

FILM
PROGRAMMING
FOR PUBLIC
LIBRARIES

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FILM PROGRAMMING FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Kati Irons



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Kati Irons is currently the audiovisual collection development librarian for the Pierce County Library System, Tacoma, Washington. She selects and maintains a 500,000-item audiovisual collection for the eighteen-branch system, which serves 560,000 people, and manages an AV budget that has increased from \$30,000 in 1991 to more than \$700,000 in 2014. Irons works with in-staff and Friends groups to develop programming and educates staff on appropriate marketing and licensing for film programs. She has presented on libraries and film programming at ALA in 2011 and at WLA conferences in 2011, 2012, and 2014.

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This book is dedicated to three amazing librarians without whom I would not be a librarian: Pam Darling, who showed me the path; Cindy Cunningham, who opened the door; and Sharon Ufer Lavell, who gave me the keys. Thank you!

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PREFACE

Film programming is a natural fit with libraries, another tool in our storehouse of storytimes, book groups, and lectures. They are an opportunity to create programs that are educational, emotional, and silly. They are an opportunity to reach out to every age group and interest group. Everyone loves movies, and as we sail into cinema's second century as an art form, it's safe to say there are plenty of movies for us to love.

That said, film programming can seem more complicated than other kinds of programming libraries offer. How do you choose films to show? What equipment should you use? Are you following the correct rules for publicly showing films? How do you market your programs? Where do you begin?

For fourteen years I have worked as the development librarian for the Film and Music Collection at the Pierce County Library System (PCLS) in Washington State. When I began, we had a small but well-loved collection of VHS tapes, and now PCLS has a collection of over two hundred thousand DVDs and growing. Although I would like to claim that this is entirely because I'm great at my job, the truth is that the world of movies has never been more available or more affordable. Our collection is that big because the world of films available for libraries to buy is that big—and growing.

In addition to building the PCLS film collection, I am also responsible for maintaining the film licenses for the system, keeping them current and keeping our staff educated on how to create programs that work within the bounds the licenses allow us. Because of this, I know all the questions staff often have and the places where librarians can get lost or discouraged when trying to organize film programs.

The goal of this book is to help shine some light on challenging film programming areas, such as licensing, marketing, and equipment. It's also to show you where to find inspiration for your own film programs, film advisory, and film displays. Ultimately, your imagination is the only limit

on the kinds of film programs you can offer, and I hope this book can give you the tools to set your imagination free.

Throughout the book I will offer various suggestions of film titles relating to the topics at hand. These suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive or even “the best,” but they are meant to be choices I think could make good film programs, or could inspire you to think of your own. When listing films, I include the year it was made, the production company, and the rating. I include films from multiple rating levels, including R.

I have done my best to ensure that the films I list in this book are, as of this writing, in print and available for purchase from traditional library vendors or from reliable online resources. When the source is an online vendor, I have determined that it is available new (not used) and reasonably priced. In other words, if it is only available used from Amazon for \$112, I consider that “not available.” As of this writing, the Disney films I mention in this book are not “in the vault,” as Disney describes their out-of-print stock, but I make no promises to the whims of the Mouse House.

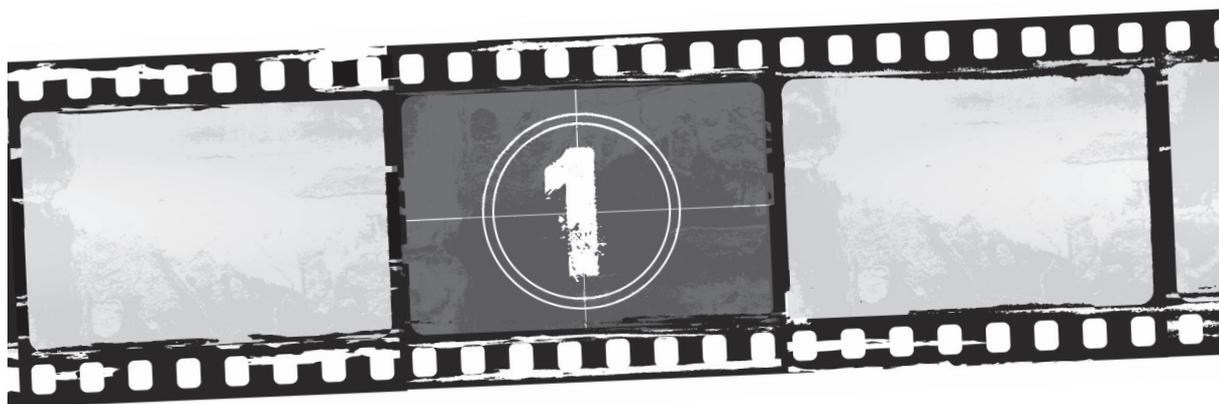
Much help in researching this book has been given by John Fossett, head of Collection Development for Kitsap Regional Library. John and I have created several film advisory programs for the Washington Library Association (WLA) and ALA, and he has been invaluable in providing me with and pointing me to good resources for this book. You will see his name pop up often throughout these pages!

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I would like to acknowledge the help and support of the Pierce County Library and its staff, whose enthusiasm for film has made my career and by extension this book possible. This book would not have been possible without the help of John Fossett, my partner in cinematic crime and amazing programs, and John's wonderful system, the Kitsap Regional Library.

I also would like to acknowledge some special individuals who kept me going through the challenging task of writing a book, including Lisa Bitney, Elise DeGuseppi, Holly Gorski, Matt Lemanski, Georgia Lomax, Judy Nelson, and Lisa Oldoski. I'd like to thank the Puget Sound Collection Development group for prompt and generous responses to spontaneous film questions, and the lovely ladies of the Friday Writers Group, who helped hold my feet to the fire.

My family also made this entirely possible, by answering the phone every time I called to say, "What have I agreed to?" and by replying, "Nothing you aren't capable of!" Mom, Dad, Bev, Sarah, David, and Szilvia, you're the bomb-diggety. I would also like to acknowledge my grandma, Betty Lou Irons, who loved movies, the *TV Guide* crossword, and Robert Redford above all things, and showed me that a polite obsession with movies is a perfectly respectable pastime.



INTRODUCTION

Why Film Programming?

Visual-media programming has a long history in libraries. As a child I certainly remember filmstrips and 16 mm films being a regular part of my library experience. Media has long been a tool in the library programming toolbox, along with storytimes and book programming. Often libraries were able to offer movie experiences that customers were simply unable to get anywhere else.

Doug Roberts is a reference librarian who has worked for Spokane Public Library for forty years. In his role as the film and media specialist, he oversaw the 16 mm film collection for Spokane Public. Roberts says, “During the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s, and into the ’80s, we had a large 16 mm film collection—over seven hundred titles. We also participated in the Washington Library Film Circuit (WLFC) and rotated packets of films monthly between libraries around the state. We loaned films to the public, teachers, senior centers, day cares, and elsewhere. In addition, we had regular weekly film showings at our downtown library auditorium.”

In addition to weekly film showings, the Spokane Public Library hosted free noon-hour programs during the year that featured films or concerts. The audience included people who worked downtown, seniors, business-people, and other library regulars. People were encouraged to bring a brown-bag

lunch and enjoy a film. The noon-hour series lasted for twenty years, until the closing of Spokane's old downtown branch in 1990.

Spokane didn't limit film showing to the library only. Roberts says, "Our Outreach Department would take films to retirement centers and nursing homes and show films to the residents somewhere just about every day on a monthly schedule. We also participated in community events and would set up library film showings for the public. These would be at the county fair, the Fourth of July parties or holiday parties at Riverfront Park, and especially, during the Expo '74 World's Fair, which was held in Spokane."

Spokane's collection was not limited to 16 mm film; 35 mm filmstrips with audio cassette soundtracks were available from the children's department for checkout, and helped serve local teachers and day-care centers. The library also had a few Dukane filmstrip viewers that staff could load for children to watch. "The tape would trigger the images to advance in the viewer on most," says Roberts, "although some were manual and needed to be advanced 'when you hear the beep'" (Doug Roberts, pers. comm.).

Through film, libraries had the opportunity to share content that was exclusive to library customers. Elise DeGuisseppi, who began her library career as a children's librarian in the late 1980s, says, "The short films we showed—[including] Weston Woods iconographic and animated adaptations of children's books [and] a bit of live action as well—were unique in that they weren't yet available on video (which was in its early days) and were not shown on TV. Libraries really were a market for these films." Of course, just as we have technical difficulties today, 16 mm film was not without its own quirks. "Children loved them," DeGuisseppi says, "but I lived in fear of threading and operating the projectors. One caught on fire once under my watch. While it was momentarily fascinating to see the film image being consumed by flames, I had to tear myself away from it for the sake of the children" (Elise DeGuisseppi, pers. comm.).

Many libraries had film and filmstrip collections, and some library systems created partnerships or consortia, such as the Washington Library Film Circuit (WLFC), to help make film—which could be quite expensive—more readily available. The WLFC was facilitated through the Washington State Library from the late 1950s through the 1970s. Member libraries received monthly packets of films, which helped expand their offerings to show and to circulate.

The advent of VHS changed the landscape of film for libraries. When VHS was first released, it was intended for the newly birthed rental market and came with a high price point. But consumers drove the market, demanding the ability to “own” their favorite movies and convincing the industry that there was a home-video market waiting to be tapped. Randy Pitman, publisher and editor of *Video Librarian*, was working for Kitsap (Wash.) Regional Library when the transition happened. “[When] home video hit in the mid-’80s,” says Pitman, “acquisitions suddenly mushroomed from buying ten 16 mm films a year to eventually purchasing hundreds of VHS titles” (Randy Pitman, pers. comm.).

All libraries struggled with the question of whether or not to build VHS collections, and some decided no. Still more decided that if they did build a collection, it should be focused strictly on educational videos and perhaps classic films, but not a showcase for blockbusters or current popular films. Some believed that we must not allow this home-movie juggernaut to distract from the library’s mission, which should be books.

On the one hand, never had libraries had greater access to almost any film they might want to show. On the other hand, our patrons were flush with the novelty of watching movies at home from their favorite chair and pausing when they wanted to run to the kitchen. The focus of libraries became helping patrons create individual viewing experiences, rather than create communal ones. “Ultimately, I think the wide availability of titles on video coupled with the arrival of big-screen TVs made [library] film programming a bit less special than in the days when you couldn’t just immediately stream whatever title you felt like watching,” says Pitman.

Libraries were stuck with how to show movies as well. VHS was designed to be watched on a TV screen. Expensive equipment might allow a system to show a movie on a bigger screen, but progress didn’t bring to most libraries expensive screening equipment but instead the ubiquitous television sets with built-in VHS players. These might work adequately for a small group or a children’s program, but showing a feature film to a crowded room on a 16-inch TV set simply did not work. And from our patrons’ perspective, why should they come and sit in folding chairs in a crowded room to watch a movie they could watch at home? Libraries became movie suppliers, drifting out of the film programming business.

Other issues and questions arise each time we transition from one format to the next, such as the library community’s role in preserving what

the film industry itself is perhaps blithely discarding. Kate Mossman is the assistant library director for Everett (Wash.) Public Library and worked for the New York Public Library, where she offered many 16 mm film programs. Mossman says “There is so much from 16 mm that was never converted to VHS, and then so much of VHS never converted to DVD. It feels to me as if we are losing so much of film and TV history as people are now going to the Netflix/Hulu streaming model and [are] being satisfied with a few thousand titles” (Kate Mossman, pers. comm.).

It’s true that nothing is ever static in libraries. Thanks to streaming video, libraries are facing another crossroads on the horizon when it comes to film. But also thanks to the high-quality picture of DVD and Blu-ray and readily available, inexpensive projection equipment, at this moment it has never been easier for a library to show films to groups large and small.

Our audience has evolved too. Watching movies at home is business as usual now. The idea of enjoying a film in community with others is a novelty. Economics is a very real issue for our customers. In 1980—the year VHS trumped Beta to become the winner of the home-video market—the average cost of a movie ticket was \$2.89. In 2012 the national average cost of a ticket was \$8.12 (although it’s \$10.50 at the movie theater down the street from me!).

Even taking inflation into account, there’s a huge difference in taking a family of four out to the movies for \$40 instead of \$12. Going out to the movies is something many families can manage rarely, if at all, but they still want to find inexpensive, entertaining activities to do as a family. Single adults and couples want to find social activities that don’t involve spending money at bars or restaurants. Senior citizens need activities that aren’t hard on their wallets.

The idea of the “third place” has taken hold of the library imagination in recent years. Communities need a place—a not-work, not-home place—where they can gather, socialize, relax, retreat, and recharge. In recent decades that third-place location has become dominated by commercial enterprises such as coffeehouses and Internet cafes. But libraries are natural places for the community to gather, and unlike commercial enterprises, they are supported by the public good, and free to the individual. “Libraries have become one of the last bastions of community gathering,” says Randy Pitman, “so in that respect, film programming does remain somewhat special.”

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