

EX LIBRIS

The New York Public Library

A FILM BY
Frederick Wiseman



A ZIPORA4 FILMS RELEASE



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Assistant Editor (Sound) - DIT: **CHRISTINA HUNT** Executive Producer: **KAREN KONICEK** Sound Mixer: **EMMANUEL CROSETI** Digital Color Timer: **GILLES GRANIER**

EX LIBRIS - THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY is a production of Ex Libris Films, LLC



Photo: © 2013 The New York Public Library

Synopsis

Frederick Wiseman's film, *Ex Libris - The New York Public Library*, takes the audience behind the scenes of one of the greatest knowledge institutions of the world. The film examines how this legendary institution sustains its traditional activities while adapting to the digital revolution. *Ex Libris - The New York Public Library* shows that libraries inform and educate patrons in a multitude of ways - books, concerts, lectures, classes, and more. The Library strives to inspire learning, advance knowledge and strengthen communities.

Director's Note

The New York Public Library is one of the most important cultural institutions in New York City because of the scope of its archives, books, film, drama, art and dance collections. The main library and the 92 branches in Manhattan, Bronx and Staten island in addition to traditional library work have become community centers offering a wide variety of courses: business, computer programming, languages, after school educational programs and adult education. The library is the most democratic of institutions. Everybody is welcome and all races, ethnicities and social classes are active participants in the life of the library.

Frederick Wiseman

Interview with Frederick Wiseman



You are well known for your work on American institutions, for which you were awarded an Honorary Oscar this year. What sparked your interest in The New York Public Library?

I've always loved and used public libraries for what I can learn and discover and for the surprises and stimulation they offer. I was not familiar, before I made the film, with the depth, scope and range of the New York Public Library and the wide range of services they provide to all classes, races and ethnicities in

the main library and its 92 branches. I was also attracted by the immensity of the archives and collections, the diversity of the programming and the real and impassioned involvement of the staff in offering counseling in education, scholarship, languages and business, to name only a few categories, to everyone who came looking for help.

One of the people appearing in the film says that libraries are the “pillars of democracy”. Isn’t that a bit excessive?

No, I don’t think so. I was ignorant about the scope of the libraries activities before I started the film. As a consequence of spending 12 weeks at the library, I think it is a fair and accurate description. The NYPL is not only a place where one goes to look for books or consult archives, it is a key institution for the city’s inhabitants and citizens, and particularly in poor and immigrant neighborhoods where the library is more than a passive place where people take out books. The branches have become community and cultural centers where a wide variety of educational activities take place for adults and children. The staff of the library works to help others through language and computer courses, seminars in literature and history or how to establish a business as well as supplementing the school program with after school courses for children and adolescents. There are literally hundreds of educational programs for people of all ages and social classes. The film suggests the wide spectrum of opportunity offered by the library.

The NYPL embodies the profoundly democratic idea of being open to everyone. All classes, races and ethnicities are connected to the library. For me, the New York Public Library is



an illustration of democracy in action. And represents the best of America. For these reasons saying that libraries are “pillars of democracy” doesn’t seem excessive.

Your film reveals that both access to culture for everyone and public and civic education are a modern project...

The New York Public Library is connected to almost all aspects of culture and education in New York City - children and adult education, research, scholarship, art, dance, theater, film, race relations, physical disabilities and immigration to name some of the principal categories. The library is the most democratic of institutions because it’s involved in almost everything of importance that happens in New York City. The library represents

everything that Trump hates - diversity, equality of opportunity, education and thought. I shot the film in the fall of 2015, without Trump in mind. I just thought it was a good subject. When Trump was elected it became, for reasons external to the original choice of subject, a political film.

Could we count on the intelligence of The New York Public Library to confront the crudeness of Trump? The millions of volumes and trillions of words in the NYPL, can they counter the presidential tweets in 140 characters?

By its very existence and the continuation of its normal daily activities the NYPL is already confronting Trump.

The New York Public Library is far more representative of America than Trump, a person whose vocabulary, thinking and narcissism are that of a five-year old child. The NYPL represents the great democratic tradition of America that Trump would like to destroy. This democratic spirit, which exists at the NYPL like it does elsewhere, is the backbone of America. Trump does not represent America, even if he is the President.

Will the NYPL be “comfortable” with you being this outspoken about Trump and the library?

The NYPL would not think of engaging in censorship in any form. Their collections represent thousands of conflicting and contradictory opinions some of which are certainly offensive to one group or another. That is one of the great strengths of the library.

Libraries can have an austere image, but your film shows many joyous moments.

Yes, there is something joyous and the spirit is contagious. The staff at the NYPL is inventive and generous. The NYPL does not offer a solution for all that's wrong in America, but it is magnificent that such an institution exists. The current president of the library has set as an objective to continue the traditional work of the library, but also to help immigrants and the poor. He is, like many Americans, from an immigrant family and knows the benefit of offering a wide variety of educational and cultural programs in poor and immigrant neighborhoods. At a time when the United States has elected a very Darwinian government, I think it may be useful to show people working in a passionate



manner to help others.

In all your films, you show places and institutions by revealing as much how they function as how they malfunction. In the case of the NYPL, we have the impression that everything works. Why this choice?

I am not making the evaluation that everything works. I am a filmmaker not a management consultant. Some of my films are in part critical of the institutions that are the subject of the film. In any film I think it is just as important to show people working well and providing useful service to others, as it is to show malign, cruel and insensitive behavior. In each case the film presents what I find and I hope never represents a pre-conceived ideological position. There is almost always a combination of the kind, the cruel, the beneficent and the banal.

Why is *Ex Libris* three hours and seventeen minutes long, and not six hours or two hours and twenty minutes? Since the film proceeds in separate series of sequences that develop at their own speed, without interference, why wouldn't it be possible to add or remove one?

My films have the length I think necessary for the subject. I feel a greater responsibility to the people who have given me permission to film them than I do to a television network. The final film needs to be a fair representation of the experience I had in spending 6 to 12 weeks at a place and then studying the rushes during the year of editing. Some subjects are more complex than others and I try not to simplify the film in the service of meeting the arbitrary needs of the television industry.

What do you mean by the “right” length?

The length I feel is right for the story I want to tell. I don't decide the structure or telling position in advance. The structure and point of view emerge in the course of the editing. At the risk of sounding pretentious, all I can do is try to determine what I think and follow my own judgment.

At what moment do you consider that the editing work is completed?

The film is completed when I think I have done the best I can with the material I have. I have to be able to explain to myself why I have selected each shot and its function in the dramatic narrative I am trying to construct.

Do you still edit in analogue?

No, I've switched to digital, unfortunately. The first film I edited in digital was *La Danse - Le ballet de l'Opéra de Paris*, in 2009. But the film was shot in analogue. All my films have been shot and edited in digital since then.

Did that change the way you edit?

No, I think that a lot of what's said about the differences between analogue and digital editing is bullshit. It's not the machine that makes the choices! It takes me exactly the same amount of time to edit a film in digital as it does in analogue. The work is done

by the brain, not by the machine.

The Avid digital system follows the model of the flat bed Steenbeck editing machine that I used for years. The only thing that goes faster is the possibility of recovering a specific shot. But that is not necessarily a good thing. When the reel was on the wall, I had to get up and get it, put it on the Steenbeck to look for the shot. This was not time lost. In looking for a shot or sequence, I also reviewed what was shot before and after it, and as a result often had ideas I found useful.

In Ex Libris, you don't follow any one character more than another, one story more than another, whereas the NYPL president, who really has character, could have served as the film's unifying thread. Is this choice because it's the only way to fully take into



account all the facets of an institution or collective entity?

If I made a film following the president of the NYPL, it wouldn't be a film about the library. He would become the subject of the film. I'm not saying that you can't make an interesting film focused on him. This is not the film I chose to make. My films are mosaics, the result of thousands of choices designed to giving an impression of the day-to-day activities of the place. That is the subject of the film. The final film is impressionistic, never definitive or comprehensive.

You are both the director and the sound recordist for your films. Is it what you hear that guides what you see?

No, it depends. It is completely variable depending on the sequence. Sometimes the images lead the words and sometimes it's the words that lead the image. In the film *At Berkeley*, there are many meetings and sequences where words lead the images, but the contrary can also happen, as in *La Danse – Le ballet de l'Opéra de Paris*.

Why the title, *Ex Libris – The New York Public Library*, which designates the inscription inside a book before the owner's name and which sometimes is in the form of an image or a coat of arms?

It's partly a private joke, because my father-in-law, in his library, added an ex libris with his name to all the books that he had acquired. But what I wanted to indicate above all is that this film does not reflect everything that goes on at the New York

Public Library. I chose the titles of my films, *At Berkeley* and *In Jackson Heights* for the same reason, to suggest that the film does not pretend to show everything that goes on in these institutions. Rather than choosing *From the Library* for the title, I use the Latin expression to suggest the same idea.

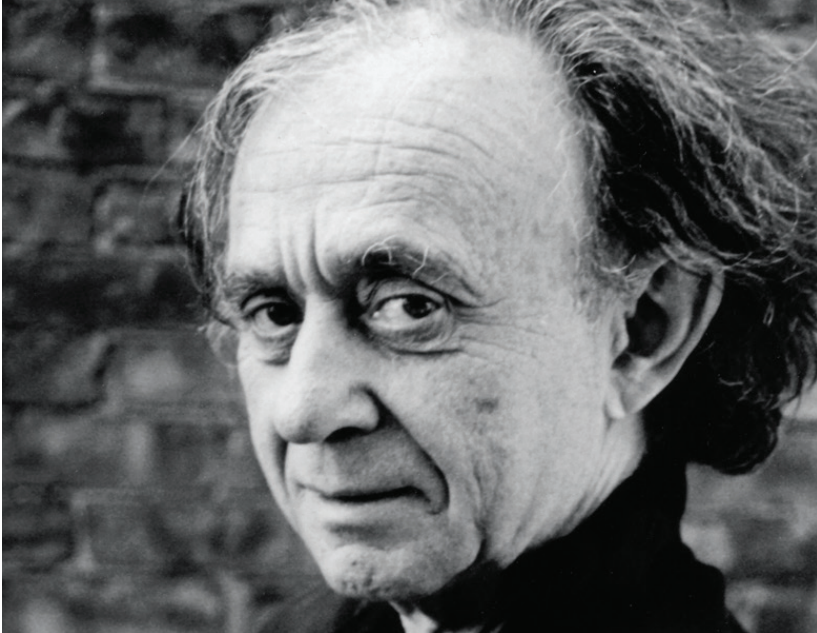
As one of the persons appearing in your film points out, despite its name, the New York Public Library is not only a public institution, but a public-private partnership, since half its budget comes from private funds and foundations. In France, PPPs have primarily served to socialize losses and privatize profits and have rarely been the best choice for the public good. How is it that in the case of The New York Library this partnership appears to be working?

It is probably because of the difference in the history of the two countries, with the centralized French government allocating 1% of the national budget for culture. The \$250 million budget of the national endowment for the arts (which is for all the art funding in the United States) is probably just a small portion of what the city of Paris receives each year from the French government. Because of the difference in the tax codes of each country, American foundations replace the government in making large grants for cultural activity. Andrew Carnegie founded libraries throughout America at the end of the 19th century. Even though he was a very tough businessman, he didn't forget that he was a Scottish immigrant and wanted to give part of his fortune to the country that had made him rich. Bill Gates and Warren Buffet follow similar paths today. Private foundations make an important contribution to American culture and education.

Do libraries like the NYPL still have a future when the great digital library has become accessible from any computer connected to the Internet?

Even if they are in the process of digitizing and putting larger and larger sections of their gigantic holdings on line, I don't think libraries will be less important in the future. The New York Public Library sponsors such a wide variety of important cultural and educational activities that it will continue to be a place where people want to go to learn, share ideas, become informed and develop their capacities. Those needs will enhance not diminish the importance of the NYPL and all libraries.

About Frederick Wiseman



Since 1967, Frederick Wiseman has directed 41 documentaries - dramatic, narrative films that seek to portray ordinary human experience in a wide variety of contemporary social institutions. His films include TITICUT FOLLIES, HIGH SCHOOL, WELFARE, JUVENILE COURT, BOXING GYM, LA DANSE, BALLET, CENTRAL PARK, BALLET, LA COMEDIE FRANCAISE, CRAZY HORSE, and IN JACKSON HEIGHTS. He has directed a fiction film, THE LAST LETTER (2002). His films are distributed in theatres and broadcast on television in many countries.

Wiseman also works in the theater. In Paris he directed *The Belle of Amherst*, the play by William Luce about the life of Emily Dickinson, and two plays at La Comédie Française—Samuel Beckett’s *Oh Les Beaux Jours* and *La Dernière Lettre*, based on a chapter of Vasily Grossman’s novel, *Life and Fate*. He also directed *The Last Letter* (the English version of *La Dernière Lettre*) at the Theater for a New Audience in New York. Most recently, a ballet inspired by his first film, *TITICUT FOLLIES* (1967) premiered at the New York University Skirball Theater in spring 2017. The French publisher, Gallimard, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, jointly published the book *Frederick Wiseman*, which offers a comprehensive overview of his work through a series of original essays by distinguished critics and artists.

Frederick Wiseman received his BA from Williams College in 1951 and his LLB from Yale Law School in 1954. He has received honorary doctorates from Bowdoin College, Princeton University, and Williams College, among others. He is a MacArthur Fellow, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has won numerous awards, including four Emmys. He is also the recipient of the Career Achievement Award from the Los Angeles Film Society (2013), the George Polk Career Award (2006), the American Society of Cinematographers Distinguished Achievement Award (2006) and the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement from the Venice Film Festival (2014). In 2016, he received an Honorary Award (Oscar) from the Board of Governors of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Frederick Wiseman Filmography

TITICUT FOLLIES, 1967

HIGH SCHOOL, 1968

LAW AND ORDER, 1969

HOSPITAL, 1969

BASIC TRAINING, 1971

ESSENE, 1972

JUVENILE COURT, 1973

PRIMATE, 1974

WELFARE, 1975

MEAT, 1976

CANAL ZONE, 1977

SINAI FIELD MISSION, 1978

MANOEUVRE, 1979

MODEL, 1980

SERAPHITA'S DIARY, 1982

THE STORE, 1983

RACETRACK, 1985

BLIND, 1986

DEAF, 1986

ADJUSTMENT AND WORK, 1986

MULTI-HANDICAPPED, 1986

MISSILE, 1987

CENTRAL PARK, 1989

NEAR DEATH, 1989

ASPEN, 1991

ZOO, 1993

HIGH SCHOOL II, 1994

BALLET, 1995

LA COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE OU L'AMOUR

JOUÉ, 1996

PUBLIC HOUSING, 1997

BELFAST, MAINE, 1999

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, 2001

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE 2, 2002

LA DERNIÈRE LETTRE, 2002

THE GARDEN, 2004

STATE LEGISLATURE, 2006

LA DANSE - LE BALLET DE L'OPÉRA DE

PARIS, 2009

BOXING GYM, 2010

CRAZY HORSE, 2011

AT BERKELEY, 2013

NATIONAL GALLERY, 2014

IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, 2015

EX LIBRIS - THE NEW YORK PUBLIC

LIBRARY, 2017

Credits

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