however, they have been shown in film festivals around the world, and many museums

and galleries have devoted retrospectives to Wiseman's work, including the year-long series at New York City's Museum of Modern Art in 2010. In 2016, he received an Honorary Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (given "to honor extraordinary distinction in lifetime achievement" and for "exceptional contributions to the state of motion picture arts and sciences"). As well, some of Wiseman's films have become available on the Kanopy streaming platform, making them somewhat more accessible. In short, Wiseman has become a recognizable and widely embraced cultural figure, himself an institution. For these reasons, a second edition of *Voyages of Discovery*, the only book that covers all of Wiseman's films, seems necessary.

For the first edition, I rejected as too mechanical the simplest approach of discussing the films individually in the order of their release. Indeed, even the films themselves avoid a chronological structure. But many other possibilities readily presented themselves. For example, *High School* and *Basic Training* could easily be discussed in the same chapter, and several critics have already pointed out the considerable connections between these two films. Then again, *High School* could just as profitably be compared to the *Deaf and Blind* films and, of course, *High School II*. *Canal Zone* and *Sinai Field Mission*, to take another example, might have been included in the chapter on the military films. For that matter, a category such as "military films" might have been avoided altogether, on the grounds that such a heading places undue emphasis on content, in favor of a stylistic rubric like "self-reflexivity," a grouping that might include, for instance, *Welfare*, *Manoeuvre*, *Model*, *The Store*, and *National Gallery*. The groupings I finally settled upon seemed, to me, the best given the arguments I present, but this should in no way be understood to preclude the possibility of other critical schemas given the films' provocative richness.

As I write now, thirty years and twenty Wiseman films later, other possible groupings than those I have chosen here present themselves. Nevertheless, I have retained my original organization, expanding on the chapters where it seemed logical and adding three new chapters. In this way, I have managed to incorporate discussion of all of Wiseman's films at the time of this writing. All of the original chapters (1–8) have been revised to some extent, but their basic arguments have remained. Some

of what was originally chapter 1, “Man with a Movie Camera,” is now part of the introduction. However one chooses to organize an analysis of these films, though, what holds them together is that they all reveal an impressive richness as cinematic texts. I have also retained my original opening argument regarding the relation between documentary film and authorship, for it seems to me still an important and necessary argument to make despite the intervening years.

Although I do refer to Wiseman’s own comments about his work, whether my readings coincide with the filmmaker’s intentions has not been my concern. Their positioning of the spectator, *mise-en-scène*, and cinematic allusion is both impressively controlled and powerfully expressive, rivaling the best fiction films. My many points of comparison or contrast with fiction films (including the chapter titles) are deliberate, a measure of the rich design of Wiseman’s films as texts. This, then, is primarily a book of film criticism rather than theory. In these pages, theory is employed in the service of criticism—my aim throughout being to provide readings of the films that demonstrate their remarkable complexity as aesthetic works.

Since, as I argue, Wiseman’s films depend to such a great extent on their address to the spectator, in writing this book, I have sought to become the kind of viewer that Dudley Andrew, in his *Concepts in Film Theory*, calls “a new, or renewed spectator,” one who understands the films as signifying systems yet, at the same time, negotiates with them. Indeed, as I ultimately argue, this is precisely the ideal spectator addressed by these films. Hence, the subtitle of this book refers to “the cinema” and not “the films” of Frederick Wiseman, for I treat these films as dynamic works that exist in relation to the viewer rather than approach them simply as textual objects. As I explain, Wiseman has referred to his films as “voyages of discovery.” My work as a critic has taken me on a similar journey of discovery; I have traveled along with these films for years, regarding them as works that I believe to be of major importance, eager to explore what each reveals to me. For Wiseman’s films are, in Roland Barthes’s distinction, more writerly than readerly. They are about institutions, power, knowledge, religion, community, democracy, sexuality, technology, ideology, race, and cinema itself, and no single voyage could claim to chart such vast seas.

All of the quoted dialogue is taken from the Zipporah transcripts, although I have made silent corrections as necessary. The comments attributed to Wiseman for which sources are not provided are taken from a lengthy interview I conducted with the filmmaker in his Cambridge studio in January 1989, several follow-up conversations by telephone, and a 2022 exchange via email.