Film clips and Technology

Not so long ago, as a newly minted professor straight out of graduate school, I envisioned myself teaching classes on Shakespeare in which film clips would play a prominent role. However, the realities of video technology soon cooled my aspirations. Lining up clips on individual films proved to be arduous and overly contrived in the classroom. I could only do one clip from each film in a class period, and I could not compare scenes within a film. While the VHS format allowed me to copy clips from different productions onto one tape rather easily, the image quality was very poor, and the tapes degraded with use. (It is very sad to recognize that our heavily used collection of Shakespeare VHS tapes is degrading at a rapid rate.) Even more importantly, the tapes were clumsy to fast forward and rewind in class; thus my lectures and discussions using them tended to be much more linear than I liked. Interactivity in class lectures and discussion was difficult to foster when the clips were in a set order. However, recent innovations in technology have radically changed and improved my use of film clips in class.

CD Format

Digitizing film clips has fostered much greater flexibility in class presentation. I can call up scenes at will, regardless of the order I might have prepared in my notes. This has led to more creative lecturing and discussions, which respond better to student needs. Split screens allow me to put contrasting productions side-by-side for analysis. Moreover, using the scrubber bar at the bottom of the QuickTime player, I can move within a clip with great ease. Analyzing and comparing individual frames within one film and between contrasting films has become possible. And, thankfully, the quality of the images does not degrade with use.

The limitations of this format have been mostly due to classroom equipment. I require a high-end computer fast enough to play the clips without stuttering and a high-resolution projector. However, the benefits have far outweighed the pitfalls. The digital film clips have:

- Inspired students to take risks and offer more thoughtful play presentations in class
- Encouraged students to use much more sophisticated gestures in play presentations
- Created the starting point for productive debates in small groups and in office conferences
- Encouraged students to develop a greater sense of how color impacts interpretation
- Inspired students to go out and see films on their own
- Provoked more debate in classroom discussions, with students lining up to praise or critique contrasting productions
- Instilled a greater appreciation of how Shakespeare creates most of the visual atmosphere in his plays with language. Once students saw it on the screen, they became more sensitive to Shakespeare's evocation of color, sound, gesture, settings, and other atmospheric details.
- Encouraged students to slow down while reading, becoming more sensitive to poetic rhythms, dramatic pauses, and shifts between verse and prose.
- Inclined students to trust their visual acuity when looking at the film clips. Their willingness to be imaginative and creative with visual analysis helped them to become more accomplished readers of the text.
- Empowered students to emulate the daring and imagination of contemporary film directors.

DVD Format

For future classes, I am currently developing the collection of film clips as DVDs. The image at the right shows the menu for one set of clips. This allows for much larger, better quality images. Also, one can better utilize freeze frames, slow motion, and zooms. The menu function enables faster transitions between clips. There is room for much more creativity in presenting the clips, because menus can be created according to individual needs. I can fit many more clips on one disk, which creates even more flexibility in the classroom. The only limitations are that one cannot show clips side-by-side, and the disks are much more expensive than CDs.

Printer Friendly Version

DVD menu for one set of clips