

Perspective on Establishing a Film Collection

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IT CAME AS SOMETHING of a shock recently, upon visiting a library, when the librarian proudly pointed to the "audiovisual" room. It consisted entirely of microfiche readers and files. As an "educational media" specialist rather than a librarian, this writer's first reaction was scornful amusement. However, with reflection came the realization that the shame should have been personal and not directed toward the librarian.

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century made materials printed from movable type available for the first time in history. Yet it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the ability to read and write was considered important enough for leaders to advocate the establishment of public schools. Prior to that time, illiteracy was the rule rather than the exception (and there are some who feel that this is still true). It was 1875 before Melvil Dewey invented his decimal classification system for cataloging library books — there simply were not enough libraries or books until that time to require such a system. Thus, it is not surprising that audiovisual materials, which were merely a gleam in the minds of such men as Thomas Edison, Guglielmo Marconi, and Alexander Graham Bell less than 100 years ago, have not yet received recognition equal to that of printed materials in most library collections.

There is little doubt that, for the moment, technology has outstripped the ability to absorb and utilize it. This fact, coupled with the information explosion of the twentieth century, has placed a heavy responsibility on all libraries, whether they serve the public, industries, schools and universities or other specialized segments of the population. Much of the tech-

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nology which has enabled libraries to include any of the wide range of audiovisual materials in their collections has been developed only within the last twenty-five to thirty years. This calls for the retraining of librarians to handle acquisition of information in other than the "print" form. Also needed is a redefinition of staff roles, since no one person can be completely informed about both print and audiovisual materials, as well as have knowledge of the equipment, storage requirements and cataloging necessary for their full utilization.

Despite these difficulties, records, audiotapes, slides, filmstrips and even multimedia packages seem to lend themselves to the procedures already established in most libraries. In general, they are easy to check out, use and house. While acquisition of the equipment involved may present some problems, the equipment is usually also highly portable and is easy to use and store. The acquisition of films, however, is another problem entirely.

One of the most popular audiovisual forms, the motion picture, has been a unique part of twentieth-century culture and civilization. In the 1890s, fierce rivalry raged among France, Germany, England and the United States for the distinction of being first to make the motion picture a viable medium. Thomas Edison and George Eastman (founder of Eastman Kodak) were largely responsible for developing the technology which made the United States a leader in the field.

At that time, Edison felt that the motion picture's primary value would be to the field of education. What he did not foresee was its immense potential for entertainment — a popularity which still endures. Today, the motion picture ranks in importance as an art form with literature and the theater. It also provides invaluable original documentation of most of the events of this century.

Motion picture collections were started almost from the very invention of the medium. Fascinated by the inventions of his friend Thomas Edison, Henry Ford amassed a huge collection of films made during the first three decades of this century; these are now housed in Dearborn, Michigan. The Museum of Modern Art, perhaps one of the first institutions to realize that a motion picture could also be an art form, acquired a large collection which met its exacting standards and continues in the selection and circulation of these films today. In Davenport, Iowa, Kent Eastin began collecting entertainment films in the early 1920s as a hobby. That hobby became Blackhawk Films, a thriving business which is probably one of the finest sources of early American movies today.

As early as 1913, at a meeting of representatives from four mid-

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western universities, it was agreed that educational films should be available for use in colleges and public schools. As a direct result of this meeting, the first educational film rental libraries were established in 1914 by the University of Wisconsin, University of Iowa, Iowa State University and University of Kansas. Although their initial efforts were confined to circulation of "magic lantern" slides and a few highly combustible 35mm nitrate films, there are more than fifty major university film rental libraries today, in addition to countless public school and college film collections throughout the nation. Since few patrons had movie projectors at home, however, public libraries were a little slower to acquire film collections, and the equipment was both cumbersome and difficult to operate for a long time.

In comparison to the development of printed materials, the development of motion pictures has been amazingly rapid. While printed materials do — and perhaps should — constitute the major portion of most library collections, the acquisition of films is now considered an important and necessary activity.

Some initial advice to anyone considering addition of films to a collection would be: "Forget everything you know about the selection, processing, housing and circulation of books or printed materials. This is an entirely different ball game." To begin with, a decision must be made on the format: 8mm, 16mm or both. The 35mm format is used almost solely in commercial theaters and the equipment required is rarely available elsewhere. The 8mm format is attractive from the cost point of view; however, there is regular 8mm and super-8mm, both of which can be silent or have magnetic or optical sound. Each of these variations requires a different kind of equipment. Most school and college libraries have standardized use of the super-8mm format, either silent or with optical sound, and circulate the equipment on which these films can be used. They must nevertheless take great care to specify the proper format desired to match the equipment available.

Public libraries experience a more difficult problem, as they receive requests for both regular 8mm and super-8mm films, depending upon the type of equipment patrons have at home. Since public libraries have found that 8mm features and shorts are inexpensive and popular, many are acquiring collections in both formats. Various types of 8mm projectors are circulated as well, allowing patrons also to view their own movies at home. If the foregoing seems confusing, it is. The lack of standardization in 8mm format is one of the primary reasons why it is not as popular as the 16mm film.

In the early 1920s, Alexander Victor invented a 16mm projector and convinced George Eastman that with the adoption of 16mm safety acetate film, the motion picture could at last begin to serve its function in education. This was a major advance. With the addition of both color and sound in the 1930s, and the fact that any kind of 16mm projector could project any 16mm film, this has become the most popular and usable film format available today. A conservative estimate of the educational and short film features available in 16mm at the present time might be made at approximately 75,000. This figure does not include the many feature or entertainment films which have also been reduced to the 16mm format for home and library use.

How does one select 16mm films? There are no accepted lists or "recommended basic collections," no selection tools similar to the reference works which assist the librarian in acquiring print materials. Furthermore, there are no "jobbers" to whom one can send a list of titles with the assurance that the order can be filled. Even the terms are entirely foreign to someone familiar only with print materials.

In essence, the available selection tools are, in reality, "identification" tools, which may give sufficient information for making decisions on which films to preview. One of the best known is NICEM's *Index to 16mm Educational Films*¹ which lists all films submitted to the Library of Congress for copyright, giving release date, physical description, producer and distributor. This is probably the most complete listing of educational or short films available. A publication now in preparation is the CUFC/Bowker *Educational Film Locator*.² This work will list all the film holdings of the Consortium of University Film Centers (approximately fifty university film rental libraries), with a complete annotation, rental and purchase information, and addresses. While this reference will be invaluable to schools and universities, it should also be helpful to public libraries which find an increasing number of patrons requesting this type of information. Another valuable reference is *Feature Films on 8mm and 16mm*,³ compiled and edited by James L. Limbacher. This is a directory of feature films available for rental, sale and lease in the United States. This book is in its fourth edition, with supplements printed annually by the Educational Film Library Association.

There is any number of professional journals and publications which include film reviews and filmographies for specific fields, as well as a few review services which list and review a wide range of materials. Among these are *Sightlines*, *Landers Film Reviews*, *Preview*, and *Media and Methods*.⁴ The Educational Film Library Association also publishes an

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excellent bibliography of periodicals, journals and books called *Film Library Administration*.⁵

Once the references have been acquired, the next step is to compile a list of film distributors or producers and write for their catalogs. In some cases, the film distributor produces no films but represents a number of producers in marketing their products, while in others, the producer and distributor are one and the same. Keeping up to date on what is available is difficult. Many film distributors employ salespeople who will call on librarians and an even larger number do all of their marketing by direct mail. Therefore, it is necessary to peruse the mail each day and to keep complete files of the many sources of supply. One method of handling this is with a double filing system. The first file should contain catalogs arranged alphabetically by source. The second is a subject file into which brochures or circulars on new releases can be placed for reference at the time of selection. The subject file is also a convenient place to store filmographies on specific subject areas.

Previewing is a practice seldom used in the selection of print material, but absolutely essential to film selection. The high cost of 16mm films (\$7-\$8 per minute for black and white and sound, \$14-\$16 per minute for color and sound) makes it mandatory that they be previewed before purchasing. Most reputable film distributors provide free film preview service for a period of one to two weeks. However, this privilege places a responsibility on the previewer to keep records of what films have been previewed, what evaluations were given and when the films were returned. A good evaluation system is essential. Some of the factors which should be considered are the audience to which the film is directed, the accuracy and effectiveness of the presentation, and the technical quality. Samples of evaluation tools are available in *Developing Multi-Media Libraries, Administering Educational Media*, and *AV Instruction: Technology, Media and Methods*.⁶ Another useful publication, at least in identifying the kinds of problems which may have to be dealt with is *Guidelines for Producers and Distributors of Educational Films*, published by the Consortium of University Film Centers.⁷ While it is directed to film producers, it contains a great deal of information which is also helpful to the purchaser.

Who should preview and evaluate the film is another question with a not-so-simple answer. Some libraries have a screening committee, and in many schools and universities, subject area specialists and curriculum committees perform this function. The Missouri Film Library Cooperative, which services a number of public libraries in the state, holds an annual film festival to which representatives of the cooperating libraries are in-