



Frederick Wiseman

# At Berkeley

## At Berkeley

Director: Frederick Wiseman

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244 mins

Digital

'Faculty meetings, generally speaking, are just awful. I've spent half my life in the United States government in meetings, and the other half in faculty meetings. And I can tell you, faculty meetings go on twice as long. Why? People in faculties like to speak, they like to talk, they are used to hearing themselves speak. And they are used to watching other people nod in response.'

This is Robert Reich, a former US secretary of labor under President Bill Clinton. He is seen in his natural professional environment, as are all the subjects in Frederick Wiseman's *At Berkeley* – which in his case means addressing students at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. Like the many faculty members, administrators, staff and students in Wiseman's film, Reich is not identified by onscreen text (there is none) or voiceover (ditto). He has no opportunity to address the camera directly, and there is no obvious emphasis by way of score or camerawork to indicate that, in speaking the above lines, Reich has just articulated something very essential to the film. I have just named a few things that *aren't* in *At Berkeley*. If I were to discuss everything that is in it, I would need all the space between the covers of this magazine.

Reich's statement comes around the two-and-a-half-hour mark in a 244-minute movie, in one of the scores of fluorescent-lit meetings of which *At Berkeley* is composed: classroom lectures, administrative convocations, live performances and the powwows of campus discussion groups for African-American and military veteran students. (Reserve Officers' Training Corps drills, meanwhile, take place in the half-light of dawn on the university grounds.) These meetings, held in spaces both intimate and vast, are broken up by interstitial views of the campus. The spruce *beaux arts* neoclassical buildings and the light of northern California in autumn filtering through the well-watered flora make for a picturesque scene, though such asides emphasise the process of constant upkeep by which this idyllic facade is maintained, as in the image of a caretaker sweeping a spiral stairwell, sending clumps of dust on a long fall to the floor below. All of this is business as usual, even the film's one incontestable event, which doesn't come along until the final quarter and which calls into question Berkeley's impeccable self-presentation. This is a protest sit-in in the reading room of the campus library held on 7 October 2010, of which more later.

Wiseman has first-hand professional experience of the campus environment, though in a very different era. While teaching a course in legal medicine at Boston University School of Law in the early 60s, he took his class on a field trip to the Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Bridgewater, the first of many such visits. Bridgewater would become the subject of 1967's *Titicut Follies*, a documentary about procedural politics within an institution. It has been followed, to date, by another 37 institutional studies. Eighty-four years old as of last January, Wiseman has enjoyed a raised profile lately thanks to his last three films, *La Danse* (2009), *Boxing Gym* (2010) and *Crazy Horse* (2011) – about the Paris Opera Ballet, Lord's Gym in Austin, Texas, and a Champs-Élysées cabaret, respectively. (If he failed to crack the top ten in *Sight & Sound*'s recent documentary poll, it is only because his sustained excellence makes the selection of a single consensus masterpiece impossible.) These recent Wiseman subjects are more than usually attractive to potential audiences, as they offer the promise of trained bodies in motion, but *At Berkeley*, dedicated wholly to palaver, is closer in spirit to the bureaucratic opuses on which Wiseman's reputation rests, the last of these being 2006's very great *State Legislature* (that one just shy of the four-hour mark), shot during a meeting of the Idaho legislature in Boise.

Wiseman has worked in the US principally and, more recently, in France. Both are nations with longstanding democratic traditions, and Wiseman's unifying subject may be said to be the democratic process in all its genius, corruptibility, inefficiency and untidiness. On the surface, his films seem to internalise that untidiness a little too much. Comprising footage shot over 12 weeks in the autumn of 2010, *At Berkeley* first appeared complete at the 2013 Venice Film Festival. That the arrangement of its material is the result of three years' on-and-off effort is not immediately evident, for the film is arranged with a deceptive casualness that can seem like slackness. But just as the car radio 'coincidentally' happening across Otis Redding's 'Sitting on the Dock of the Bay' at the beginning of Wiseman's 1968 *High School* comments incisively on what we are about to see (the key phrase is 'wasting time'), so *At Berkeley* too has a theme song, The Supremes' 'Up the Ladder to the Roof', performed by an all-girl a cappella group to a stupefied audience. Or

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## Frederick Wiseman

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### At Berkeley

Sat 6 Dec 18:35; Sat 20 Dec 13:45

### In Jackson Heights

Sun 7 Dec 17:15; Sat 27 Dec 17:00

### Belfast, Maine

Sat 13 Dec 18:10; Sun 21 Dec 16:20

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Sun 14 Dec 17:30; Sun 28 Dec 14:00

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so it seems – who knows if the reaction shots actually correspond to the performance, for Wiseman's foxy, faux-offhand style leaves nothing to chance.

In the context of the film, the metaphor of 'up the ladder' ascent refers not to heaven above but to upward mobility, to which higher education has traditionally been the key. *At Berkeley* pinpoints a moment where access to that education – particularly for middle-class students, coming from families who are neither poor enough to make them eligible for aid nor rich enough to pay the latest inflated asking price – is at risk, as the state of California scales back its contribution to the school, demanding such measures as tuition hikes, operational streamlining and staff cuts.

In its chain of classroom observation vignettes, *At Berkeley* provides a department-by-department tour of the campus, and the expertise that admission offers access to. Watching these scenes, there is sport in trying to determine if and how the particular lesson at hand is meant to act as a coded commentary on the life of the university – the film's 'core mission', to use the corporate jargon with which the administrative meetings are laced. In some cases, the connection is easy: when an instructor at the zoology and botany building lectures on the cost/benefit analysis behind the dispersal of a species, his words might just as well be applied to any students whose aspirations take them out of their native terrain and into the strange territory of an ultra-competitive university. Elsewhere, the material defies such straightforward readings. To what end, for example, does Wiseman linger on the robot being programmed to fold a napkin, or the young man learning to walk again with an experimental pair of bionic legs?

Confirmation of the miracles that are possible within the halls of academia, these are also evidence of the 'growth of the research enterprise' at Berkeley, made possible by new funding sources, both government and corporate, against which the university must guard its public character. This is one of the recurring subjects for discussion in the dozens of administrative meetings that are shuffled in among the classroom scenes, in which topics include tenure triage and 'corporatising the structure' of administration by replacing relationship-based, personalised inefficiency with 'predictable, repeatable, improvable processes'; the longest single sequence concerns the rehearsal of campus police response scenarios in preparation for the announced, forthcoming student protest.

The film's most recognisable character, who unfailingly reappears from one meeting to the next, is Robert J. Birgeneau, then the university's chancellor, a silver-haired gentleman faintly reminiscent of a latter-day Roger Corman, with an unfailing smile and unmistakably Canadian politesse, as perfectly manicured as the institution over which he presides. Birgeneau has seemingly secured the position through his uncommon fluency in the bureaucratic lexicon that has infested every corner of the university in the period of what he calls 'progressive disinvestment' – the phrase used to refer to the slow withdrawal of state money from this state institution. This ongoing crisis is the basis for much discussion of 'sustainable funding models', 'misaligned incentives', 'intermediate strategies', 'duplication of efforts', 'overall vision', 'dynamics of logistics' and 'the trajectory of this movement'.

Those last three lines are spoken by students during that 7 October library sit-in, which – once the initial racket settles down – takes on the character of still another sonorous assembly. You get the feeling that you are seeing the next generation of administrators rehearsing for their future day jobs through activism, an impression only strengthened when, after the peaceable dispersal of the sit-in, Birgeneau belittles the protesters for their lack of organisation by comparing their efforts, unfavourably, with the clear overall commission-oriented vision of his own protest days.

Wiseman would have had quite another film on his hands if he'd arrived at Berkeley just a year later. Autumn 2011 brought the Occupy Wall Street-affiliated 'Occupy Cal' protests, during which UC Berkeley police dispersed protesters on Sproul Plaza with truncheons swinging. (The resulting outcry led to Birgeneau stepping down as chancellor the following spring.) All of this would've been unavoidable headline news during *At Berkeley's* post-production, but rather than ending his film with an ode to youthful disobedience and the renascent spirit of the eternal left, Wiseman opts to take a philosophical tone. A lecturer discusses the prospects of the future colonisation of other planetary systems, unlikely despite 'exponentiating' technological advances – although, he concedes, 'maybe the machines that eventually replace us' will succeed. These are machines that might very well be made at UC Berkeley – by then, maybe the only sentient beings who can afford the tuition.

Nick Pinkerton, *Sight and Sound*, October 2014