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## Review of *Aspen*, a documentary film by Frederick Wiseman

Michael R. Hill

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

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***Aging in Japan: When Traditional Mechanisms Vanish.*** 45 minutes. 1990. Rental \$75, purchase \$149 (VHF) from Films for the Humanities and Sciences, Inc., P.O. Box 2053, 743 Alexander Road, Princeton, NJ 08540.

In traditional Japan... the aged were treated with respect, there was a place of honor for them in the family and in society.... Even old, they would not be treated as a burden; rather they... would have gone to live with their eldest son or another child. But there is no room for them in the new apartments and houses nor often in the hearts of the modern "nuclear" families (Woronoff 1985, p. 98).

*Aging in Japan: When Traditional Mechanisms Fail* shows us one way the Japanese are coping with the problem of a rapidly growing aged population: the use of private neighborhood recreational social centers. These social institutions for the elderly have become big business. In 1989 alone, over 200 were built in urban areas, at a cost of 10 million dollars each. This useful film asks: What draws people to these places? What needs do they meet for the larger society? How do the elderly perceive and use them?

The neighborhood recreation centers cleverly tap a Japanese tradition: the bathhouse. Hot springs and bathhouses in Japan were, and still are venerable institutions where social intercourse and relaxation allow the Japanese a change of pace from their usually hectic way of life. The video tours a facility in Nagoya, where the bathhouse of the past with its spring-like effect is recreated in six different pools (or baths) each with different mineral salts, suggesting a cleansing or medicinal function to the customers. But unlike bathhouses of the past, today's bathhouses are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Customers may come for a few hours, the whole day, weeks, months, and now years—away from one's family. Ten percent of the customers remain for 24-hour periods, a fact unanticipated by the original developers.

Through the convenience and services of rental lockers, bed rolls, a television room, eating and socializing room, pools to bathe in, and a walking area, these institutions assist older people in living out their lives in a way which takes them away from home and work. Like American nursing homes, the bathhouse can be perceived in a positive light, as an innovation in Japanese social structure, or negatively, as isolation and warehousing.

Sensitive interviews with customers give viewers the opportunity to form their own opinions on this question. Mrs. Idido comes to the bathhouse daily and often stays all night because there is "nothing for me to do at home; my daughter-in-law won't even allow me to wash my

rice bowl." Mr. Hayasaki, 100 years old, views it as a daycare facility; he is dropped off daily by his 77 year old son. Mr. Nakajimi, another daily resident, feels he has no option since his relatives placed him there, and he has no other place to go. For some, this institution is a place to socialize and congregate, for others it is an escape from their children and grandchildren, and for others it is a place to die—eventually.

*Aging in Japan* has much to offer students in social problems, introductory sociology, community, social organization, gerontology, and international studies. It belongs in most video libraries.

James P. Sikora  
Wesleyan University

#### REFERENCE

Woronoff, Jon. 1985. *Japan: The Coming Social Crisis*. Tokyo: Lotus Press.

*ASPEN*. A film by Frederick Wiseman. 1991. 2 hours 30 minutes.

Frederick Wiseman's most recent documentary was heralded in the *New York Times* (December 29, 1991, pp. 27, 36) with considerable fanfare, but for this reviewer *Aspen* is a sociological disappointment. Wiseman's unusually keen documentary grip on the subtleties and institutional complexities of Western society has momentarily slipped in his presentation of the collage of institutionally disjointed images offered in *Aspen*. Visually excavating the social nexus of community life as a whole is a worthy objective for filmmakers of Wiseman's stature and experience, but sociology instructors who hope that *Aspen* might serve as an institutionally sophisticated community study will have to look elsewhere.

*Aspen*, however, has its moments if not overall coherence, and the film reaches its highest classroom potential as a video sourcebook illustrating several ideologically constitutive social processes common within the lower to upper middle classes in the United States, including: discussion groups, professional seminars, lectures, church services, and leisure-time personal enrichment classes. Since any one of these processes deserves full-fledged documentary investigation, screening relevant clips from *Aspen* can serve to introduce (but not define) course units on group processes and symbolic interaction. Field assignments and student participant observation studies are particularly appropriate to amplify and complement classroom analyses of the specific social processes glimpsed in *Aspen*.

Instructors who follow the adage that we can often learn as much or more from mistakes as well

as successes might profitably consider screening *Aspen* in close conjunction with a few of Wiseman's venerable classics, such as the controversial *Ticut Follies* (1963), or the more recent *Near Death* (1989). The latter is a sociologically riveting and emotionally draining six-hour account of life and death struggles and social decision-making in a hospital's intensive care unit. Wiseman's hallmark and *forte* is the institutional microcosm as a unit of analysis, and thus students contemplating thesis or term paper projects that range too widely over the social landscape can learn a valuable lesson about focus and topic boundaries by critically comparing the limited sociological import of *Aspen* with the wealth of insight provided by many of Wiseman's previous films. This comparative exercise is especially pertinent in courses on research methods of visual sociology.

Wiseman's excursion into color photography makes *Aspen* a visually fascinating film when seen against the background of his fine cinematographic record in black and white. The snowy slopes of Aspen, Colorado, provide a gesso canvass onto which designer-clad skiers flash by in neon bursts of color. Wiseman's editorial attention to color is playful and at times visually poetic, but the sociological edge is lost in the exchange. As a sociologist, I much prefer Wiseman's vintage institutionally-focused works and suggest the following titles for future Wiseman projects, preferably in black and white: *Boy Scouts*, *Peep Show*, *Beauty College*, *Fast Food*, *Mortuary*, *Tavern*, *Billy Graham Crusade*....

Michael R. Hill  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

*Where the Spirit Lives*. 97 minutes. 1989. Purchase, VHS video (released 1991) \$98.95 from Tutorial Cinema, 87 5th Avenue, New York City, NY 10003.

*Where the Spirit Lives* is a heart-wrenching but ultimately uplifting story about two Native American children, Komi and Pita, who are abducted by an agent of the government of Canada for forcible education in the King George Indian Boarding School. Citing Regulation 31 of the Indian Act of 1925, agent Taggart tells the siblings' mother that her people had been warned to send their children to school. "It's 1937. You can't stay ignorant savages forever," he tells her.

At King George School the children are systematically stripped of their Native American heritage. They are given Christian names, Amelia and Abraham; made to worship the Christian God; forbidden to speak their native language ("No talking gobbledygook here"); and forbidden to even discuss their Native American lifestyle. When Miss Kathleen Williamsburg, a young, idealistic teacher who arrives at the school the same day as Amelia and Abraham, asks the children in her class to tell her where they come

from, a young adolescent girl answers, "We ain't suppose to tell. We ain't suppose to talk about it."

Reverend Buckley, the administrator of the school, initiates Miss Williamsburg into her role as teacher by telling her that "these children come to us from a dead culture. It's like a millstone around their neck. Our job is to remove this burden and give them their freedom."

Amelia, at first, is rebellious and is often punished for rule infractions, performance of Native American rituals, and an escape attempt. Reverend Buckley, determined to break Amelia's spirit, tells Miss Williamsburg that Amelia's parents are dead and her village evacuated as the result of a plague. Through a translator Miss Williamsburg sorrowfully conveys this news to Amelia. The girl ritualistically mourns for her parents for several days. Following the mourning, however, she becomes cooperative and eager to please Miss Williamsburg, whose protegee she becomes.

But even as Amelia and Kathleen develop respect and affection for each other, Mrs. Barrington, a wealthy widow who has generously supported the school, expresses an interest in adopting Amelia. Reverend Buckley encourages the adoption and urges Miss Williamsburg to do so as well. In exchange, Mrs. Barrington has promised the school a new library.

Kathleen, however, learns that Amelia and Abraham's family is alive, when their father and brother come to the school to bring them home. Reverend Buckley tells the men the children are not there. Deeply dismayed by this deception, Kathleen urges Reverend Buckley to tell Amelia the truth before the adoption plans are finalized. Instead, he asks her to reconsider. With Mrs. Barrington "she has a chance to escape that pagan world," he explains. But if she returns to her people "she will become savage once more." Kathleen says nothing to Amelia who prepares to leave King George School with Mrs. Barrington, mistakenly believing that her brother will be adopted with her.

Shortly before she is due to leave school, the body of her friend Rachel, a victim of continuous sexual abuse who ran away from school in an attempt to reach her family, is returned to the school by agent Taggart. Reverend Buckley presides over a Christian service for Rachel, but that night Amelia and Abraham (and Amelia's friends, Esther and George) steal Rachel's body and give her a ceremonious Native American burial.

Reverend Buckley is outraged when he sees Rachel's body on the traditional scaffolding. Amelia is made to pray for forgiveness; the two boys are to be whipped. As the teacher is about to whip Abraham, George attacks him and in the scuffle the teacher is beaten to death. Esther, who has been confined to a small room, overhears Kathleen and Reverend Buckley talking and learns that Amelia's parents are not dead. Though Amelia is at first incredulous when Esther tells her this news, she finally believes her. Gathering her brother, a supply of food, and a horse, they