A Treasure of Viewing

By Miranda Haddock,
Head, Visual Resources Library

As a school kid I remember being delighted whenever the 16 mm projector was wheeled into the classroom. Something special was going to take place! It didn’t matter whether the films were long or short, my favorite life subjects or not, just watching moving images grabbed my attention.

I still think of moving images as a treat in the classroom. And, the news gets even better since instructors are using more and more moving image media today than they did ten years ago when the “film” collection became part of the University Libraries. In fact, the faculty at Western Michigan University is using 77% more videos per annum than they did in 2000. Overall usage of the collection has increased by 200% in the ten years the Libraries has been administering the collection. Fortunately, the collection of moving image media has grown along with use of the collection. To date, there are over 5000 videos, 450 DVDs, and 410 16 mm film titles available for classroom use. Sara Wick, Coordinator, provides assistance to users of the Collection, which is located in 3305 Sangren.

The Moving Image Collection

As in most academic library collections, the materials contained in the Videotape, DVD, and 16 mm Film Collection reflect what is being taught at the institution. Faculty request instructional videos that highlight their subject specialties. The collection ranges from the life sciences with titles like Life’s Greatest Miracle, featuring Lennart Nilsson’s groundbreaking photographic techniques, to the visual arts with the The Indiana Murals of Thomas Hart Benton. Just as instructional moving images come in several formats (videotape, DVD, 16 mm film, etc.), they also take many forms of visual expression including traditional documentaries, animated lessons, and feature films. Often selected titles are:

— Dead Birds, a semi-documentary produced by the Film Study Center of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University from a 1961-63 expedition to study the living habits of the Dani people in West New Guinea;

— Animated Neuroscience & the Action of Nicotine, Cocaine, and Marijuana in the Brain, an instructional video using 3-D animation to demonstrate a specific lesson;

— Les Amants du Pont-Neuf (The Lovers on the Bridge), a 1991 French film, has optional English subtitles making it an ideal “listening” film for students learning French;

— Kumonosu-jo (Throne of Blood) in Japanese and Mujeres al Borde de un Ataque de Nervios (Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown), for those studying these languages;

— The Goddess and the Computer examines traditional Balinese rice farming beliefs and mathematical models, a film that might be used in a variety of classes ranging from art history to religion to mathematics to management;

— Oh! What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me! explores how mass media effect indigenous people;

— Borderline, a documentary on Detroit’s 8 Mile Road, and Beyond the Veil, which shows diversity within Islam, might be used by Political Science, Anthropology, and Sociology;

— The Smell of Burning Ants demonstrates how boys are socialized by our culture, a useful viewing for both psychology and sociology; and

— Spin the Bottle examines the college party scene and how it influences thoughts on gender and alcohol—a valuable viewing for several of the social sciences.

Literary holdings in the Videotape, DVD, and 16 mm Film Collection are equally varied. The collection contains BBC titles on Dylan Thomas, Ernest Hemingway, George Elliott, and a series of 39 productions of Shakespeare’s work. Writers are also represented by other production companies as well. Some of the authors whose life and work are represented are Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Octavio Paz, Louise Erdrich, and Michael Dorris. This collection holds literature that has been interpreted for film. A few titles that immediately come to mind are Great Expectations, Name of the Rose, Cyrano de Bergerac, Jane Eyre, and Grapes of Wrath.

Multidepartmental Appeal

As mentioned above, many of the titles held in our collection appeal to more than one department. Many of what are considered “high use” moving image titles are used repeatedly by more than one department. The heavy use of some titles requires that we have more than one copy of these titles. WGBH-Boston and Blackside Productions’ Eyes on the Prize receives more use than any other title. The film is popular with Sociology, Political Science, History, and Africana Studies. Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity is regularly used by Sociology, Communications, and Women’s Studies. Killing Us Softly, focusing on the media and images of women, and The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter are two other titles that have been used by multiple programs such as Women’s Studies, History, and Sociology.

Even though a movie image production may have originally been targeted to one type of audience, often it becomes used by more than one audience. Dreamworlds was at first marketed to those in the Communications discipline. However, it is a useful title for other areas of study that analyze the effects of visual pop culture on our young people. Education, Sociology, Social Work, and Women’s Studies are examples of other subject areas that could benefit from this work, and, for that reason, such titles become very high use videos. Bread and Roses was produced and distributed as a feature film, but in the academic classroom it becomes a vehicle for discussion on labor relations, illegal aliens, and large corporations.

Some of our high use titles are not only well used in the classroom, but are also used in training sessions by administrative offices around campus as well. Departments, offices, and organizations that train student assistants on campus use Fish and Fish Sticks, motivational videos produced by ChartHouse International Learning Corporation.

Moving Images and Teaching

Videos, DVDs, and 16 mm films are used in many different ways in the classroom. A professor of acting may use different versions of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. For example, the 1948 rendering with Sir Laurence Olivier as Hamlet and the 1996 adaptation with Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet illustrate how different actors (and directors) have chosen to interpret the character. Novels are often made into feature films, but require rewriting as a screenplay. The Razor’s Edge might be used in a Communications or Creative Writing class to demonstrate how screenplay writing differs from an already well-established, published novel. Other feature films by directors known for their artistic framing of images, Alfred
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Hitchcock’s Rear Window and Ingmar Bergman’s Wild Strawberries immediately come to mind, would be used in classes focusing on the art of the moving image, camera, or directing technique. Literature and foreign language faculty might select a documentary on a particular writer being studied, perhaps an American literature class would include Alice Walker: Author or one of the many interviews with Toni Morrison.

Members of the faculty prepare assignments around the content of videos and DVDs. Marlene Breu, an Associate Professor in Family and Consumer Sciences, notes that she requires students, after viewing a video, to write a reaction paper or a critique of the film or to participate in a group discussion. Exams often include questions or essays built around the content of a video that has been viewed. Sometimes a video can condense a subject and explain a concept in 10 minutes when it would take an instructor 30 minutes to explain the same material. Since videos are a visual medium, students who are visual learners have more opportunity to assimilate a topic. Films and other moving image media provide both visual and auditory stimuli, aspects that can go beyond the ordinary lecture. Political Science professor Susan Hoffmann uses Fritz Lang’s Metropolis to show the effects of the industrialization process. Students remember the regimented workers whose lives are bound by the manufacturing machinery and time clock.

According to Marlene Breu, Family and Consumer Sciences, videos serve as “virtual field trips.” In her class, Apparel and Textile Studies, it is important for students to have an understanding of the textile manufacturing process. Since textile production plants are not available in Michigan or nearby in neighboring states, Dr. Breu uses videos to show textile processing.

For a number of years, the collection was open to faculty only. However, this has changed and students are now able to check out videos for their personal or group study. The graphic content of videos, DVDs, and film can complement what is taught in class or are good references for a research paper in additional to traditional print resources. For example, two videos, Hawaii, the Pacific Paradise and Maua: the Spirit of Our People, provide excellent visual, historical, and cultural background for students focusing on Polynesia for a research paper. Occasionally, students find it difficult to understand works of literature. A student trying to understand the poetry of Ezra Pound would benefit from viewing Ezra Pound, a work that includes biographical information as well as an explanation of his influence on modern literature. Viewing a feature film derived from a work of literature may also help a student frame the story mentally before actually reading the book. A lengthy tome such as Name of the Rose comes to mind, although viewing a film instead of reading a book for a course is not recommended by this author. With the growing documentary and well researched feature films, with historical themes is an excellent method for students to gain the feel or clothing, housing, and other aspects of past lifestyles.

Maintaining Our Valuable Collection

Moving image collections, as do book, audio, photograph, and slide collections, require watchful maintenance. In 2003, the Library installed new shelving specifically designed for video and DVD collections. This shelving is more compact and can hold more items than conventional library shelving. With the collection growing in number of items and use, efficient storage is very important.

When a title is damaged, worn out, or lost, the Visual Resources Library makes every effort to replace it. To safeguard against damage, we view each title when it arrives to make sure it operates correctly and that the images and sound are not damaged. Rarely do we have to return a title due to poor technical quality. However, we have found that, on occasion, sound defects don’t become apparent until a tape is viewed in a large lecture hall. When this occurs, we then make every effort to obtain a copy with better sound. The staff of the Videotape, DVD, and 16 mm Film Collection have been trained to make sure videos and films are rewound properly and that the surfaces of the DVDs are intact.

Many of the titles purchased for our collection cost well over $500 for a single title as, for example, the ChartHouse International Learning Corporation materials. Sets of videos with two or more tapes or DVDs cost well over $1000 and sometimes up to the $5000 range. One of the realities of maintaining a collection of instructional materials is that some titles are copied in small numbers or go out of print, making them difficult to replace. Eyes on the Prize, a series of 28 tapes produced by WGBH in Boston, is one of the more heavily used series in our collection. In order to replace this series, the Acquisitions Department would need to spend many hours and hundreds of dollars just to locate a used copy of one of the tapes.

In order to preserve our important collection that so closely reflects the undergraduate and graduate curricula of Western Michigan University, the Library has specific use and circulation policies in place. The policies allow access to the collection by all WMU faculty, staff, and students who wish to use the materials for educational purposes associated with the University. The Library licenses the videos and DVDs for University use only. License agreements do not permit moving image materials to be used for film festivals or other activities of the broader Kalamazoo community. Complete policies are available through the Videotape, DVD, and 16 mm Film Collection home page.

This past year, etc. policies and fees have been put into place to discourage users from holding onto materials after the due date. As a result, circulation statistics have gone up, with more and more departments demonstrating interest in the use of moving images in teaching. Our stricter policies require that patrons return their materials on time so that other members of our WMU community can use them. Since these policies have been in place, there are fewer overdue and lost titles than previous years.

Services

The Videotape, DVD, and 16 mm Film Collection offers a variety of services to faculty and students. Instructors can make advance reservations through the University Libraries’ Web site to ensure that a video or DVD will be available for class when needed. Materials, including manuals that accompany some titles, can be renewed for one week if an instructor needs more time. Generally, videos and DVDs must be checked out from the collection in 3305 Sangren, but arrangements can be made to have the videos picked up in the Harper C. Maybee Music and Dance Library. Moving image materials can be returned to Waldo Library or any of the four branch libraries. Instructors can also place videotapes on reserve so that students can view the video in small groups in one of the several viewing rooms available in the Education Library.

Anyone in the University community can request a moving image title for purchase although budget limitations give priority to requests that relate to WMU academic programs and curricula. A recommendation form can be found on the Videotape, DVD, and 16 mm Film Collection home page. Purchases can also be made through the University Libraries’ subject liaisons.

In order to assist patrons in locating titles in the moving image collection, a “how to” guide for searching WestCat, the Libraries’ online catalog for all collections, is also available on the Collection’s home page, http://www.wmich.edu/library/film. All titles in the moving image collection can be found through basic searches in WestCat, e.g. by title, Library of Congress subject, etc. The guided keyword searches in WestCat can be specifically limited to items in the moving images collection. The search, once limits are set, will identify all of the titles in our collection that are, as the old saying might be paraphrased, “moving pictures worth thousands of words.” Come and see for yourself our “treasure of viewing.”