

FILM IN THE CLASSROOM: A COMMENT

By RICHARD HARVEY

Why did you begin to use film in the classroom? Is your film usage today based mainly on pedagogical theory or on personal experience? How does film differ from print and speech as a means of teaching and learning history? Those questions, and others which arose spontaneously during the discussion, were considered by a panel of four historians at a session on "Film in the Classroom" at the May 15th meeting of the Community College Social Science Association at the Sheraton Inn-Hopkins Airport, Cleveland, Ohio. The panelists were Lee Makela (Cleveland State University); Marvin Fletcher (Ohio University); Taylor Stults (Muskingum College); and Richard Harvey (Ohio University, Chairman).

Ten years ago, such a session would have been innovative. Ten years ago, such a session would have lacked academic respectability. Today, one cannot claim innovativeness for such sessions. Indeed, they have become almost routine at professional meetings everywhere, even receiving the high-powered backing of the American Historical Association on some occasions. And yet, it appears that they continue to be somewhat beyond the pale: for the most part, only academics in the lower reaches of the pecking order and those who do not publish much participate in them. And much the same may be said of the use of film in the classroom: it, too, is not quite respectable, being used (so it is thought) by "with-it" historians and by those anxious to inflate sagging enrollments in their classes.

The film in the classroom scene today, however, is a little more complex than that. On the one hand are the "film freak historians," ranging from those who, with troubled consciences, are only beginning to

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explore the possibilities of film supplements to print and lecture, to the veterans, who have been using film for a decade or so, who (one imagines) identify with Eisenstein, or Truffaut, or Peckinpah, and who, at the moment, seem especially interested in taking stock of the situation before going on. Judging from the views expressed at the "Film in the Classroom" session, the veterans now have serious reservations about the value of film in the classroom. They no longer look to film as the best, and surely not the only means, of adding a visual supplement to lecture presentations. They regret the loss of control over classroom materials which the use of film entails. And, in some cases, frustrations with budgetary and utilization problems have decided the issue, against the use of film. These historians, self-taught and now competent in a good many areas of media technology, are adopting a confident do-it-yourself attitude toward media usage. Some are making their own films; some are creating new soundtracks for older films; some are creating sophisticated slide-tape shows for classroom use; all, it appears, are exploring with their students the real and potential uses of media techniques in the classroom. Thus, it would appear that the vets are abandoning the use of a commercial product, readily available on the market--the finished film at a set rental--for visual and sound supplements which they themselves create, and thus control.

On the other hand, the use of film in college and university classrooms is still widely regarded as faddish, as a "pop" means of increasing enrollments, as an abdication of one's lecturing responsibilities, as a lapse from the professionalism which all historians espouse. These negative attitudes are fervently held, perhaps because they have to do with professional identity, and thus appear to be serious obstacles to communication between those who use film (and other media) and those who do not.

Yet, I should like to suggest that common ground does exist. It consists of two propositions. Proposition one is: historians can and must do everything they can to stimulate an interest in history. They may generalize; they may philosophize; they may dramatize; they may popularize. They must help the individual student to find his place in the continuity of human experience. No means, not even film and other media, ought to be regarded as off limits. The proposition's corollary is: historians must not do in a scholarly book, in an article, in a paper for a professional meeting, what they must do in the classroom. Historians must wear, alternately, two different hats. They must distinguish between the purposes of undergraduate instruction--where they

can and should be judged by their clients--and the scholarly professionalism required by their peers in books, articles, papers, reviews, and the like. Too many historians look upon the class session as an occasion for the reading of scholarly papers as lectures; too many view their students as potential graduate students.

"Visual literacy" means both the understanding of the techniques used in producing a given set of visual effects and the ways in which those effects play upon the cognitive and affective faculties. It means subjective immersion in the affects; it means objective appraisal of their content and form. Proposition two is: history as a liberal art should enhance the "visual literacy" of its students. History, philosophy, and literature, for example, are accepted as disciplines which help to free the student from time- and culture-based biases. They are meant to enlarge the student's field of experience. They prepare the student for intelligent participation in his culture. Now, if the "visual" component in that culture becomes increasingly significant, i.e. if it is used more frequently and sophisticatedly to communicate myth and symbol, to disseminate information, and to entertain, then the liberal arts should accept "visual literacy" as a goal for its students, as a legitimate expression of its long-standing tradition of preparing young men and women for intelligent participation in the life of their times. History students, in a word, should be taught to "read" a film critically just as they are taught to read a historical monograph critically.

Recognition of the validity of proposition one would free historians from the conventions of undergraduate instruction--conventions which derive from the values and objectives of graduate instruction. Experimentation with various teaching techniques, including the use of media, could very well become the norm. No longer would such freedom be the monopoly of the high schools and the community colleges. Recognition of the validity of proposition two would virtually require historians to use film and other media in the classroom in order that history play its role as a liberal art in heightening "visual literacy."

History has handed the discipline of history a cruel dilemma: while twentieth-century students, at least in this country, were growing increasingly unreceptive to historical culture as presented in its traditional forms, the visual and the affective approaches to reality were revolutionizing the arts and the communications media just at the moment when the discipline of history was becoming especially pretentious about its "scientific" status. This is a special moment in the history

of history teaching: what we do today will determine the classroom experience for a generation or more. And above all, what historians need to do is to start talking to one another about their teaching: they need to discover the common ground.

FILM & HISTORY NEWS

NATIONAL AUDIO VISUAL CENTER

The Center announces the availability of seven new films produced for the Bicentennial by the United States Information Agency. In a reversal of previous policy, the Congress has authorized the circulation of these films in the United States. For further information on these films and for a catalog of all the films available for sale or rental from the federal government write: Lynn McCloud, National Audiovisual Center (NAC), General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. 20409.

CONFERENCE ON CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

The Temple University Department of Anthropology has announced that their annual conference on visual anthropology is scheduled for March 9, 10, and 11, 1977. This year the presentations will focus on "the communication of ideology," and are meant "to encompass research from any culture, including our own, on the process wherebysocial and cultural ideologies are formed, transmitted and expressed in behavior." For further information contact: Anthony Kroch, Department of Anthropology, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122.

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