The University of Oklahoma presents art, film and videotape

Who needs Siskel and Ebert? A corps of OU academics, notably Joanna Rapf, left, and Heidi Karriker, have turned their love of film and video into a respected area for intellectual study.
art, film and videotape

an interdisciplinary production
directed by A. Heidi Karriker

featuring:
Joanna Rapf
Lynda Lee Kaid
and the Faculty Ensemble Players

with guest appearances by
C. Ned Hockman
and
Ray Merlock

written by
Kathryn Jenson White

The Scenario
Producing the Film and Video Studies Program may not have taken a cast of thousands, but it did require the hearts, minds and creativity of more than a dozen film-loving academics from six departments or schools and three colleges, a cooperative administration, a generous benefactor and a company of students eager to study and work in one of today's most complex media fields.

Led by program director A. Heidi Karriker, an ensemble of academic co-stars has crafted an interdisciplinary program that draws upon the talents of those working in art; English; modern languages, literatures and linguistics; journalism and mass communication; communication; and educational technology. The program also draws from the talents of the national film community and draws to itself student cinemaphiles who want to leave campus with a film-related degree.

The program began officially in 1991, featuring Karriker, associate professor of English Joanna Rapf, professor of communication Lynda Lee Kaid and a chorus of other faculty members, with guidance from David Ross Boyd professor emeritus of journalism and mass communication C. Ned Hockman. The story behind the effort began much earlier, however, as campus movie lovers who saw the power of film and video as instructional tools discovered one another in their separate screening rooms with the light of "the flickers" bouncing off their intent faces.

Scene I: In the Beginning
When Joanna Rapf came to the University in 1974, film was not a major area of academic study on any university campus. Various schools had film courses, but the study of film was not seen as a respectable academic discipline. Although Rapf had the film industry in her blood and in her own experience, she did not come to Oklahoma to teach film. Her pedagogic interest was—and to some degree still is—the Romantic poets.

Sitting in an English department office filled with film memorabilia such as photographs of her actress mother Louise Seidel, screenwriter father Maurice Rapf and M-G-M studio founder grandfather Harry Rapf, Rapf slowly turns the pages of her worn, green grade book for the spring of 1976. The edges of the scene soften and blur, and her voice takes her listeners back in time 20 years.

"When I think what I didn't know about teaching film then, it's appalling," she says. "I'd worked as a script girl off and on for years and then for a Washington, D.C., film company called Norwood Film Studios. I was writing film scripts for the Air Force, but I really didn't know anything about how to teach this stuff.

"Knowing my family's background in film, Jeffrey Chown, a graduate student who loved film, persuaded me to teach a film course. We couldn't give a pure film course. A film and literature course, however, sounded all right. We did a course on the adaptation of literature to film called 'Novel into Film.' That was respectable."

The dog-eared grade book reveals a first class of 15 students. The next offering, in fall 1976, doubled in size. By fall 1978, film had gained enough respectability to stand on its own. This allowed Rapf to cut the novel tie-in from the course content. That semester, the English department offered two courses in film, each drawing more than 50 students. That number was well on the way to today's Rapf course enrollments, which hover close to 200. Clearly, the department had a hit on its hands.

Flashback
Rapf's film courses were actually not the first on campus. Film classes first appeared at the University as the set was struck on W.W.II, when a young, dynamic first sergeant named Ned Hockman left the service to settle in Norman. Hockman had been a photographer with the 10th Combat Camera Unit, whose adjutant was a dashing young actor named Ronald Reagan. Reagan eventually went into government work; Hockman capped his career with membership in the Oklahoma Journalism and Broadcasting Halls of Fame.

"Sometime after 1949, I started making motion pictures promoting the University and teaching motion picture production at the request of
Ring Lardner Jr., who wrote the screenplay for Robert Altman's "M*A*S*H," came to campus in 1978 to speak to OU film classes. One of the "Hollywood Ten," Lardner went to prison in 1950 for refusing to cooperate with the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. Among his other credits are "A Star is Born," "Nothing Sacred," and "Woman of the Year," for which he won an Academy Award.

For a while in the late '70s and early '80s, the University was renting more films than any other university in the country.

Author and screenwriter Budd Schulberg was a visiting lecturer in the spring of 1975. His credits include the novel "What Makes Sammy Run" and screenplays for "On the Waterfront," with Marlon Brando, "The Harder They Fall," with Humphrey Bogart, and "Winter Carnival."

ABOVE: An early entertainment industry visitor to the campus in the 1950s was Hollywood producer Saul David, shown here with OU's Ned Hockman (right), at the Boomer Theatre on Campus Corner.

LEFT: Hollywood director Mark Rydell came to OU in 1980 as a guest of the English department, through a grant from the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences. Among Rydell's credits are "The Cowboys," with John Wayne, and "On Golden Pond," with Henry and Jane Fonda and Katharine Hepburn.
Fayette Copeland (then director of the School of Journalism), who saw television coming and wanted me to teach an evening course at what is now called OCCE,” Hockman remembers. “After several years there, I moved to the journalism school to teach film.”

Focusing on film production, but also teaching film history and aesthetics, Hockman’s courses cranked out many men and women who are now working in all areas of broadcast, including motion pictures. Movies like “Hook,” “Jurassic Park” and “Back to the Future” bear the marks of a Hockman-taught film professional. The School of Journalism later added mass communication to its name, and the radio-TV-film track was born.

Merlock taught film courses on subjects as diverse as the image of blacks in film, the depiction of psychotic behavior in film and the films of Clint Eastwood. He contends that even though few would consider Oklahoma a center of film activity, the celluloid art has long had a strong following here.

“In the late 70s and early 80s, the University was renting more films than any other university in the country because we had so many different film programs running,” he says. “According to the information given to us by our film distribution companies, when you combined the rentals of the English department, The Other Film Club—a group formed by Heidi Karriker to screen international and art films for students—and the various other entities showing films as part of their curricula, we had some pretty high numbers of films coming in here.”

Although students had access to a wide variety of films on campus, film-related classes were scattered among six departments and three colleges, and putting them together to fashion a degree program was difficult.

“We had courses all over campus,” Merlock says. “We began to try to connect the dots to help students prepare for a career in filmmaking. In journalism they were talking about movies that made money. In art they were looking at movies in the same way paintings are seen, and in English we were analyzing the film and looking at the filmmaker as an artist. We needed to put it together in the big picture.”

Scene II: The Big Picture

Film-loving academics interested in connecting the dots began meeting. At first the group was informal, but it evolved into the provost’s advisory committee on motion pictures. Lynda Lee Kaid, whose interest in film and video stems from their use in the political process, was among those active in moving the program from concept to completion.

“We laid out a program that would encompass the offerings of the six different departments in an interdisciplinary degree that would better serve our students interested in film,” she says. “I put the plan down on paper for the administration. We knew that only by taking an interdisciplinary approach could we offer students our full range of film courses.

“Student response has been very good. It has taken a while for them to learn we have the degree, but I think we’ve had a stronger response than we anticipated.”

Scene III: The Director

When associate professor of modern languages, literatures and linguistics A. Heidi Karriker rolled into Norman in 1975 to teach Russian language and literature, she was sent reeling by the
There were no other theaters showing international films on campus, so we started The Other Film Club, which has been going strong since then.

As a young World War II veteran, photographer C. Ned Hockman, now a David Ross Boyd Professor emeritus of journalism and mass communication, taught OU’s first film courses.

absence of access to great films in the community. She decided to act.

“We saw ‘Scenes from a Marriage’ at the Boomer Theater on Campus Corner, and then the theater closed when the film did,” she says. “There were no other theaters showing international films on campus, so we started The Other Film Club, which has been going strong since then.”

Under Karriker’s direction, the Film and Video Studies Program has developed.

“Although for a long time there was a discipline for the teaching of film in Ned Hockman’s motion picture production courses and courses in art and English, we had to coordinate them,” she says. “The problem was that students working on degrees in art couldn’t easily take a documentary film course or scriptwriting in the School of Journalism. Journalism students couldn’t take an introduction to filmmaking course in the School of Art.

“It took us seven years to get our proposal written and the program in place, but now more than 1,000 students enroll in courses in the Film and Video Studies Program each semester. We have 65 declared majors. We’re proud of our students; 50 percent of those who graduated last year did so with honors or distinction.”

Students are being placed in internships for FVS; last summer, two students had internships in New York City, Karriker says. One worked at Ted Miller Entertainment and the other at CBS.

In addition to signing quality students for the program, Karriker and her cast and crew continue to offer film-related events that bring the larger university community, Oklahoma residents and even out-of-staters to campus for film screenings and discussions.

“The Film and Video Studies Program provides a resource for University, state and regional film- and video-related interests,” she says. “It also provides a forum to demonstrate faculty and student research and to facilitate the pursuit of external funds for the program. That external funding has allowed us to have such programs as ‘Women in Film,’ a weekend look at what women producers, screenwriters and other artists are doing in the field. We presented the first ‘Women in Film’ in March 1995 with a series of films, lectures, discussion groups and papers read by scholars from around the country. We plan the second for March 1996.”

Other film programs that have drawn large audiences from the University and beyond are “Independent Cinema: Cross-Cultural Perspectives” and the “Rolan Bykov Symposium.” The first showcased the innovative work of directors working on small-budget films outside any studio system and the second the films of a Russian actor at the center of the Russian film community. Featured in February 1996 was “One Hundred Years of Motion Pictures.” A program on Asian cinema is scheduled for April.

“Fifteen years ago, it was difficult for me to read a scholarly paper on film at a Slavic conference,” Karriker says. “There was little comment from the audience because their knowledge of film was as entertainment and not as a scholarly discipline. Now that has changed completely; now there are many academic film associations. We have a society called Closely Watched Frames, which involves more than 100 scholars who publish widely on Slavic and East European films. The Society for Cinema Studies and national and regional chapters of the Popular Culture Association draw hundreds of participants to film panels.”

OU also has strong ties to the country’s oldest academic film organization, the University Film and Video Studies Association, of which Ned Hockman was one of the early officers.

Scene IV: The Backer

All the principals involved in the Film and Video Studies Program are in a state of post-award excitement over the academic equivalent of an Oscar. The program has been given an endowed professorship through the generosity of Oklahoma City film lover Jeanne Hoffman Smith. Karriker hopes to have a film scholar filling the Jeanne Hoffman Smith Professorship in Film Studies by fall 1996.

Smith’s involvement with the program, however, did not begin with the professorship endowment. More important to her than the faculty position that bears her name is the endowment she established in the University of Oklahoma Foundation nearly a decade ago to provide long-term program development in film and video studies.

“Jeanne is a social worker, and she is passionate about seeing film used academically at the University,” Rapf says. “She sees it as an important teaching tool, not just in the study of film itself but in all disciplines. Her gifts have allowed us to organize a huge animation festival, to bring leading film scholars to campus on a visiting basis and to bring in such big names in film as cinematographer...
Haskell Wexler ('Bound for Glory,' for which he won the Academy Award, 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf;' 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest,' 'Days of Heaven'), and screenwriters Joan Tewkesbury ('Nashville') and Terry Southern ('Dr. Strangelove').

Meanwhile, Back at the English Department

Rapf has just published a book on one of her film faves, Buster Keaton, and is beginning an epic: a book tentatively titled Harry Rapf: The Unknown Mogul. In it, she will tell the story of how her grandfather has been denied his rightful place in the history of movies.

"Harry's is a name that is almost unknown today and shouldn't be," she insists. "When M-G-M was founded in 1924, three men founded it: Louis B. Mayer, Irving Thalberg and Harry Rapf."

With hefty files of news clippings from the period and many of her grandfather's personal papers, Rapf is able to trace Harry Rapf's career trajectory.

"He was one of the early people with Warner Brothers," she says. "He did the Rin Tin Tin pictures and made lots of money for the studio."

Then when Louis B. Mayer formed M-G-M, Irving Thalberg and Harry Rapf came on board as his vice presidents. During the late '20s and early '30s, Thalberg and Rapf were working equally. Thalberg was a boy genius; he was the intellect, the brains. People like Mayer and Rapf were old-fashioned showmen. Thalberg died of a heart attack when he was quite young, at just the right time for immortality. Rapf did not die young, but at 54 he did have a heart attack about the time of Thalberg's death.

"Because of his health, Harry was given a reduced load and began doing M-G-M's B pictures and shorts. Producers did not take screen credit for their films until later, so his name doesn't appear on many of his big hits of the early '30s--'The Champ,' 'Tugboat Annie' and others."

Although J. Rapf's files on H. Rapf contain newspaper photographs showing the three studio executives together in a variety of settings, only two of the three have become household words in film households.

"Movie history was first written down in books in the '50s," Rapf explains. "The author of the first big history of M-G-M, called When the Lion Roars, went to the man who was head of the studio at the time for source material. That was Dore Schary, who hated my grandfather. Harry had fired Schary twice, and when Schary told the history, he diminished my grandfather's role considerably and spoke of him in derogatory ways.

"History has now perpetuated itself. Young scholars have gone to that book for their information, and they do not find Harry Rapf's role presented accurately."

Rapf intends to reclaim her grandfather's rightful place with her book. That will please her father, Maurice, who at 81 is emeritus director of film studies at Dartmouth and still teaching courses there. Rapf herself has been a visiting professor at Dartmouth several times over the years. She says her father became an academic because of her.

"When I was in graduate school at Brown in the late '60s, the school wanted to begin to teach film," she says. "They knew of my father's background and asked me if he'd be interested. He had worked for Disney as a scriptwriter on 'So Dear to My Heart,' 'Cinderella' and 'Song of the South,' among others. In the late '40s and early '50s, he was another of the artists blacklisted in Hollywood, so he came to the East. He took the job at Brown, and eventually Dartmouth asked him to come there to do the same thing."

Scene V: The Big Finish

All of those involved in the Film and Video Studies Program have their academic roots in other areas, but their hearts belong to film. From small-budget independents to blockbusters costing millions to make, films matter to them, and they want to awaken students to the power and the glory of the art form.

"Anything I say will sound clichéd, I'm afraid," Rapf says. "As a creative art, film integrates many different talents--writing, dance, poetry, art, music, acting, cinematography—all the major art forms of the 20th century. Everything is mixed up in this batter that produces a film.

"Consciously or unconsciously we are shaped by the movies. It's such an incredibly complicated art form that I'm in awe a movie is ever made. What I appreciate now, teaching, is that awesome complexity and the brilliance of the art that goes into film making."

"It's a collaborative effort that produces a multi-level piece of art. On one level it can be just simple laughter or tears; then you look at it, and on another level—maybe without the consciousness of the filmmaker—it is profoundly reflective of the world we live in. It has all these cultural ramifications; it shows us who we are and then, in turn, makes us who we are."

Movies matter. As a result of OU's Film and Video Studies Program, they are better enjoyed, understood and even made by Oklahomans. The program is definitely a player.

THE END

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The Supporting Cast

The interdisciplinary faculty of the Film and Video Studies Program includes the following:

John Alberty, Art
Blake Armstrong, Communication
Richard Barney, English
Bruce Hinson, JMC
Gerald Howard, JMC
Tim Hudson, JMC
David Jaffe, JMC
Lynda Lee Kaid, Communication
A. Heidi Karriker, MLLL
Eric Kramer, Communication
Michael Lee, Music
Mary Marcus, JMC
Mitchell McKinney, Communication
Gregg Mitman, History of Science
Misha Nedeljkovic, JMC
Haejung Paik, Communication
Joanna Rapf, English
Roger Rideout, Music
Betty Robbins,
Business/Women's Studies
Kevin Saunders, Law
Chad Smith, Art
Jay Smith, Education
John Springer, English
Andy Strout, Art
Connie Suttle, Art
C. Ned Hockman,
Professor Emeritus, JMC

1996 WINTER 13