

The Public Library Film Redefined

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PUBLIC LIBRARIANS OF THE 1970s responsible for the selection and acquisition of 16mm motion picture films enjoy a situation drastically changed from that of their predecessors of the 1940s and 1950s. Evaluating and selecting films for public circulation and library programming today poses a dilemma, but one quite different from that of earlier times. It is no longer the dearth of quality films which makes selection difficult, but rather the overwhelming number of superior films available for public library collections.

The sole resource for locating desirable film titles during the formative years of public library film collections was H.W. Wilson's *Educational Film Guide*,¹ published quarterly with cumulative editions. The eleventh edition, published in 1953, indexed and described 11,000 titles. The guide is no longer in existence. In contrast, the current major source, NICEM's *Index to 16mm Educational Films*² lists 100,000 titles.

With this phenomenal increase in the number of available film titles, as well as the appearance of expanded film company catalogs and indexes, it becomes necessary for public librarians to define more carefully the form and type of films with which they are concerned. Gloria Waldron noted in her book, *The Information Film; A Report of the Public Library Inquiry*, published in 1949, that: "Any definitions have to be fairly arbitrary when terms are used as loosely as they are in the sixteen-millimeter field and when films differ so widely as to subject matter, technique, and purpose. For the sake of clarity, it is probably necessary to be arbitrary and define the various types of films."³

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In a paper written in 1954, this writer had, for simplicity's sake, classified the films that made up the collections in most public libraries at that time according to three basic types. These classifications were based on the film design rather than on the use of the film, or on the value received from it. They were defined as follows:

1. *The teaching or classroom film:*

This type of film is usually made specifically for schoolroom use, to be shown under the supervision of a teacher, or to be used as a supplement to a textbook. Also included in this category are training or instructional films which show how to do something by outlining an individual procedure. The teaching film may make use of many standard cinema techniques, including narration, synchronized dialog, animation, etc., and may be found in other than school libraries; i.e., public, industrial, or government libraries.

2. *The information or idea film:*

This type of film is usually made for adult audiences, to enlighten them upon general and specific subjects of an educational or social nature. These films, often of serious content, may also be referred to as "discussion" films. Many of them are not complete in themselves, but leave some questions unanswered, so the film can be discussed. In this area the documentary film, often concerned with social issues and comment upon them, is an important category in public library collections.

3. *The entertainment or recreational film:*

This type of film is made primarily to entertain or amuse, and is usually fictional in form. Often Hollywood produced films are included in this category, after having been reduced from standard 35mm theatrical gauge to 16mm. These may include children's films, i.e., photoplays of such famous classics as *Treasure Island*, *Alice In Wonderland*, etc. In addition there are films on art, music, biography, the dance, and comedy.⁴

These three classifications and descriptions were not restricted to any particular kind of film library but could be found in public library collections as well as in school and commercial film libraries. They could be borrowed free of charge or rented by groups and individuals for either entertainment or educational purposes, according to the established policy of each library.

Useful at the time they were written, these classifications are still

Public Library Film Redefined

valid as general descriptions of many films in public library collections today. It is evident, however, that they are simplistic when applied to the new visual forms, artistic and technical, appearing in contemporary catalogs.

Film-maker Stan VanDerBeek states in his essay "Culture-Intercom" that: "Some of the vastly expanded techniques available now include: 8mm (some 6½ million 8mm cameras in America), super-8mm (over one billion dollars for photo-services annually), video tape for home use, computer-generated graphics, stereo and laser pictures."⁵ In order to establish new classifications which define the public library 16mm film, it is necessary to review some of the major changes and development in the motion picture field over the last two decades.

By the mid-1960s, a "cinema revolution" had occurred, brought about by recent social and political factors. Influenced by technical advances and unusual photographic techniques originating at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair and Montreal's Expo '67, and motivated by the world political situation, young film-makers began to focus their attention and their cameras on the serious problems of society, including national and international politics and war. Referred to as the "film generation," these knowledgeable and intelligent cameramen, directors, scriptwriters, and editors evolved due to an increase in the number of cinema courses offered in high schools and colleges, the proliferation of popular and scholarly books on film history and aesthetics, the wide publication of film guides and classic film scripts (many available for the first time), and in particular, the exciting technical advances.

Contributing significantly to this revolution was the appearance on the market of lightweight, portable cameras and sound equipment, and extraordinary improvements in film and lens capabilities. At about the same time, an unusual method of film-making became evident. Called "cinéma vérité" it has been defined by G.R. Levin, film-maker and author of *Documentary Explorations*:

The term generally refers to films that use such techniques as: synch-sound interviews, the hand-held camera, the direct recording of reality (supposedly) without the interference of the film-maker/cameraman, who is purported to be almost an instrument himself without involvement in the particular situation, and non-manipulative editing of the footage.⁶

Originating from an earlier technique practiced in the 1920s by the Russian Dziga Vertov, the "cinéma vérité" technique was expanded by

French directors and incorporated in the "direct cinema" of America. The distinction between the two approaches seems best defined by *The Oxford Companion to Film*:

The principal difference in approach between direct cinema and *cinéma-vérité* was in the function of the film-maker himself: while the "direct" film-maker claimed to take an objective stance, merely standing by in the hope that a situation already tense would resolve itself in a dynamic, enlightening crisis, the practitioner of *cinéma-vérité* deliberately intervened, hoping that greater spontaneity and truth would be stimulated by the participation of the film-maker in the event filmed.⁷

The "underground" film, a term used to describe films of the 1950s and 1960s that were independently made, subjective and often intensely personal, also influenced film-making during those "revolutionary" days. Unable to find commercial outlets because of the controversial political, social and sexual issues they explored, some of these films have emerged in the 1970s and can be seen in theaters, on college campuses, and even in public library collections.

Notably affected by the new film-making techniques was the documentary, a film genre forming the basis of many public library collections. The documentary technique, spawned by Robert Flaherty with *Nanook of the North*, matured under the direction of Britain's John Grierson, whose description in 1926 — "a creative treatment of actuality"⁸ — stood as the classic definition for many years.

Today, the term *documentary* has many meanings to film-makers and librarians, definitions having been extended to cover a variety of nonfiction films. Richard Barsam, author of *Nonfiction Film*, has stated that "all documentaries are nonfiction films, but not all nonfiction films are documentaries."⁹ Formerly, newsreels, instructional films, travelogues, archival films, "compilations" (films assembled from footage which was made for another purpose and which has usually been released as part of an earlier film¹⁰), television specials, as well as many experimental and underground films were mistakenly referred to as documentaries.

John Craddock, film-maker and former librarian, in an article in *Film Library Quarterly* entitled "The Changing Style of Documentary" states in an analysis of television documentaries: "Documentary film-makers seeking ways of communicating the reality of what they saw in the world were increasingly frustrated by the limitations of 'talking heads' and pre-conceived scripts. They wanted to follow events and record them

Public Library Film Redefined

naturally as they developed, compressing and clarifying the action . . . with the audience."¹¹

Television, currently a prime source for public library visual material, has adopted and applied many of these creative methods which have brightened the tube with some remarkable productions. In addition to documentaries of such high caliber as *Harvest of Shame*, *Hunger in America*, *Primary*, *Guilty by Reason of Race*, and *The Selling of the Pentagon*,¹² television provides imaginative and entertaining films of cinematic excellence in the fields of science and the humanities.

More of the public and commercial "made for television" films are finding their slot on the shelves of public library film departments; to name but a few: the Kenneth Clark "Civilization" and "Romantic Rebellion" series, Alistair Cooke's *America*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, the excellent BBC "Masterpiece Theatre" presentations of literary classics, the biographical dramas *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *Eleanor and Franklin*, and *Paul Robeson*. Public television has preserved for posterity and libraries the works of our finest artists with the "Great Performances" series.

One of the latest developments in nonfiction film-making is the production of documentaries for children. During the 1977 American Film Festival, sponsored by the Educational Film Library Association (EFLA), Maureen Gaffney, director of the Children's Film Theater of New York City, chaired an exciting first panel and discussion program on this promising genre.

Children's librarians have rarely voiced any enthusiasm over television fare produced for children. Until recently, aside from a few goeey specials thrown on the screens during holidays, children's programs were crudely drawn cartoons, very loud and often violent. Thanks to a national campaign by parents, teachers, and the national organization Action for Children's Television (ACT)¹³ to improve children's television programming, the producers and networks have been making an effort to upgrade the quality of their productions. Public librarians can now obtain titles from CBS's "Children's Film Festival," ABC's "After School Specials," and in the near future BBC's "Once Upon a Classic," all of which are high-quality programs.

In spite of the continued domination of Saturday-morning children's shows by old-style animation, brilliant new techniques in this cinema art have appeared elsewhere. Exhilarating animated short films, often less than five minutes in length, emanated from England, France and Eastern Europe in the early 1950s. Charming animated children's stories and folk tales, many originating in Poland, Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia, were

welcomed by children's librarians. Even more promising for public library consideration was an exciting type of nonverbal film intended for adult viewers. Inventive in design and provocative in content, these acclaimed films often incorporated philosophical or political ideas tinged with satire, sophistication and humor.

No longer a novelty are films made by children — films which are animated, photographed, sound-recorded and edited by young people aged six to eighteen. The movement, pioneered by Roger Larson of the Young Filmmakers Foundation of New York, Yvonen Andersen of The Yellow Ball Workshop, and Marjorie Lenk of Cellar Door Cinema in Massachusetts, has produced a body of work of striking inventiveness in animated clay, paper and cloth cutouts, wax, sand, and other materials. These film gems not only delight their makers' peers, but also entertain and often enlighten their elders.

Experimental films, original and provocative, find enthusiastic audiences among young adults, and computer-generated and holograph-made films are no longer unfamiliar. As listed by VanDerBeek in his article "Culture-Intercom," some of the ideas which spark the interest of current film-makers are: "simultaneous images and compression, abstractions, superimpositions, discontinuous information, social surrealism, episodic structure, loop film (continuous projection), film as a reflection of private dreams, hallucinations."¹⁴

The National Film Board of Canada, formed in 1939 under the guidance of pioneer documentarian John Grierson, functioned as a World War II propaganda unit, but also produced short films for educational and community information purposes. Today, the board, internationally recognized as a prolific film production center, generates traditional and innovative nonfiction films, imaginative and often ingenious animated shorts, as well as fine, dramatic feature-length films. The experimental, unsurpassed works of pioneer Norman McLaren are world renowned and have become necessary basic visual material for all public library film collections. In addition to being a training center for young film artists, the film board is also preserving the works and special film techniques of older artists, such as pioneer Lotte Reiniger's silhouette animation and Alex Alexeiff's "pin board" technique, through its visiting artist program.

In the early 1970s, Films, Inc., a major 16mm film distributor of entertainment features from Hollywood studios, established a policy of allowing public libraries to purchase selected titles from their catalogs on a 5-year-term lease basis. Costs of these films were often as high as \$1000 or even more per title, yet because of their popularity and importance to

Public Library Film Redefined

library programming, many libraries for the first time added well-known and classic titles to their collections.

Independent film-makers, many of them women, often produce topical films of local interest. These personal films, sometimes naïve or crude in their execution, present a fresh point of view on many important social issues ignored by earlier film-makers and therefore cannot be overlooked by today's public libraries. The thrill of discovering young, new cinematic talent can be most rewarding to a film librarian.

In recent years public libraries have become circulating centers for print and nonprint materials for the handicapped. The film librarian is now responsible for serving this minority with captioned or nonverbal films to entertain and inform the deaf. One cannot overlook the ethnic groups in populous areas and so must become familiar with foreign-language films as well as with films which focus upon the cultural heritage of America's various peoples.

Like the increase in the number of films produced during the last twenty years, the increase in the number of reference and informational books published on the subject has been massive. Without a definitive and reliable resource book like *Books In Print*, the film librarian must search through a number of indexes and reference aids in order to locate the necessary information. Important reference tools supplementary to the aforementioned NICE index which should be familiar to the film librarian are *Library of Congress Catalog: Motion Pictures and Filmstrips*, *Film Evaluation Guide*, *Feature Films on 8mm and 16mm*, *Films for Libraries*, *The International Index to Multimedia Information*, *Index to Instructional Media Catalogs*, *The Multi-Media Review Index*, and *Films Kids Like*.¹⁵

Among the film periodicals (whose number also was minimal in the 1950s), those most useful to the public film librarian are *Film Library Quarterly*, *Booklist*, *Sightlines*, *Previews*, *Film News*, *Landers Film Reviews*, and *Media & Methods*.¹⁶ For theory, aesthetics and the critical evaluation of theatrical films, the librarian should read *Film Quarterly*, *Sight and Sound*, *Film Comment*, *Take One*, *Filmmakers Newsletter*, *The Journal of the University Film Association*, and *American Film*.¹⁷ The classic works of Rotha, Grierson, Jacobs, Bazin, Lindgren, Manvell, Knight and McLuhan, read and loved by all well-rounded film librarians, are made available in new paperback editions, while the film criticism of Pauline Kael, Judith Crist, Stanley Kaufman and other major critics is periodically brought together in book form.

Another current trend not to be disregarded by the serious film librarian seeking articles or film titles under particular classifications is the publication of bibliographies and filmographies (expanded and annotated lists in book form), i.e., *A Filmography of the Third World, Women and Film, Films—Too Good for Words, Positive Images; Non-Sexist Films for Young People*¹⁸ and others. Invaluable to the librarian is the book *The Film User's Handbook*¹⁹ by George Rehrauer. In nine fact-filled chapters on the practices, problems and, in many cases, their solutions, the author fills a major gap in film library administration literature. In voluminous appendices he includes serviceable bibliographies of over 200 important book titles, and over 175 film-related periodicals.

Although it may not be possible to formulate rigid definitions for the public library film, one can still define broad distinctions and general categories so that up-to-date definitions may be used as guidelines for public librarians responsible for building new film collections or for expanding existing ones.

It is now necessary to update and revise the three basic film classifications in the 1954 study as follows:

1. *The teaching or classroom film* — The teaching or classroom film remains essentially as defined in 1954. It has, however, no place in most public library collections today, with the exception of public libraries specifically budgeted to service schools with films designed for the curriculum.
2. *The information or idea film* — These are nonfictional films produced for all audiences on any subject concerning humanity, the environment and the universe. They include both short and full-length documentaries; travelogues; news films; contemporary; historical and biographical compilations; factual films made for television, experimental and animated works. Also in this category are captioned films for the deaf and foreign-language films. Designed primarily for general audiences in informal situations, they are also useful in classrooms under the supervision of a teacher, or as supplemental material to textbooks.
3. *The entertainment or recreational film* — These are fictional films produced for all audiences, from children through adult, and created primarily to entertain, enrich or amuse. This category includes short or feature-length serious dramas, adventures, mysteries, comedies, musicals and animated films. Independently made films, captioned films for the deaf, and foreign-language films may come under this definition, and while subject matter has no limits, many are concerned with the

Public Library Film Redefined

arts, sciences and the humanities and may be satirical, humorous or experimental.

Leo Bogart in his article "Mass Media in the Year 2000" states:

Since the rate of inventions grows as the existing base of technology expands, the changes in the next third-century will be even more dramatic than those of the last third. In that last third-century we have had our communications capacities enlarged by web offset and color gravure printing, photocopying, teletypesetting, talking motion pictures and television (both first black and white and then in color), miniaturized and printed circuitry, communications satellites, audio and video tape recording, micro-photography, and electronic data processing. Although the mass media which existed earlier have bent and changed under the pressure of these inventions, they have not vanished. As we try to read the future, it seems reasonable to expect that today's media will continue to exist, but also that their form, function, and content will undergo radical modifications.²⁰

The myriad of film titles, publications, cinema techniques, and inventions crowding the cinema scene within the last two decades demands a new breed of film librarians in public libraries. They must be thoroughly trained in librarianship, with formal or informal film study courses constituting an integral part of their education, and this education must be continuing in order to keep abreast of the rapid technological changes taking place in the communication field. Most importantly, the scope of their interests must be broad, encompassing the world of art, science and the human condition.

The public library film — like the public library book — remains, as it has been, a basic educational and communicating tool. Its future form may be altered by magnetic tape, video disc, laser or holograph, but the film librarian will remain responsible for guarding this visual record of the past, keeping it free from censorship, honest in content, and blessed with creative cinematic techniques.

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Public Library Film Redefined

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