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Mixed Media: Working with Audio and Visual Materials— Heather Fox, Assistant Editor, University of Louisville

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Teaching Diversity and Documenting Change: The Indiana Universities Library Film Archive Educational Film Collection and Race Representation

By Josephine McRobbie and Asia Harman, Indiana University

“When we first started, these kids didn’t know the difference between checkmate and chicken liver . . . they lost so many games.” So begins the 1986 award-winning educational film *The Masters of Disaster*, which documents the struggles and eventual triumph of a chess team of African-American sixth graders in inner-city Indianapolis at the 1983 National Elementary School Chess Championships. This engrossing and uplifting film is part of one of the most extensive historic educational film collections in existence, housed in Bloomington, Indiana, at the Indiana University Libraries Film Archive (IULFA). Through the preservation of films such as *The Masters of Disaster*, our cultural history is more thoroughly documented, and beyond the insights these films offer into social and economic issues of various periods, they also promote an understanding of the conventions and priorities of audiovisual teaching methods throughout modern history.



Members of the *Masters of Disaster* chess team ponder the next move.

The IULFA educational collection is home to more than 46,000 films dating from before World War II that were initially produced and intended for classroom use. As noted by the IULFA Web site, “Indiana University was one of the major university-based distributors of educational films from the 1930s through the 1990s, and one of very few distributors to keep and preserve them. These collections include career training films, U.S. Department



The Audio Visual Center’s logo used in roughly 25,000 educational films belonging to the Indiana University Libraries Film Archive.

of War productions, and more than 5,600 programs produced by the National Educational Television (NET) network, the precursor to PBS.”¹

The contemporary media has fully skewered and parodied educational and prescriptive “social guidance” films. For example, the faux “After School Special” series *Strangers with Candy*,² the meta-movie criticism series *Mystery Science Theater 3000*,³ and the thrift-store-curated VHS blog *Everything Is Terrible*⁴ frame many educational films as bizarre and antiquated cultural relics. However, historian Jessamyn Neuhaus writes, “Interest in prescriptive mental hygiene educational films constitutes a significant part of the growing academic and archivist attention to ephemeral and orphan film . . . [c]lassroom films make up a notable percentage of the films first collected by Rick Prelinger, who led a movement over the past twenty years to save ephemeral films and make them available to the public and to researchers, first in CD-ROM format and then online at the Moving Image Archive.”⁵

Examining the inventory of the 12,000 educational films recently acquired from the Lane Education Service District in Eugene, Oregon, comprising educational films from the 1920s to the 1980s, one is struck by the sheer number of titles in the IULFA collection that refer to

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socioeconomic issues and race. One of these films, the exceptional documentary *The Masters of Disaster*, provides a glimpse into the developments in racially integrated urban life in the early 1980s. The ethnographic films *In the Rapture* and *The Rapture Family*, both produced in 1976, document and discuss a traditional black church musical drama in stunning and informative detail. “The Negro and the American Promise,” an episode of the Boston public television program *Perspectives* from 1963, features interviews with James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and explores the nuances of social segregation and bigotry in the year of the march on Washington. Capturing these three individuals in the prime of their time as public intellectuals and activists makes this film an important historical document, despite the fact that some may find it stylistically dated. The series *Inner City Dweller*, produced in 1973 by Indiana University Instructional Support Services and available at the IULFA Web site, focuses on a resident’s attempts to maintain his house on his own as a mechanism to review the problems of low-income urban housing and living.⁶

This sympathetic portrait is characteristic of socioeconomically themed educational films from the mid- to late-twentieth century, in which “a veritable genre of African American-focused ‘race’ films—by which we mean films explicitly about what it means to be black and, almost always, living in an inner city environment—were being marketed to American educators,” as Marsha Orgeron notes in her work on race relations in late 1960s and early 1970s educational films.⁷ Orgeron suggests that the political climate of this period, and President Lyndon Johnson’s stated objective for a “decent and orderly society” in postsegregated and postindustrialized America, was the impetus for this kind of programming, which not only provided social guidance for “appropriate African American behavior in the face of adversity” but is “equally about the role that white behavior plays in both creating and reversing racial tensions.” With this perspective in mind, these films are relevant as time capsules of mid-twentieth-century politics and attitudes on race and class.

Both private collectors, such as the Prelinger Archives, and public institutions, like the IULFA, are committed to preserving and providing access to classroom films. Preservation and access are key aspects of the IULFA mission. The IULFA’s role is to house the roughly 55,000 titles in its collection in a stable environment to prolong their lives. At the Ruth Lilly Auxiliary Library Facility,



A screen shot of the Masters of Disaster chess team celebrating a team victory.

located on the IU campus, films are kept at 50 degrees Fahrenheit with a relative humidity of 30 percent. These conditions will add hundreds of years to lifespans of the films, allowing for more time to preserve a larger quantity of them. Archivists and film specialists at IULFA write multiple grants for the preservation of these films every year. The word “preservation” can have a wide array of meanings, but, in this context, indicates either a film-to-film transfer or a 4K scan (which is so named for the 4,000 pixel horizontal resolution of digital film). All of the titles in the collection are curated and cataloged to enable both searchability and accessibility.

There are currently 211 films available for viewing on the IULFA Web site, including many titles previously mentioned. By providing access to these films, IULFA allows researchers and individuals to catch a glimpse of how the nation has portrayed itself over the years and gain some insight into the American character. Films such as *The Masters of Disaster*, *In the Rapture*, *The Rapture Family*, *The Negro and the American Promise*, *Inner City Dweller*, and many others document the lives and representations, practices and struggles of African-Americans throughout the twentieth century.

Notes

1. “Expansive Collection, Extraordinary Focus: A World of Knowledge on Film,” *Indiana University Libraries Film Archive*, <http://www.libraries.iub.edu/index.php?pageId=1002886> (6 February 2013).

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toward the next stage of their careers, but the knowledge that they gave voice to a once silent legacy will last forever.

Notes

1. Kären Mason and Tanya Zanish-Belcher, "Raising the Archival Consciousness: How Women's Archives Challenge Traditional Approaches to Collecting and Use, Or, What's in a Name?," *Library Trends* 56:2 (fall 2007): 355.
2. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 89–107.
3. Marilyn French, *The War Against Women* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), 11.
4. Catharine R. Stimpson, "Gerda Lerner on the Future of Our Past," interview, *Ms.* (September 1981), 94, 95.
5. Kären M. Mason, "Fostering Diversity in Archival Collections," *Collection Management* 27:2 (2003): 23–31, 25.

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2. "Strangers with Candy," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0194624/> (5 February 2013).
3. "Mystery Science Theater 3000," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094517/> (6 February 2013).
4. *Everything Is Terrible*, <http://www.everythingisterrible.com/> (6 February 2013).
5. Jessamyn Neuhaus, "'Shake This Square World and Blast Off for Kicksville': Teaching History with Post-WWII Prescriptive Classroom Films," *The History Teacher*, November 2010.
6. "IU Digital Collections Search," *Indiana University Libraries Film Archive*, [http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/dcs/?f\[source\]\[\]=Indiana+University+Libraries+Film+Archive](http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/dcs/?f[source][]=Indiana+University+Libraries+Film+Archive) (6 February 2013).
7. Marsha Orgeron, "'A Decent and Orderly Society': Race Relations in Riot-Era Educational Film, 1966–1970," *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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