

SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space Culture: Innovative Approaches for Public Engagement in Space (9)

Author: Dr. Tracie Prater
NASA Marshall Space Flight Center, United States, tracie.j.prater@gmail.com

SPACE ON SCREEN: ENGAGING AND EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ABOUT SPACE THROUGH
FILM

Abstract

In 2014, Belcourt Theatre, a nonprofit community theater in Nashville, TN, was awarded a “Science on Screen” grant, sponsored by Boston’s Coolidge Corner Theatre with major support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Belcourt was one of only twenty theatres nationwide selected to take part in this initiative, which seeks to pair screenings of science-related films with discussions led by experts in fields closely related to the film’s subject. Belcourt’s programming had a space focus, as five space-related films (2001: A Space Odyssey, October Sky, Gattaca, Wall-E, and For All Mankind) were selected for screenings as part of the series; each film was supplemented with a post-film discussion and/or outreach activity. 2001: A Space Odyssey was introduced by a NASA engineer and followed with a discussion led by Dr. Fred Ordway, technical adviser for the film and member of the original Von Braun rocket team. October Sky was accompanied by an outreach event in a public park, where the rocket team from nearby Vanderbilt University showcased the rocket they built for NASA’s University Student Launch Initiative. Other activities at the October Sky event included flying space shuttle kites, a “pin the payload” on the International Space Station game designed for children, and a rocket propulsion demonstration. The series culminated with a showing of For All Mankind, an Oscar-nominated documentary on the Apollo program, complemented by a panel discussion with two Apollo engineers and a NASA historian. Belcourt also offered special “intersession” screenings specifically for high school students in the Nashville metro area as well as “kid’s shows” on Saturday mornings. Several screenings were also part of the FLICX (Faculty Led Interactive Cinematic Exploration) program at Vanderbilt University, which seeks to promote faculty-student conversations based on film. Belcourt members and screening attendees were surveyed following the events and their feedback was compiled into metrics to capture the effectiveness of the activities, discussions, and programming associated with the series. The Belcourt Science on Screen initiative represents a unique way to connect science to cinema and can serve as a model for how to engage and educate the public about space through film.