



#### **Ex Libris: The New York Public Library**

Director: Frederick Wiseman

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A production of Ex Libris Films LLC

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197 mins

Digital

**Frederick Wiseman**

## **Ex Libris: The New York Public Library**

‘Libraries are not about books,’ explains architect Francine Houben, ‘libraries are about people.’ Frederick Wiseman could hardly have written a more perfect summation of his invigorating new film, *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library*, than these words spoken halfway through it. It’s hardly surprising, though, given Wiseman’s renowned methodology. Ever since 1967, when *Titicut Follies* kicked off his half-century vocation of documenting (typically American) institutions, Wiseman has adopted the same approach. Having secured unrestricted access, he shoots whatever he finds interesting, and once he gets into the editing room he sculpts a film that reflects what he has learned through his observations. He doesn’t bring an agenda with him; he lets what he sees dictate it and then hones it with expert precision.

This might not seem obvious, given the way that Wiseman and his films are often described – indeed, *Ex Libris* may at first glance appear to be a slow and discursive 200-minute work about a library – but his style of delivery belies its exacting construction and clear-eyed point of view. There’s a moment in the film when the poet Yusef Komunyakaa is speaking about his work during one of the library’s ‘Books at Noon’ events. He could just as well be speaking about Wiseman when he says, ‘The politics are not on the surface of the poem, but I think, since I use language, the politics are underneath, woven into the emotional architecture of the poem.’ Wiseman’s craft is not of the conspicuous variety, but exists in the subtle decisions of what to show and when to show it. His message is conveyed in juxtaposition, repetition and thematic rhythm.

This is evident from the very beginning of *Ex Libris*. The first guest speaker we see is the scientist Richard Dawkins, who addresses an appreciative audience with his usual combative candour. From a leading atheist decrying belief in a deity as idiocy or ignorance, Wiseman cuts directly to a bank of telephone operators in the library’s research office, responding to enquiries that we can’t hear. The first caller is told that the Gutenberg Bible is currently unavailable for viewing. It’s a jokey wink from Wiseman, presenting the desire to examine a religious text as a tongue-in-cheek riposte to Dawkins’s derision. A subsequent enquiry offers a more serious inversion: an operator patiently explains to the caller that unicorns are not real creatures. Wiseman often uses juxtaposition for levity – as when he cuts from a 100-year-old physical picture archive to the sign for the internet services department – but here the temptation to snigger passes abruptly. The operator goes on to find the first recorded use of the word in the West and translates a passage about a ‘unicorn’ from Middle English for the caller. It’s a lovely moment of selfless and humble humanism and democratic spirit, using contrapuntal editing to make a statement that sets the tone for what is to follow.

Although footage of the tellers and administrators getting on with their jobs doesn’t take up a large amount of screen time, they are returned to intermittently, offering advice on anything from the best way to track an ancestor through public records to which *Wizard of Oz* book to reserve. They ground the film in our traditional library experience, as the film seeks to show how the NYPL (and, by extension, all our libraries) is changing, the challenges it faces in the digital present and, vitally, just how important libraries remain to modern society as an educational resource. This can be seen both in the way the library is adapting to serve the community and in the nature of the knowledge it is sharing.

#### **Frederick Wiseman**

##### **Ballet**

Sun 4 Jan 12:15; Sat 17 Jan 17:40

##### **La Danse: Le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris**

Sat 10 Jan 14:50; Sat 17 Jan 14:15 (+ intro by dance writer and critic Judith Mackrell)

##### **Ex Libris: The New York Public Library**

Sun 11 Jan 14:40; Sun 18 Jan 14:40

##### **The Store**

Tue 13 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by season curator Sandra Hebron); Mon 19 Jan 20:35

##### **National Gallery**

Sun 25 Jan 15:00; Sat 31 Jan 14:40

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One of the film's many different recurring strands focuses on meetings between library staff, who discuss the way their work is changing and what the future holds. These are the kinds of conversations that would most likely end up on the cutting-room floor of other documentaries, but for Wiseman they're crucial. One of the issues covered is how the library can help those in the city without internet access at home (around 3 million people) and how online resources can embrace Andrew Carnegie's vision for 'a library within walking distance of every New Yorker.' Lofty idealism informs conversations about what kind of society the library wants to help build, giving a surprising urgency to scenes of people sitting in rooms talking.

Another meeting involves debate about how libraries should respond to vagrancy – with a change of culture, it's refreshingly suggested – and Wiseman once again subtly makes connections for us. The discussion references the regularity with which homeless visitors fall asleep in the library. Shortly afterwards, a montage of library users lingers on an African-American man asleep at a table. Regardless of the specific man's actual situation, the image has power in its implications about inequality – and it's subsequently hard to ignore the fact that the majority of the library's high-level staff are Caucasian.

There are several other scenes featuring discussions of racial and religious inequality, often framed through a historical lens – from the labels on a map in a textbook referring to African slaves as 'workers' to the ways in which Western society has created narratives about the intertwined nature of slavery and Islamic belief. Emancipatory thought becomes another repeating motif that feeds back into the film's – and the library's – central thematic concern with the institution as the enabler of knowledge and, by extension, freedom. The notion pops up often enough to remind you that there is a steady hand on the tiller, despite the wide-ranging and apparently disparate subjects through which these ideas are coursing.

Similarly, Wiseman's attention returns on numerous occasions to the parts of the library system that cater for those who are disadvantaged in some way, from the recording of audiobooks to the teaching of Braille. We see a sign-language interpreter demonstrating the physical nuances of her work while translating as two people read the Declaration of Independence with different emotional inflections. It's a scene that sticks in the mind, not least as a reminder of how we all interpret what we see.

At one point, the musician Elvis Costello is interviewed on stage and asked about his own emotional pitch during the writing in the later 1980s of his song 'Tramp the Dirt Down', which is an indictment of Margaret Thatcher. He speaks about his anger at 'what that particular time let loose on people – the desire to step on your fellow countrymen to get ahead,' a statement that chimes with contemporary relevance. Costello goes on to explain that the song's melody is a nod to Stevie Wonder's 'Isn't She Lovely' – which was intended as a joke. It's an anecdote that seems perfect for Wiseman: the adding of a comic note to leaven something serious; the use of subtle foundational elements to enhance meaning; and the creation of a deeply political work disguised formally as something far less edgy. But where the future in Costello's song 'looked as bright and as clear as the black tarmacadam,' Wiseman's message is one brimming with hope and possibility. He's not interested in the state we're in, but the vision this institution has for what we're capable of. Not bad for a slow and discursive 200-minute work about a library.

Ben Nicholson, *Sight and Sound*, August 2018