

Captioned and Nonverbal Films for the Hearing-Impaired

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TIMES HAVE CHANGED; a few years ago, the library's basic "product" was books. About the only special needs satisfied were those of the poorly sighted — there were large-print or talking books. Now, however, librarians deal with a multitude of media, to keep up with a diversity of patrons. A public librarian is almost automatically attuned to the needs of the handicapped community. A school librarian is now legally committed by PL 94-142¹ to the practice of mainstreaming, i.e., integrating the exceptional person into regular instructional programs. Whatever the librarian's function, there are new demands to be faced today, some of them originating from the rightfully rising expectations of the disabled. These citizens are no longer as patient as they used to be about receiving token attention to their needs — nor are they willing to accept library services in isolation from the rest of the population. Until very recently, for example, most hard-of-hearing children were schooled in separate institutions. When deaf adults wanted movies for diversion, public libraries provided loans for screenings with family and friends at home. Now, however, these same clients — and their perceptions of their civil rights — have changed. They still want access to film resources, but with the difference that they now demand the option of viewing within a "normal" setting. In other words, they are entitled to an education within a public school environment; Saturday morning film sessions or story hours should not, by the nature of presentation, exclude deaf children from participation; nor should deaf adults be deprived of adult film fare on library premises.

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This new consciousness carries with it a twofold obligation: (1) to supply the deaf with non-audio-oriented media; and (2) to enable the deaf, whenever possible, to enjoy these materials alongside of — not separate from — their hearing peers. Does this accommodation seem impractical? Will it mean new facilities? More personnel? A bigger budget? The happy answer is *no*. A federal free-film program, Captioned Films for the Deaf, has been designed for just this purpose.

Captioned Films for the Deaf (CFD) is a branch of the USOE Bureau for the Education of the Handicapped. Since it received its congressional charter in 1958, CFD has provided hundreds of subtitled pictures to deaf Americans — free of charge. The subject matter of these resources is the same as might serve any other segment of the population. These films consist of exactly the same footage as uncaptioned counterparts, differing only in that the soundtracks have been altered from the original just enough to allow better synchronization with the superimposed text. CFD distributes titles to schools, and for the general public, circulates entertainment movies and shorter subjects of interest to adults. While the offerings in education and entertainment are related, they are different in policy, procedure, and purpose.

There are many captioned educational films available on the market today. Typical productions include *Boarded Window* (Perspective Films); *Cry of the Marsh* (ACI Productions); *Dr. Heidigger's Experiment* (CCM Films Inc.); *John Fitzgerald Kennedy — 1917-1963* (Films, Inc.); *Little Engine that Could* (Coronet Instructional Films); *Mike Mulligan and His Steamshovel* (Weston Woods); *The Ugly Duckling* (Coronet Instructional Films); and *Why We Have Elections* (LCA). There are approximately 1000 titles in the current catalog, with 75-90 new entries acquired annually. There are sixty film depositories located regionally. Those eligible to borrow and use films from these depositories include schools and programs for the deaf. In order to be able to use these films, an audience including a minimum of only one deaf student is required. Applications should be addressed to: Captioned Films for the Deaf, Distribution Center, 5034 Wisconsin Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016 (telephone: 202-363-1308).

Among the typical productions of captioned entertainment films are: *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Bambi*, *Butch Cassidy*, *French Connection*, *Lion in Winter*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *That Darn Cat*, and *Sound of Music*. There are approximately 750 titles listed in the current catalog; between 45 and 50 new titles are acquired annually. There is only one film depository for this classification of films; it is located in Indianapolis. Deaf per-

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sons, both children and adults, are eligible to borrow these films, provided that the requirement of a minimum audience of six deaf viewers is met. Information about these films may be obtained by writing to the Captioned Films for the Deaf Distribution Center at the above address.

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

As evidenced by the data immediately above, entertainment films are for the *exclusive* enjoyment of deaf viewers. This restriction arises from a commercial agreement designed to protect theatrical exhibitors from unfair competition. There is nothing, however, to prevent libraries from acting as coordinating agents for programming, scheduling, and screening such presentations. Librarians, because of their professional expertise as coordinators and publicizers, are particularly well suited to the task of selecting and announcing appropriate materials for community members, whatever their special interests. As part of these outreach efforts, however, librarians should not overlook the opinions of the consumers themselves. They should take care to solicit their preferences actively. Communication is a two-way process, and unless librarians keep open and attuned to individual input, they are in danger of the classic error of imposing their own tastes on the people they are supposed to be serving. Moreover, communication with the deaf isn't as difficult as librarians may imagine. Many hearing-impaired persons have developed understandable speech, and some can read lips if they are spoken to carefully, without abruptly switching from subject to subject. If nothing else works, there is always the faithful standby, the written word. Written notes can be used either to supplement conversation with deaf individuals or to collect information via questionnaires or surveys.

NONVERBAL FILMS

Nonverbal films are another source of software for the hard-of-hearing. These are not only silent films, but also films with visual coherence strong enough to convey a mood or message pictorially. A few familiar examples are: Churchill's *Rainshower*, McGraw-Hill's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, and Macmillan's *The Red Balloon*. These titles, and dozens more like them, are probably available through the usual 16mm centers. Some of these films may have already been reserved for hearing patrons; if so, they can be reserved for hard-of-hearing patrons as well. In fact, nonverbals are a good choice for programming that is compatible with both deaf and hearing audiences. Of course, librarians are understandably somewhat unaccustomed to dealing with wordless media. As a

matter of principle, nonverbalism may even seem to be hostile to a librarian's interests — and, by extension, detrimental to the interests of the library clientele. On the contrary, many nonverbal films not only originate from the printed page but, more important, they can lead readers there. A prime example of this sequence is the work *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* by Ambrose Bierce, the film of which was cited earlier. Others include Poe's *Masque of the Red Death* (McGraw-Hill), Saki's *Open Window* (Pyramid), Hugh Hood's *The Red Kite* (Wombat), and Mabel Watts's *Zachary Zween* (Sterling Educ.). Thus, nonverbals can be utilized both as a vehicle for increasing readership and as a means of reaching deaf and hearing people simultaneously and on more than one intellectual level. The best of these productions, although they may be unnarrated and free of dialogue, use images and sound effects to recreate the verbal and conceptual content of the literature that inspired them. As if by some reciprocal equity, their cinema counterparts then restimulate interest in the original print version.

UTILIZATION POINTERS

Apparently, there is no need to persuade librarians to use nonverbals. As evidenced by the hundreds of such films in active circulation, librarians are already using them. Instead, a few ways of "integrating" them might be suggested here. Librarians can accomplish such integration in several ways: (1) thematic scheduling of unnarrated classics, such as those films identified above; (2) selecting a nonverbal short to precede full-length features; and (3) adding more word-free films to the library's collection and advertising them as such. If this last suggestion is not followed, the library's deaf patrons may not be able to appreciate the librarian's efforts in their behalf.

There is, however, a related word of caution to add: not all alingual films are self-explanatory to deaf viewers. While such productions are usually more pictorial than most, and rely less on narration for clarity, many hard-of-hearing people still depend for understanding on the music and sound effects which hearing patrons take for granted. Abstract subjects are, as a result, less understandable in themselves, as are quick-cut, nonlinear montages of any extensive length. For those reasons, it may be wise to choose topics that are intrinsically narrative in style and scope. General examples of these include: stories, nature studies, sports, hobbies, art and travel. After beginning with those areas, the librarian can come in closer contact with deaf clients — and they are a fascinating group.

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Their ideas should be polled to determine what they would like to see on film. Aside from these possibilities to guide librarians in nonnarrated programming, there is at least one major reference source: *Films—Too Good for Words*.² In addition to this directory, librarians may also wish to consult the catalogs of film companies that are especially strong in that format. Among these firms are Churchill Films; Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation; Films, Incorporated; International Film Bureau; International Film Foundation; Learning Corporation of America; Macmillan Films, Inc.; National Film Board of Canada; Phoenix Films, Inc.; and Pyramid Films. Almost all of these companies—and many others—will sell or rent captioned copies of the same films available through Captioned Films for the Deaf if, for any reason, a library is not eligible for free utilization.

References

1. PL 94-142. "Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975." Nov. 29, 1975. Washington, D.C., U.S.G.P.O., 1977.
2. Parlato, Salvatore J. *Films—Too Good for Words*. New York, Bowker, 1973.

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