

No Popcorn

...But Portland's DIY Church of Film Shows What Others Don't

Matthew Lucas

2018

Church of Film is a small volunteer film collective in Portland, Ore., whose mission is to provide accessible and free cinema, especially to communities where access to movies is limited. The program was founded in 2013 at the North Star Ballroom in North Portland.

There are no theaters of any kind in the area, and neighborhoods were hurting from a rapidly encroaching influx of development and gentrification. Since that time, the collective has expanded to other venues and parts of the city, most notably the Clinton Street Theater in Southeast Portland, and has shown one or more screenings weekly. Screenings have always been free and donations based.

The programming is designed to expand the narrow confines of canonical cinema—a crashout of historical distribution prejudices and market valuation—exposing audiences to smaller national film industries and outsider voices. Most of the films screened have received little or no US distribution, and screenings have included ones from 47 different countries.

The collective creates subtitles for some of the foreign language films.

Another goal is to broaden expectations in cinematic narrative. Inspired by experimental Chilean filmmaker Raul Ruiz's description of cinema as "an instrument of speculation and reflection... a machine for travel through space and time," the curatorial emphasis focuses often on folk tales, Surrealism and art film, alternative narrative methods, and on films that document different countries and time periods.

This encompasses a broad spectrum of films: documents of the Cuban Revolution, folk cinema from Central Asia, diva films from Italy's silent era, arthouse features from Japan's Art Theater Guild, and essays from France's Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action, for example, have all been screened.

The ultimate hope is that Church of Film provides a workable DIY model for other programs who may pursue a similar model of affordable and accessible cinema. With a projector, a screen, and a venue, those with access to online film libraries have opened up a great deal of possibilities for cinephiles to bring curation to the public, forming cinematic spaces that are de-commodified and more adventurous in their selections.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/400-spring-2018/no-popcorn>
Fifth Estate #400, Spring, 2018

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net