

arts
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Brutally honest documentary about human Follies

by Ira Nayman

Some films, no matter how good they are, dare you to continue to watch them. Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*, a brilliant expose of the inhumanity of certain psychiatric practices, is so brutally honest that it's painfully difficult to sit through.

Released in 1967, *Follies* is a documentary about the inmates of the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Without narration the daily routine at the hospital, which housed men who could not stand trial for reasons of insanity and men waiting for psychiatric tests to determine their fitness to stand trial, is portrayed.

This routine includes a strip search of an entire wing, an old man bathed in filthy water and an inmate being cut by a barber more concerned with speed than safety.

By a slow accumulation of details, the film conveys a sense of the dreadful inhumanity of the treatment of Bridgewater's inmates. The men are frequently paraded through the facility undressed, clearly a form of humiliation intended to keep the inmates in line.

The film is named after an annual show put on by staff and inmates at the institution (Titicut is a native name for the area). *Titicut Follies* starts with a rendition of "Strike Up the Band" by a half dozen drugged inmates who have difficulty keeping time and remembering all the words. It, and other



Two inmates of the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane share a moment of musical appreciation in Frederick Wiseman's brilliant documentary *Titicut Follies*. The film's depiction of the humiliating treatment of inmates — one can hardly call them patients — of the facility was forbidden from being shown anywhere in the world for 25 years by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

musical numbers strewn throughout the film, are at once funny and chilling.

Single line references to drugs occur here and there throughout the

film, although the issue is not explored in any methodical way. It is the docility of the inmates that drives the point home: Bridgewater was a prison that didn't offer any real psychiatric help

to the people it housed. One of the film's major drawbacks is relying solely on the emotional impact of its visual evidence, giving us no context for a deeper under-

PREVIEW

Titicut Follies
directed by Frederick Wiseman
produced by Zipporah Films

standing of the issues it raises. The film also has some structural problems; I had no idea that the man in solitary confinement had been there for 17 years, for instance, until I had read the press kit. Audience members without access to such information will have occasional difficulty understanding what's going on.

The film is 25 years old. In an unprecedented move, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court banned public screenings of the movie world-wide. It originally asked for all the prints to be burned, deciding later that the film could be shown to small groups of "legislators, judges, lawyers, sociologists, social workers, doctors, psychiatrists, students in these or related fields and organizations dealing with the social problems of custodial care and mental infirmity," but not the general public.

The court's stated purpose was to protect the privacy of the inmates; ironically, its decision impeded changes that could have protected what are arguably more important rights. Wiseman believes that hospital administrators originally cooperated with the filming hoping it would help them wring more funds out of the state government; when they realized it would make them look bad, they instigated the court case.

The ban was lifted last year because many of the inmates have died, making their privacy a moot point.

But like the very best documentaries, *Titicut Follies* transcends its specific subject. It has become a timeless statement on the use of knowledge (in this case, psychiatry) as the basis for an abuse of power.

Titicut Follies has a limited run at the Backstage Cinema, 31 Balmuto Street, from March 20 to 27. Tickets are \$4 for members of Cinematheque Ontario, \$6 for non-members, \$3.50 for students and seniors. Advance tickets for members are on sale now; non-members can buy tickets the day of the screening. For more information, call 923-FILM.

Virtual Reality cannot save bad virtual movie

by Pedram Fouladianpour

In the past 30 years we have witnessed colossal changes in image reproduction. TV, video and all sorts of electronic image enhancement have had a crucial role in redefining the function of images.

Although computer generated images seem to be a footnote in recent debates, the psychological and social effects of Virtual Reality, the latest revolution in computer graphics, are already being questioned.

Virtual Reality can be a new toy for computer game addicts, although its impressive computer simulations have other uses (i.e. — military training). By wearing a helmet-like device, anyone can enter a three-dimensional, 360-degree computerized world and interact with objects in it.

This new technology might be the ultimate in escapism, in which people will find themselves completely detached from physical reality. If the relationship between consciousness and concrete reality is severed, Virtual Reality might suffocate imagination. Fancy stuff for science fiction...

Cut to an office in sunny California. A handful of producers are sitting

FILM

The Lawnmower Man
directed by Brett Leonard
starring Jeff Fahey and Pierce Brosnan
produced by New Line Cinema

around a table trying to come up with an idea for their next movie. Some are concerned about this new technology. Somebody thinks of Stephen King: didn't he write a short story about Virtual Reality?

The film *The Lawnmower Man* is the result.

Jobe Smith (Jeff Fahey) is a full-grown man with the intelligence of a six-year-old. He is a ward of the local church, nicknamed "The Lawnmower Man" because he cuts people's grass.

At a top-secret science lab, Dr. Angelo (Pierce Brosnan) uses Virtual Reality to accelerate the intelligence of laboratory chimpanzees. A sinister group bankrolling Angelo's experiments forces him to heighten his animals' aggressive instinct.

As a result of the group's demands, Angelo quits the lab to pursue his research alone. An encounter with Jobe convinces him that the Virtual Reality experiments can help Jobe

attain advanced intelligence. Unfortunately, the experiment goes too far.

The Lawnmower Man has the usual elements of a sci-fi film: extravagant technological effects, a mad scientist, his monster/victim, etc. Cinematically, it isn't very subtle. The film contains mediocre acting, TV commercial cinematography and a desperate director who turns to every conceivable cliché to create suspense. Despite his efforts, the narrative often seems contrived.

Part of the problem could be Stephen King's original story. In the films based on King's work, terror is

turned into some sort of spectacular entertainment. It becomes kitsch. Thus, the terror is safe, never really threatening.

The Lawnmower Man is no exception. It trivializes issues such as the application of modern technology for destructive purposes. What we witness is spectacular state-of-the-art computer graphics mixed with a roller coaster plot. (My favourite scene is where a possessed, homicidal electric lawnmower kicks butt.)

The Lawnmower Man is not enlightening. In a sense, it's like a video game itself.

Ray Liotta film career alert! Liotta film career alert!

by Lee Romberg

Article 99 sounds like a stupid headline for a *Sports Illustrated* story on Wayne Gretzky. I can't be sure, but I think it has something to do with the 99 or so things wrong with this film.

Set in a Washington veterans hospital, *Article 99* documents the jeopardy the American health care system is in because of severe government cutbacks. In this facility there is a routine procedure for dealing with armed psychotics running loose, but open-heart surgery is an "unauthorized operation."

The doctors must steal proper medicine and supplies from the basement storerooms in the middle of the night because the corrupt hospital director (John Mahoney) is more concerned with the budget than the patients.

The lighting is awful, a hazy sheen that'll give you a headache if you look at it too long. This may be an attempt by director Howard Deutch to replicate Stanley Kubrick's brilliant depictions of a mental institutions in *A Clockwork Orange* and the bootcamp in *Full Metal Jacket*. It doesn't work.

Actors Ray Liotta and Kiefer Sutherland are in the film primarily as selling points, making it hard to take Deutch's opinions about government spending and bureaucracy seriously.

FILM

Article 99
directed by Howard Deutch
starring Ray Liotta and Kiefer Sutherland
produced by Orion

Liotta (*Field of Dreams*) gives a convincing performance, but if this is the best script he could get after *Goodfellas*, his career is in trouble. Sutherland is cast against type as an intern who is far from his usual cool tough guy.



Forest Whitaker, Kiefer Sutherland and Ray Liotta look young and serious in the hospital comedy *Article 99*. Can you spot the 99 things wrong with the movie? The accompanying article will give you a head start. And, what about Liotta's career? If this is the best film he can find after his phenomenal success in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, you know *Studs* is his next career move.

As for the other 95 things wrong with *Article 99*:

- 95) it's full of movie clichés;
 - 94) the relationships, including a love scene with Liotta and another doctor (Kathy Baker) and a renegade woman doctor (Lea Thompson) playing hard to get with nice guy Sutherland, are unconvincing;
 - 93) there's a Deadhead sticker on the window of a mid-west farmer's GM pickup! —
- Wavy Gravy, Jimbob! Need I say more?



Jeff Fahey and Jenny Wright attempt to survive a special effects extravaganza in *The Lawnmower Man*. The film is based on a short story by Stephen King — you'll know the end of the world is nigh when they start making films out of his shopping lists.