CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media

Edited by

WILLIAM L. NOTHSTINE

CAROLE BLAIR
University of California, Davis

GARY A. COPELAND
University of Alabama

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The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's *Primate*

Thomas W. Benson

The mission of rhetorical critics is to pay close attention to the communicative potentials of symbolic forms, to understand not only the forms themselves but also what listeners, readers, and watchers are likely to make of those forms. Rhetorical critics inquire into meaning, not simply in an artifact but also in the pragmatics of that artifact: that is, in how a human being can, or did, or should use that artifact. Rhetorical critics are interested not only in *what* meaning emerges from a text or artifact, but also in *how* it emerges. This is a complicated matter, but it seems apparent, at least, that a critical account must do more than propose a reduction of its text to a theme or an effect: the game of critical truth or consequences. In rhetorical situations, the connections among referent, author, text, and reader are always mutual.

Even if focused pragmatically on the "effect" of a text, a rhetorical critic is usually going to do best if he or she is attentive to the details of the text; to the contexts, both internal and external, that give that text meaning; and to the forms and processes that connect to create meanings. For modern rhetorical criticism, a meaning-centered approach brings to the text a curiosity not simply about the structure of the text, nor about the clues to the author revealed by the text, nor about the extent to which the text mirrors "reality," but also about the ways in which the text invites an audience to make meanings. The text implies its audience and the interpretive actions of its audience.

I propose to examine the rhetoric of Frederick Wiseman's documentary film *Primate.*[1] Wiseman helps us to understand how meanings are made by audiences, and how audiences turn "facts" into symbols with which to comprehend their world.

FACTS, AUTHORS, AND READERS

To understand how Wiseman's *Primate* works, and its significance to studies in rhetoric and film, we need to see it as part of a developing tradition, a continually evolving dialogue in the arts and social sciences of the past century. To place Wiseman fully into the context of Western cultural developments is clearly beyond the scope of this essay, and so I propose instead

to begin with a brief discussion of two authors who are clearly precursors of Wiseman. Anthony Trollope, a nineteenth century master of political realism and personal romance, and James Agee, a twentieth century documentarist who turned facts into imaginative activities, help us to trace the development of the issues of audience action and the transformation of facts.

Anthony Trollope understood that fictions are made by authors in collaboration with their audiences. In the first of his Palliser novels, *Can You Forgive Her?*—its title itself is addressed to readers—Trollope addresses his reader directly. He has been describing how his heroine, Alice Vavasour, jilted the virtuous John Grey because she felt she might have fallen in love with her own cousin, the scoundrel George Vavasour. She even promises to marry her cousin, thinking she can help him. But she soon discovers her mistake, and understands that she can never love George—and of course, that she cannot permit herself to return to John Grey. In the midst of Alice's muddle occurs this passage:

> She had done very wrong. She knew that she had done wrong. . . . She understood it now, and knew that she could not forgive herself.
>
> But can you forgive her, delicate reader? Or am I asking the question too early in my story? [We are on page 384 of an 800 page novel]. For myself, I have forgiven her. . . . And you also must forgive her before we close the book, or else my story will have been told amiss.[2]

Trollope here asserts what every author of fiction knows: that the novel is not simply the invention of the actions of its characters, but the invention of the actions of its readers, in collaboration with those readers.[3] The *meaning* of Trollope's novel is not simply in the story of Alice's redemption, it is in the pleasure we take in wishing for and welcoming that redemption.

Another short passage from Trollope bears on our second methodological point, that a critic needs to attend both to details and to contexts in constructing a balanced account of meaning. Alice is in the Alps with her cousins. The idle George Vavasour is described as lounging on a "bench, looking at the mountains, with a cigar in his mouth." George expresses his contempt for hikers who climb the mountains for exercise, or for study. "They rob the mountains of their poetry," says George, "which is or should be their greatest charm." He goes on:

> "The poetry and mystery of the mountains are lost to those who make themselves familiar with their details, not the less because such familiarity may have useful results. In this world things are beautiful only because they are not quite seen, or not perfectly understood. Poetry is precious chiefly because it suggests more than it declares. Look in there, through that valley, where you just see the distant little peak at the end. Are you not dreaming of the unknown beautiful world that exists up there;—beautiful, as heaven is beautiful, because you know nothing of the reality? If you make your way up there and back to-morrow, and

> find out all about it, do you mean to say that it will be as beautiful to you when you come back?"
>
> "Yes—I think it would," said Alice.[4]

By this point in the novel, we have come to recognize Alice's virtue and George's sinfulness, and so Alice's simple "yes" carries considerable force. It is clear from the discussion that Alice, and Trollope, invite the reader to take pleasure and wisdom from the details of everyday reality, and from the relations of those details, and even from the effort that it takes us to trudge up the mountain for a clearer view of them. Trollope's invitation to detail has nothing in common with that other sort of nineteenth century amateur scientism that reduced the world to a statistic.

Charles Dickens, especially in *Hard Times,* shows us the terrible consequences of the misplaced love of facts, and John Fowles uses another facet of this mentality in two of his best novels, *The Collector* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* both of which are in large part variations on his theme of the horror of the impulse to factualize, possess, name, count, and fragment the world of nature, to reduce it to our order and our use.[5] For Trollope, the alternative to George Vavasour's vague and lazy romanticism is not science, but a common sense feeling, a willingness to face the details of the world, and to see their relations and their consequences.

Americans have had an especially interesting time trying to cope with "the facts." Our literature, journalism, and popular arts have been dominated in this century by various forms of flight to and from facts. From Upton Sinclair to Norman Mailer, from Robert Flaherty to *60 Minutes,* from the newsreels to *Real People,* we have searched after the facts, and have found that facts are not enough, even if we could agree on what "the" facts are. Artists have told us over and over again that art may be too disconnected, and science too reductive, to bring us into a proper relation with our world.

The issue is posed with special poignancy by James Agee, in a passage from his documentary essay on Depression sharecroppers in Alabama, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men:*

> If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.[6]

And yet Agee is writing a book, and not simply trading in objects, as his writing shows very well. In a later passage, Agee describes the dresses of one of the tenant farm women:

> Mrs. Gudger: I have spoken already of her dresses. I think she has at most five. . . . Three are one-piece dresses; two are in two pieces. By cut they are almost

> identical; by pattern of print they differ, but are similar in having been carefully chosen, all small and sober, quiet patterns, to be in good taste and to relieve one another's monotony. I think it may be well to repeat their general appearance, since it is of her individual designing, and is so thoroughly a part of the logic of her body, bearing, face and temper. They have about them some shadow of nineteenth-century influence, tall skirt, short waist, and a little, too, of imitation of Butterick patterns for housewives' housework-dresses; this chiefly in the efforts at bright or 'cheery,' post-honeymoon-atmosphere trimming: narrow red or blue tape sewn at the cuffs or throat. But by other reasons again they have her own character and function: the lines are tall and narrow, as she is, and little relieved, and seem to run straight from the shoulders to the hem low on the shins, and there is no collar, but a long and low V at the throat, shut narrowly together, so that the whole dress like her body has the long vertical of a Chartres statue.[7]

The passage is remarkable not simply for its factuality, its close attention to detail, but also for the way it relates those details, gives them a meaning in the life of the person whose dresses are being described, and calls on us to bring to the description a cultural sophistication that is almost certainly unfamiliar to Mrs. Gudger. The final reference to the statues of Chartres Cathedral is only the most explicit indication that the entire passage is addressed to educated and prosperous readers, and not to the tenant farmers with whom Agee in so many ways identifies himself imaginatively.

The issues raised by Anthony Trollope in the 1860s, and by James Agee in the 1930s are still with us, though transformed. Certainly in the past decade and a half one of the most profound inquirers into American facts has been the documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, who has produced, beginning with *Titicut Follies*, in 1967, some fifteen major documentary films. Wiseman's films have much to teach us about the uses to which we can put "the facts" about everyday reality, and about the rhetorical actions that film makers and their audiences perform.

THE RHETORIC OF *PRIMATE*

Primate, shown on public television for the first time in 1974, was shot at the Yerkes Primate Research Center in Atlanta. Immediate and later reaction to *Primate* was sharply divided between those who charged that Wiseman had unfairly attacked the Yerkes scientists and those who applauded the film as a profound attack against vivisection. That is to say, the majority of commentators for and against the film seemed to recognize it as a rhetorical act in the narrowest sense—as persuasive discourse in the forensic and deliberative modes, accusing a group of particular scientists of cruelty to animals, and attacking the policy of public support for animal research.

A rhetorical critic could sensibly and conveniently proceed through the

film on these narrow grounds. We would extract from the film its implicit accusations and propositions, examine the proofs Wiseman offers to support them, and attempt to assess both the extent to which the film might be persuasive and the extent to which we, as critics, could support the proofs as "good reasons" to accept the propositions and accusations. Nothing could be more straightforward.

But such a critique, though it would have its uses, would be seriously incomplete, because it would fail to account for the way the audience is likely to understand the film. Rhetorical critics in the last two decades have discovered that non-oratorical persuasive actions can be analyzed with the rigorous tools of traditional rhetorical criticism. But they have also followed Kenneth Burke in understanding that all symbolic actions, and not just those most narrowly didactic, can be encompassed by a rhetorical criticism that is interested in the whole enterprise of sharing meanings in human communication.[8] It is this latter, larger sense of rhetorical criticism to which we must turn, I think, to understand how Fred Wiseman's *Primate* invites us to share its meanings.

What does Wiseman's *Primate* mean? *Primate* invites us to experience a horrified, comic rage at the arrogance, hypocrisy, banality, and destructiveness of our fellow humans and ourselves. Like most of Wiseman's films, *Primate* is not simply accusatory, it is paradoxical, and this of course contributes to the frustration of Wiseman's opponents—both in the film community and in the various institutions that he has explored in his documentaries.

Primate, like Wiseman's other documentaries, is in black and white, with synchronous sound, but with no direct verbal commentary by Wiseman. The film is 105 minutes long—feature length—and contains, according to an analysis by Liz Ellsworth, 569 shots.[9] That works out to an average of 11 seconds per shot for *Primate,* approximately half of the average shot length of 22 seconds in Wiseman's *High School.*[10]

The unusually large number of shots in *Primate* is not simply a fact, but a clue, both to the rhythm of the film and to its method of building meanings. We would expect that with briefer shots the meanings would emerge to a great extent from the structural relations among shots—from editing or montage—and that the shots themselves would be very likely to be highly condensed in their imagery and iconography. This pattern of condensation and montage does much to account for Wiseman's method.

Primate is addressed not to particular crimes, nor even to social policy, but to our attitudes about human action. The film is not merely forensic or deliberative, it is existential.

I have said that the film follows a pattern of condensation and montage. I propose to get closer to the film's method by examining how certain major structural features of the film invite us to construct meanings. I will discuss three major structures: Comparison, Sequence and Continuity, and Sound/

Image relations. Rather than treat these structural features separately and sequentially, I will layer them in the discussion that follows, because they work together to achieve Wiseman's effects.

Primate's effect depends very heavily upon the family of rhetorical structures that may be collected under the heading of comparison: analogy, contrast, metaphor, identification, irony, and comparison itself. Our response to the film depends upon our willingness to compare men to apes, and to judge their relations in terms of the increasingly complex comparisons we are invited to draw. The film opens with a long series of shots in which we may first notice the ambiguity of the film's title, which applies equally well to men and apes. We see a large composite photograph, with portraits of eminent scientists, hanging, presumably, on a wall at the Yerkes Center. Wiseman cuts from the composite portrait to a series of eight individual portraits, in series, then to a sign, an exterior shot of the Center, and then a series of four shots of apes in their cages. The comparison is obvious, though not particularly forceful, and it depends for its meaning both upon the structure Wiseman has chosen to use—at least he does not intercut the apes and the portraits—and upon our own predictable surprise at noticing how human the apes look.

Slightly later in the film, still very near the beginning, occur a pair of sequences that are crucial to how we will experience the rest of the film. Researchers are watching and recording the birth of an orangutan. The descriptive language is objective, but not altogether free of anthropomorphism: for example, it is hard not to refer to the female giving birth as the "mother."

Immediately following the birth sequence, we watch women in nursing gowns mothering infant apes: the apparatus of American babyhood is evident—plastic toys, baby bottles, diapers, baby scales, and a rocking chair. To reinforce the comparison, we hear the women speaking to the infant apes:

> "Here. Here. Take it. Take it. Come on." [says the first woman, offering a toy to an infant ape].

Then another woman enters the nursery, also dressed in gown and mask.

> "Good morning, darlings. Good morning. Mama's babies? You gonna be good boys and girls for Mommy?"

A moment later she continues:

> "Mama take your temperature. Come on, we'll take your temperature. It's all right. It's all right. It's all right. It's all right."

Then a man enters and hands cups to the infants. He says:

> "Come on. Come on. Here's yours."

The rhetorical effect of this sequence is to reinforce our sentimental identification with the apes. And this scene, by comparison, makes even more frightening a sequence that follows close upon it, in which a small monkey is taken from its cage, screaming, as a man with protective gloves pins its arms behind its back and clamps his other hand around its neck.

After these sequences, every image in the film invites us to continue enacting comparisons, as part of the process by which we actively make meanings out of the images. Those who object to Wiseman's methods argue that his comparison of apes and people is a cheap shot, an obviously sentimental ploy to make monkeys out of primatologists. Although there is something to be said for this view, since it is quite clear that Wiseman is showing us comparisons whose meanings are predictable, the problem is complicated. Wiseman's comparisons do not stay at the simple level of the infant scene, but grow increasingly complex throughout the film. The infant scene not only predisposes us sentimentally, it also rehearses us in the exercise of comparative thinking. The researchers themselves invite the comparison. Their use of the dramatic apparatus of American baby care is not something Wiseman forced upon them, though admittedly he takes advantage of it. And at a deeper level, those scientists who object to a sentimental willingness to object to vivisection are placed in the paradoxical situation that the primary justification for their research is that, biologically, apes are such close relatives of people. The defenders of such research must seek funding for their research on the grounds that apes are biologically analogous to humans; but they must also seek to justify their practices upon those apes by arguing that, ethically, apes are not analogous to humans. *Primate* makes it very difficult for viewers to buy that argument, by inviting them to identify with the apes at an aesthetic, subjective level. This is why comparison is so central to Wiseman's film: comparison both justifies and condemns the research, and Wiseman exploits that comparison not simply to attack vivisection, or scientific research in general, but also to engage us in actively considering the paradoxes of our institutions and ourselves.

And this is why those scientists and reviewers who attacked *Primate* had such a frustrating time of it. Wiseman invites his audience not simply to condemn particular scientists for foolishness or cruelty to animals, and not just to reason about the policy of animal research. Instead, Wiseman reframes the whole question, inviting us to look with our common sense at the whole context of human action at Yerkes, to employ our own abilities to identify with the apes, to feel horror and shame at the actions of our fellow humans.

Wiseman's peculiar rhetorical talent is to help his audiences identify with oppressors and oppressed: we feel pity, fear, and rage on behalf of the victims, with whom we identify; and we feel the shock of horrified recognition in realizing that the oppressors are acting in our name, as members of this society: teaching our children, butchering our meat, administering our

institutions, and toying with the generation and termination of life in a primate research center.

Comparison works in another way in the film. Wiseman establishes a dialectic between acts of kindness to the apes, and acts that we are likely to perceive as cruelty. Do the acts of kindness balance the acts of cruelty—is there a journalistic attempt at fairness here? Not really. We understand that in this institution the apes are subject to human domination, mutilation, and termination. In such a situation the acts of kindness do not balance the acts of heartless research. Rather, kindness is reduced to hypocrisy, a lie told to ease the consciences of the scientists and to keep the apes under control. Far from balancing the harshness of the research scenes, the scenes of kindness turn the research into a cruelty and a betrayal.

We can perhaps forgive Wiseman his unsympathetic methods, because we realize that the shame and rage we direct at the primate researchers is directed at them as representatives of ourselves. It is not that we cannot forgive them—we cannot forgive ourselves.

And what makes Wiseman's films so devastating is that there is no easy liberal solution. Wiseman's films are not about corruption, they are about something that is much more nearly indivisible from our daily lives, and about institutions that—even when they have some modifiable policies—are never going to be able to resolve the paradoxes they were set up to deal with. Problem films are almost always optimistic, in that every problem implies a solution. Wiseman's films do not imply any solution to the enterprise of being human.

And here we have another reason why *Primate* is so frustrating to the scientists who have attacked it. They realize that they must defend themselves on the deliberative issue of the justification for their research. But *Primate* goes beyond deliberation—one cannot expunge the effect of *Primate* on a susceptible viewer with an argument addressed to policy. And yet—and here's the rub—Wiseman's film is relevant to that deliberative issue, even as it goes beyond it. The rhetoric of non-oratorical forms frequently presents us with this paradox: that it implies a stance toward deliberative matters that its opponents cannot refute adequately with a deliberative reply.

Let us examine briefly another sequence in *Primate.* It is the climactic sequence of the film, a little over twenty minutes, and 100 shots, long. In it, researchers remove a gibbon from its cage, anesthetize it, drill a hole in its skull, insert a needle, then open its chest cavity, decapitate it, crack open its skull, and slice the brain for microscopic slides. It is a harrowing sequence. From a structural standpoint, Wiseman uses the techniques we have noticed earlier. The images are often highly condensed, with big closeups of needles, drills, scalpels, the tiny beating heart, the gibbon's terrified face, scissors, jars, vises, dials, and so on.

We are invited to engage in our continued work of making comparisons and metaphors: the gibbon is easy to identify with, in its terror of these silent

and terminal medical procedures. We are the gibbon, and we are the surgeons. At another level, we see the gibbons' cages as a sort of death row, and call upon our memories of prison movies when we see the helpless fellow gibbons crying out from their cages as the victim is placed back into its cage for a twenty-five-minute pause in the vivisection.

Wiseman has carefully controlled sequence and continuity in this section of the film, first by placing the scene very near the end of the film, so that it becomes the climax of the preceding comedy, and then by controlling its internal structure for maximum effect. The sequence is governed by the rules of both fiction and documentary. As in *cinema verite* documentary, we do not know until almost the very last second that the gibbon is certainly going to die. Earlier in the film we have seen monkeys with electrodes planted in their brains, so we are able to hope that the gibbon will survive. We keep hoping that he will live, but as the operation becomes more and more destructive of the animal, we must doubt our hopes. And then, with terrible suddenness, and with only a few seconds warning, the surgeon cuts off the gibbon's head. We feel a terrible despair that it has come to this. But the sequence continues through the meticulous, mechanical process of preparing slides of the brain. Finally we see the researchers sitting at the microscope to examine the slides for which the gibbon's life has been sacrificed—and for us, as viewers, the discovery ought to be important if it is to redeem this death. The two researchers talk:

> "Oh, here's a whole cluster of them. Here, look at this."
> "Yeah. My gosh, that is beautiful."
> "By golly, and see how localized. No fuzzing out. . . ."
> "For sure it does not look like dirt, or . . ."
> "No, no, it's much too regular."
> "I think we are on our way."
> "Yeah. That's sort of interesting."

The whole operation, which viewers must experience as pitiable and frightening, seems to have been indulged in for the merest idle curiosity, and, if they cannot distinguish brains from dirt, at the lowest possible level of competence.

Our suspicions are confirmed a few minutes later when a group of researchers seated at a meeting reassure each other that pure research is always justified, even if it seems to be the pursuit of useless knowledge.

We have already mentioned the sound/image relationships in this sequence in discussing the structural uses of comparison and continuity. But let me point to some special issues that relate to Wiseman's use of sound. At many places in the film, people talk to apes, creating a dramatic fiction that the apes can understand and respond to human speech. But in the vivisection sequence, no word is spoken to the victim. This silence is almost as disturbing as the operation itself, because a bond of identification offered

earlier is now denied. Its denial, in this context, becomes part of an action that we see as sadistic. It is interesting that Wiseman's critics in the scientific community object that he has made a misleading use of sound. Their argument is that one cannot understand scientific research just by watching it take place, and that the audience needs to be told what it is seeing and why it is justified in scientific terms. The absence of a narrator forces us to see the film as an existential drama, and to believe in the reality of the gibbon's death as important in and of itself. But that is the point. This is not a debate between Wiseman and the primatologists on the costs versus the benefits of vivisection. Presumably there are good reasons to be offered by both sides of that debate. Wiseman works at a different level, inviting us to question whether any verbal justification is relevant to what we have seen. Wiseman uses his "reality fictions"—the term is his—to address our subjective consciousness, and his films do not depend for their effect upon objective accuracy (whatever that is), or immediate political utility.

Although Wiseman has frequently referred to himself as a documentary film maker, he has never professed to provide an objective description of reality. In fact, he seems to have coined the term "reality fiction" as a partly tongue-in-cheek way of declining to be described as part of the *cinema verite* tradition, with its implied claims of transparency and unmanipulated reality. Wiseman has frequently described his editing method as a process of fiction-making in which bits and pieces of photographed actuality are reassembled to see what can be found in the material.

And yet a very large percentage of the praise and detraction of Wiseman's films centers on the issue of accuracy. Those who praise the films often seem to accept them as literally true, and discuss not the films but the people in them. And those who object to the films often do so on the basis of their alleged inaccuracy or lack of objectivity. Wiseman usually brushes aside both the praise and the blame, though he has often been quite open about his methods. He allows his admirers the meanings they find in the films, and he typically responds, as he did to an objection made by Geoffrey H. Bourne, Director of the Yerkes Center, that Bourne did not object to the film when he saw it for himself, but only after he began to see how he looked to others.[11]

One of the more interesting objections to Wiseman's accuracy is made by Karl Heider. Heider, an anthropologist and ethnographic film maker, argues that one of the primary attributes of a successful ethnographic film is that it "show the structure of a whole act."[12] One of Heider's key examples of a film that fails to depict whole acts is Wiseman's *Primate.*

> A major weakness of Frederick Wiseman's 1974 television film, "Primate," was that, although he spent one month shooting and two hours of screen time on bits of scientific experimentation at the Yerkes Primate Research Center in Atlanta, the film never followed a single experiment as a whole act. The ap-

> proach had interestingly different effects on different viewers. Laymen (including television critics) were simply horrified by the picture of senseless butchery in the guise of science; one friend of mine who is familiar with that sort of research could fill in the gaps for himself and was fascinated by the film; more thoughtful viewers reacted strongly against the film itself on the grounds that it made no attempt to communicate an understanding of primate research by presenting whole acts, but only used scenes of gore to play on the audience's emotions and turn them away from such research.[13]

I have quoted Heider at some length to try to do justice to the shape of his argument.[14]

Heider's objections deserve careful scrutiny, and there are five important considerations that deserve to be mentioned. First, it is curious that in a passage in which he is describing the importance of "wholeness" Heider does not provide a full description of *Primate,* thus denying to Wiseman the structural completeness he proposes as his standard of accuracy.

Second, and obviously, Wiseman does not present his films as ethnographic documents, and so it is not clear why the standards Heider proposes for ethnography should be applied to *Primate.*

Third, Wiseman does provide, in at least one case, a dramatic account, with beginning, middle, and end, of one experiment. The vivisection of the gibbon takes approximately twenty minutes of screen time: it begins when the gibbon is taken from its cage, it provides some background on the stated desire of the scientists to check some previous research, it proceeds through the surgery to the examination of slides and the agreement that the procedure has been a success. Of course, Wiseman's account is anything but neutral, but it does have the three-act structure that Heider accuses the film of lacking.

Fourth, it is interesting to note that in developing his case against *Primate,* Heider devotes very little space to the film itself, and concentrates instead on audience reactions to the film. Implicitly, Heider seems to be struggling with the difficulty that philosophy, science, and rhetoric have recently begun to re-examine in a new light. Is Heider implying that the standard of a film's accuracy is to be found not in its correspondence to an "objective" reality, but in what an audience makes of it? Apparently not, because Heider prejudges the matter in favor of the primatologists—the lay audience's reactions to the film are dismissed as "emotional." Heider seems to imply that if the audience had the whole story, they would understand and support primate research.

A major difficulty of ethnographic—or any other—film is that accuracy cannot be measured simply in terms of the correspondence of the film to the actuality it describes. Every theorist of ethnographic film, including Heider, recognizes that completeness is impossible. Every film that explains one culture to another must confront the dilemma of point of view: if the film is made purely from the point of view of the subject culture, it will be unclear

to the audience; if the film is translated into the point of view of the audience, it will necessarily introduce elements that are unfamiliar to, and therefore untrue for, the subject culture. Hence the question of accuracy often reduces itself to the struggle over point of view. Clearly it would have been possible for a film maker to make a film sympathetic to the point of view of the primatologists: but that was not the point.

But, fifth, by far the most interesting and challenging of Heider's arguments is his standard of "whole acts." The chief danger of Heider's "whole act" standard is that it can easily reduce a sensible principle to a naive and inappropriate technical reductionism. In principle, Heider is convincing when he argues that it is a mistake to focus on what he calls the "peak" of a cultural event, "that part of the act which involves the most energy and activity and draws the most attention."[15] Even if the peak activity is the focus of one's interest, that peak cannot be properly understood without some context, and in ethnographic reporting, the cultural context would include some placement of the activity in its natural setting in time and space, including the relevant events that led up to and succeeded the event. And a full understanding of the whole act might require not simply extended observation but verbal commentary about the invisible and implicit cultural substructures that give meaning to the act. Clearly, from the point of view of the scientists, Wiseman withholds from his audience the contextual information that might either distract us from the horrors or justify the horrors in the name of scientific knowledge or human use.

But why should Heider assume that the "act" being described by *Primate* is scientific-research-as-understood-by-scientists? Heider's argument rests on the unsupportable assumptions that the ethnographer is explaining "them" to "us"; and that any social action is, firmly, finally, and naturally what it is. Wiseman correctly violates both assumptions, in my view. *Primate* is not about a "them"—it is about us. The scientists are not a foreign culture but our agents, acting like us, and on our behalf. And what a social action "is" is a matter of definition, duration, and point of view. A behavior may possibly be what it is, but an action is a socially constructed human product, subject to understandings (and misunderstandings) from a variety of perspectives, more than one of which can be accurate.

A human action, as rhetoricians from Aristotle to Kenneth Burke have told us, is a behavior waiting for a name. If a man kills another, it is for others to judge whether the act is an accident, manslaughter, or murder. From the point of view of the victim, the act is the end of life. From the point of view of the perpetrator, the act may be the culmination of a quest (revenge) or the beginning of an ordeal. From the point of view of the community, the act is a legal fact, to be dealt with as a matter of justice. Any one of their points of view is capable of being understood as a "whole act," and yet they are obviously different renderings of a single set of events, variously understood (and not by any means necessarily misunderstood).

Similarly, in the narrative arts, the form of the whole work guides the reader in defining the action that is represented. In a recent novel, *July's People,* Nadine Gordimer describes the experiences of a White South African family hiding in the bush with their former servant, July, during a revolution. It is not at all clear that the family will survive the ordeal. The novel ends when the wife runs off, alone, to seek rescue from a helicopter. From one point of view, the novel is disastrously incomplete, since we do not learn whether she is actually rescued or, if she is, what happens to her husband and child. The novel seems to end too soon, before its action has been completed. But that is just the point. It is only when the novel has ended that we realize that the action of the novel is not, as we had thought it might be, about the escape, successful or not, of this family. Rather, we see, when it ends in the woman's headlong flight through the bush, the action of the novel is the woman's transformation from a housewife to "a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility."[16] The strong feeling that Gordimer's novel is incomplete forces us, as readers, to reevaluate what we take the novel to be about, at the same time recognizing our own predispositions toward melodrama.

Let me cite one other example, to show how the process may work in a different way. American student viewers almost always feel that Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin* is too long. The fourth "act" of the film climaxes with the famous massacre on the Odessa steps, which is capped, briefly, by the answering guns of the Potemkin coming to the aid of the victims. Then comes a fifth "act," in which the Potemkin cruises off from Odessa and goes to meet the fleet. It is not clear to the mutineers on the Potemkin whether the fleet will open fire on them. At the last moment, the sailors of the fleet refuse to fire. Why does the film seem too long to American students, and why would Eisenstein have mishandled his dramatic forms? It is a question of what *Potemkin* is *about.* American students are inclined to see *Potemkin* as melodrama, in which a mutiny leads to the massacre on the Odessa steps and the vengeance of the Potemkin's reply. At that point, the story, if it is to be taken as a conventional melodrama of victimage and revenge, is over for them. The meeting with the fleet is an anticlimax, an emotional letdown, and a narrative flaw. Did Eisenstein include the last act because historical facts constrained him to do so? Probably not, since he took many liberties with history in fashioning the film. Again, it is a question of what the film is about. For Eisenstein, the film is about the achievement of revolutionary solidarity. Seen from this point of view, the meeting with the fleet becomes a dramatic and ideological extension that follows logically and meaningfully from the scene on the Odessa steps. A film that appears, if regarded as a bourgeois melodrama, to be too long, appears to fit the structure of a "whole act" if it is redefined as a drama of revolutionary solidarity.

Primate is a film with a point of view, and it is certainly not sympathetic to scientific research. But Heider's "whole act" standard is both misleading and misapplied. Wiseman records, constructs, and communicates a whole act that transcends vivisection as a political issue to examine the experience of being human. The whole act that Wiseman records, and in which he invites his audience to participate, is an act of identification with both the scientists and their victims. And Wiseman constructs his film in such a way that viewers become actively involved in constructing its meanings.

The act of identification that we perform as viewers of Wiseman is not undifferentiated, not simply a sympathetic embrace of all that is. We identify with the apes and the scientists, but in different ways. In identifying with the apes, we are able to feel the horror and helplessness of their position; in identifying with the scientists, we are able to feel responsible. There is, of course, another identification possible, and one which may complicate the matter further. Do we not also identify with "Fred Wiseman," the implied author of *Primate*?[17] The implied author of *Primate* is not simply saddened or outraged at the apes' victimage, nor does he seek redemption in political reform.

Wiseman's elusive narrative point of view, depending upon strategies of action and identification, places a strain upon critical language. Throughout this essay, I have employed the first-person plural pronoun in discussing audience response. I have said that "we" read the film in this way or that. I have done so partly as a way of identifying with the reader whose actions I am proposing to describe, and as a way of pointing to the way in which Wiseman's method hinges upon identification and division among his audience, himself, and his subjects. The use of the first-person pronoun has the disadvantage, in academic and critical argument, of seeming both overly familiar and presumptuous, and may even seem to beg the question of effect, presuming that "we" the viewers will see the film as "I" the critic describe it. But a third-person usage does not avoid the problem of critical question-begging, and may distort not only the critical perspective but the critical interpretation by suggesting an objective assessment by the critic about how "they" will read the film. The meaning of a film, that is, the meaning "in" or "intended by" a film, even when understood by its audience, is not irresistible.

Primate achieves its peculiar effects with a curious combination of generic styles that include both comedy and horror. The comedy of the early birth and baby sequences is magnified and pushed in a less sentimental direction by the many scenes in which the scientists observe, discuss, and manipulate the sex lives of the apes. The distortion of sexual behavior, in the name of understanding sexual behavior, sometimes reduces sexuality to mechanics, as in the many scenes where apes are stimulated to erection and ejaculation by means of electrodes implanted in their brains, or the scene in which a technician masturbates an ape with a plastic tube in one hand while

distracting the ape with a bottle of grape juice in the other. At other times, the scientists seem gossipy, as they sit and whisper about sex outside a row of cages. The effect of the sex scenes is comic, and undermines the dignity of the presumably scientific enterprise we are watching.

But along with the comedy, there is an undercurrent of horror, at times straightforward, at times almost surrealistic. Sometimes the horror occurs in small moments: a technician tries to remove a small monkey from its wire cage. He reaches inside the door of the cage, and grasps the monkey, which tries to evade capture by clinging to the front of the cage next to the door, an angle that makes it difficult for the technician to maneuver it out of the door. The technician reaches up with his other hand and releases another catch, revealing that the whole front of the cage is hinged. The front of the cage swings open, and the technician grasps the clinging monkey from behind, as our momentary pleasure at the comedy of the impasse gives way to a small despair: there is no escape.

At other times, the scientists are framed to seem sinister, as when the surgeon who vivisects the gibbon is shot in closeup, from a low angle, a large surgical light shining over his shoulder. And because of the structure of the film, in which a strictly observational point of view is maintained, we are never quite sure what will happen next. It quickly becomes clear to us that the scientists, for all their expressed good will, are capable of anything, and so we approach even the mildest procedures with dread, not knowing what horror they are likely to reveal. We can identify with the scientists as our representatives—even, perhaps, as analogies for Wiseman, who is, after all, observing the observers—but we do not trust them.

And for all of his unobtrusiveness as a narrator, Wiseman puts a considerable distance between himself and his subjects. From very early in the film, Wiseman adopts a convention of sound-image relationships that makes for an ironic distance. In an early scene, we observe a resident scientist talking with another man about gorilla sexuality. As we continue to listen to their conversation, Wiseman's camera begins to gaze about on its own. We *hear* the official line, but we begin to *see* other things. That wandering camera begins to stand for Wiseman's—and our—free curiosity, refusing to be locked into the conventions of place and point of view. A profound relation is thus established, in which filmic consciousness, and our consciousness, is willing to be interested in its own questions, rather than just those suggested by the speakers. Wiseman's use of sound-image relations here is something far more sophisticated than the heavy-handed *cinema verite* rhetoric that zooms in on the nervous hands of a speaker we are thus invited to doubt. Wiseman does not obviously use cutaways as a method of bridging gaps in continuity or as a way of underlining possibly deliberate misrepresentations. Nor does he obviously cut, within a scene, to images that cannot be accounted for as literally part of the immediate context. Rather, he makes us active participants in the process of building meanings by wandering beyond

the speaker's concern to the context in which it occurs, or, conversely, by gazing uninterruptedly at the actuality of everyday institutional reality rather than brushing actuality aside in favor of its rationale or product.

Wiseman looks at the "facts" of social reality, and reveals the structures that underlie them. He implicates his viewers in the social world that is described, and in the process of making meanings out of his film.

There is a danger for Wiseman here. He is skating very close to the thin ice of despair, and of that currently fashionable despair which adopts an anti-political cynicism as a substitute for responsibility to social particulars.[18]

CONCLUSION

I said at the outset that Wiseman could not be accurately pigeon-holed as the filmic equivalent of a forensic or deliberative orator, suggesting that he has gone beyond indicting his subjects or offering a policy. Part of Wiseman's usefulness to us as viewers is the way he resists the sterility of fixed genres. But it may be that we can understand Wiseman as offering us something akin to Lawrence Rosenfield's notion of epideictic.[19] Rosenfield writes of epideictic rhetoric as a celebration of the radiance of being, and he wisely notes that even condemnatory rhetoric can function as an affirmation of Being's excellence and availability. When Wiseman works for us, we are perhaps experiencing, through the comedy and the cruelty, a larger sense that comedy and cruelty are recognizable to us as alternatives to the human excellence that they imply by denying. If, as Karl Wallace wrote, the substance of rhetoric is good reasons,[20] Wiseman's *Primate* offers us good reasons to look more honestly at ourselves.

Notes

[1] *Primate* is the eighth film in Frederick Wiseman's continuing series of documentaries on American institutions, which include *Titicut Follies* (1967); *High School* (1968); *Law and Order* (1969); *Hospital* (1970); *Basic Training* (1971); *Essene* (1972); *Juvenile Court* (1973); *Primate* (1974); *Welfare* (1975); *Meat* (1975); *Canal Zone* (1977); *Sinai Field Mission* (1978); *Manoeuvre* (1979); *Model* (1980); *The Store* (1983).

[2] Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), I, pp. 383–84.

[3] This is the sort of relationship that Kenneth Burke refers to as "a communicative relationship between writer and audience, with both parties actively participating." Kenneth Burke, "Antony in Behalf of the Play," *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 329.

[4] Trollope, pp. 44–45.

[5] Fowles states the same theme autobiographically and polemically in his text for *The Tree;* John Fowles and Frank Horvat, *The Tree* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), unpaginated.

[6]James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; rpt. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 12.

[7]Agee and Evans, p. 250.

[8]See, for example, Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson, ed., *Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1984).

[9]Liz Ellsworth, *Frederick Wiseman: A Guide to References and Sources* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), pp. 102–58.

[10]Ellsworth, pp. 34–57. For an analysis of *High School* cf. Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's *High School,*" *Communication Monographs,* 47 (1980), 233–61. See also Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, "The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's *Model,*" *Journal of Film and Video,* 36 (1984), 30–40.

[11]Frederick Wiseman, *New York Times,* 22 December 1974, p. 33.

[12]Karl Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 82.

[13]Heider, p. 84.

[14]Heider refers to *Primate* at two other points in his book: once in a table on p. 108 that restates the charge of fragmentation; and once on p. 121, where, in a discussion of consent, he notes the exchange of charges between Wiseman and Geoffrey Bourne in the *New York Times.*

[15]Heider, p. 85.

[16]Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), p. 160.

[17]The concept of implied author refers not to the actual author of a text but to the consciousness that is implied as controlling the point of view of the work. See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 71–76.

[18]Cf. William Stott's discussion of social documentaries versus human documents: "Human documents show man undergoing the perennial and unpreventable in experience, what happens to all men everywhere: death, work, chance, rapture, hurricane, and maddened dogs; as John Grierson said, the theme of such documents is 'la condition humaine.' Social documentary, on the other hand, shows man at grips with conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time and place: racial discrimination, police brutality, unemployment, the Depression, the planned environment of the TVA, pollution, terrorism." William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 20.

[19]Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "The Practical Celebration of Epideictic," in *Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric,* ed. Eugene E. White (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), pp. 131–55.

[20]Karl Wallace, "The Substance of Rhetoric: Good Reasons," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 49 (1963), 239–49.