



## Welfare

Director: Frederick Wiseman, USA, 1975, 167 minutes

CURATED BY HAIDA PAUL

*Welfare* is one of Frederick Wiseman's most demanding and rewarding films. Shot in 1975 at a New York City welfare agency, the film reflects the struggle of welfare workers and clients attempting to function within the web of institutional laws and regulations governing their transactions. As with most Wiseman films (such as *Titicut Follies*, *High School*, *Juvenile Court*, *Law & Order*) the venue is institutional and easily recognizable. The action takes place within that framework of social mechanism. The camera simply looks and records. The resulting footage, superbly photographed by William Brayne, exposes the relentless flow of problems that drive people to seek aid: unemployment, inadequate housing, addiction, racism, homophobia, medical and psychiatric disorders, child abuse, and neglect of the elderly. The needs are overwhelming. The red tape is endless. Claimants' responses to the system run the gamut from abject resignation to enraged antagonism.

A young woman is told by her interviewer that he's 'looking after two and a half million people and that if a couple of thousand don't get what's due them, I'm doing a good job.' The young woman leaves. A man with a fractured skull heaps racist abuse on a kindly security officer. Two children play at shooting each other with umbrellas. A woman wrapped in a huge overcoat suckles her baby. Beside her, an old man gazes apprehensively at the handful of forms he holds.

In the early 70s, technical advances made it possible to shoot synchronized sound documentaries with available light. This enabled Wiseman to use lightweight equipment, no additional lights, and a small, unobtrusive crew. He recorded sound in tandem with

Brayne on camera. They used a system of discreet signals to communicate on who or what the camera should follow. Wiseman's editing is brilliant. What emerges is the evocation of endless days spent standing in queues or waiting in crowded corridors under the relentless glare of fluorescent lights. The film does not judge welfare workers, people on welfare, the security staff, or the person who sweeps up at the end of the day. It is a film that asks the question 'whose fault is all this?' *Welfare* is as sadly relevant today as when it was made 35 years ago.

### DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Frederick Wiseman is probably one of today's greatest living documentary filmmakers. For close to thirty years, thanks to the Public Broadcast Service (PBS), he has created an exceptional body of work consisting of thirty full length films devoted primarily to exploring American institutions. Over time these films have become a record of the western world.

Early in his career, Wiseman examined institutions – a hospital, a high school, army basic training, a welfare center, a police precinct. His approach reveals the profound acknowledged and unacknowledged conformity and inequality of American society. Wiseman's films are also a reflection on democracy.

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