

## FILMS.

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#### High School II Summer Celluloid Meltdown

Having spent many happy hours watching the most stripped-down of experimental films, I marveled as the summer movies reached an early peak with the O.J. Simpson motorcade. To think that so many people might want to join me in staring at an hourlong tracking shot showing nothing but a van moving steadily through traffic—95 million of my fellow citizens, according to the *Times*! And yet experience suggests that 94 million of them would rip down any screen on which they were shown a Michael Snow film, and then lynch the projectionist.

How to account for this sudden, late triumph of Minimalism? I suppose people did not complain about the sparseness of what they saw because it did not feel sparse to them; it did not feel sparse because they were paying attention to what they knew, rather than to what was in front of their eyes. Once again, conception had beat perception. This O.J. Effect (let's call it) is an inescapable fact of mental life. But what if we could overcome it? How much might we understand about the world if we could shut off our conceptions and just look?

The question, though impractical, is far from idle. In fact, we spend our lives living out an answer. Tossed at birth into a world already in progress, we learn on the run to make sense of things, as any number of people have pointed out, from David Hume to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Turn from philosophy to the visual arts, and you can learn much the same lesson. From Giotto to the Impressionists, the history of European painting may be seen as a gradual loosening of pictorial codes and predetermined meanings—of conceptions, in other words—as artists gave in to a growing fascination with the elusive world of appearances.

Which brings us to Frederick Wiseman. In his all-new documentary *High School II*—an optimistic counterpart to the sardonic, Vietnam-era *High School* (1968)—Wiseman once more comes as close as a filmmaker can to relying on pure observation. He provides no information through titles or voiceovers. Not once does anyone sit before the camera to re-

count her story or provide his opinion. The film tells you only what you would have learned by standing where the filmmaker stood and watching. It's as if Wiseman were putting to the test our naïve belief that you can get at reality simply by turning on the camera. I believe this method is practiced by only two groups of filmmakers: the biggest (everyone who makes home movies) and the smallest, the hardy bunch who give themselves to *cinéma vérité*.

In *High School II* you know which institution you're observing only because the students' computers happen to bear handwritten signs: "Central Park East Secondary School." You can figure out the school's location only because Wiseman has included a few establishing shots

### *Wiseman's method in High School II fits perfectly with Central Park East's approach.*

early in the film, showing the kids on their way into the building; a corner signpost, standing in what is apparently Manhattan, reads "106 Street" and "Madison Avenue." Spanish Harlem, then. You soon notice that almost all of the kids are Latino or black, whereas half of the teachers seem to be white—perhaps more among the senior staff. Is there a conclusion to be drawn? Yes—but not a simple one, as you soon learn through footage shot at a counseling session:

Teacher (white, portly, mustached, middle-aged): "You have mixed feelings about being here. Do you feel this is a white school?"

Student (black, reticent, downcast but mustering defiance): "A lotta times."

The student's mother breaks in. Heat-edly, she declares (perhaps more to the teacher than to her child) that in her house, assumptions are not made on the basis of skin color. But the teacher, interestingly enough, chooses to back up the kid. "That's a real feeling," he tells the mother. "That's a real feeling."

And so (at some cost to the viewer's patience) meaning emerges—real meaning, not the stereotyped stuff that merely confirms what we think we know. In stereotypes—that is, in the popular media, from Rush Limbaugh's orations to *The New York Times*—middle-class do-gooders

inevitably turn out to be patrons. But as you watch *High School II*, you come to understand that Central Park East is run by people who are creatures of legions, not dogmas; nondogmatic and earth, these are activists who care more about improving people's lives. (The name of the school, Deborah Meier, is listed in the introduction of this magazine. Both a disclaimer and a boast.) Wiseman, by summarizing the school's history into the concise and powerful something that Wiseman does over the course of the film, is not having betrayed the movie, but as well go on and tell you how the students have made it a daily fact of life, about the juggling homework and about the fights that break out over the verdict in the O.J. King trial (one of the wackiest of the film) and their queuing up for the ensuing riots. They would think about, even if they were inside a school; and yet Central Park East not only helps them set their hearts to these issues but also teaches them how to experiment with mutations, or savor the modality in *King Lear*.

It's a lot to jam into one hour, but *High School II* suffers from Wiseman's understandable incompleteness; inevitably, it comes in a less visceral way than *High School*, with its parade of buffoons. (Direct comparison is in New York, where both are being shown at Film Forum.) The praise for Central Park East implicit in *High School II* would have been credible without such exuberant documentation; besides, Wiseman fits perfectly with the school's approach to teaching. Again and again the staff of Central Park East asks the students to fill out their statements in detail, to provide more evidence than exactly what Wiseman does and brilliantly.

The good, the bad and the ugly of the summer films thus far: *Speed*, a film that has been about mostly in terms of Keaton's new haircut, is actually pretty good if only for the possibility of it to Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear*. Both are built around a large, some-