Teaching Comparative Cinema with Omeka
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What this is

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The issue

When preparing to teach a humanities course with a substantial use of media resources, many questions arise. How can we give students access to a wide range of audiovisual, image, and text sources located on multiple different online platforms? What's the most efficient way for the instructor to access these materials in class spontaneously, and for students to be able to work with the materials on their own? Can we do this in a way that allows for critical engagement and sparks new associations? Can we make that engagement interactive?

Screenshot of the Omeka site's homepage

To begin answering those questions for our media-intensive courses, we created an online space that would inherently promote critical thinking, comparison and self-driven research, and encourage the students to pursue the links between different films from different geographies. Thus, we customized an instance of Omeka, an online exhibition software, into such an interactive media platform. While initially envisioned as a supplement to the in-person classroom, this platform proved to be a great asset after switching to online learning in Spring 2020.

Why does it matter

Since the death of the DVD player, there are ever diversifying platforms for media streaming, and surfing for content can lead students down the distracting wormhole of the internet. But constraining that content to a preset PowerPoint presentation or a Learning Management System course content folder doesn't allow for new discoveries and re-combinations of the material. Because the size of video and image files can be so large, it is difficult to provide students with access to all the material on a single, online, and interactive platform, and learning management systems aren't really suited to respond to these needs. Equally ch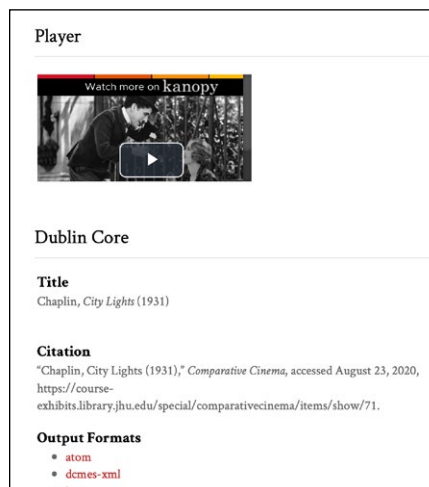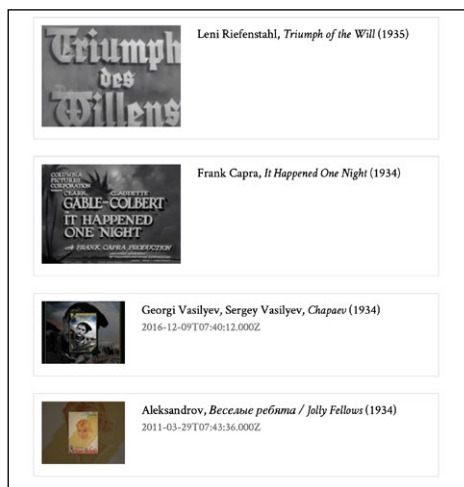allenging is the sustainability of such a digital plat-form, capable of hosting rich media content, which would only be accessible to the class and free of initial or recurring costs. While we had initially envisioned this digital platform to teach comparative cinema as a response to these challenges of the in-person classroom, the unexpected switch to online teaching, made the platform even more useful both now and in the foreseeable future.

Faculty solution

To address these challenges and to create an online space which inherently promotes critical thinking, comparison and self-driven research, we used the software package Omeka, an open-source web-publishing tool hosted by the JHU libraries, which was developed at George Mason University for creating digital collections and exhibitions. The Omeka platform is optimal for media-rich online collections, such as images, videos and text.

In Fall 2019, funded by the Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation (CTEI, formerly known as the CER) Technology Fellowship Grant, graduate fellow Hale Sirin created and customized an instance of Omeka with the specific goal of designing a web-based environment to teach comparative cinema courses. We implemented the Omeka site in Spring 2020 for the course "Cinema of the 1930s: Communist and Capitalist Fantasies," further supported by a CTEI Teaching Innovation Grant. This course compares films of the era in a variety of genres (musical,

Screenshots of the Omeka site interface showing film selections

In order to abide by copyright laws, only films in the public domain were streamed in their entirety. For other films, we provided selected short clips on Omeka, which we were able to easily access during class. Students were able to access the films available on Kanopy through our website by entering their JHU credentials.

Results and Benefits

Teaching comparative cinema with the interactive website powered by Omeka provided the students with a novel way of accessing comparative research in film studies. Rather than the materials being fixed to the syllabus week to week, students could search film clips by director, year, country, or theme. Students were thus able to compare and contrast many images and films from across cultural divides on a unified online platform.

Students were able not only able to access the course materials on the Omeka site, but also to expand and re-structure the content. Over the course of the semester, students contributed to the annotation of film clips by uploading their comments to the films and timestamping important sequences. Since they were also required to source their presentations from the material in the exhibition, their engagement on the site was quantifiable on an on-going basis. As their final projects, they had the option of creating a video essay, which involved editing together clips from the films, and recording an interpretive essay over them, like a commentary track. Their video essays were shared with their peers on the Omeka site.

epic, Western, drama) from different countries, examining the intersections between politics and aesthetics as well as the lasting implications of the films themselves in light of theoretical works on film as a medium, ethics and gender. We adapted the online publishing software package into an interactive media platform on which the students could watch the assigned films, post comments with timestamps, and help expand the platform by sharing their own video essays. We built this platform with sustainability in mind, using an open-source software with no recurring costs so that it could be used over the years and serve as model for future interdisciplinary and comparative film and media courses.

When building this website, our first task was to organize the digital archive of film clips and film stills for the course. These materials were then uploaded to Panopto, the online streaming service used by JHU, and embedded in the Omeka site. We also embedded the films that were publicly available on YouTube, Kanopy, and other archives, such as the online film archive of the production studio Mosfil'm, designing the Omeka site to serve as a single platform to curate this content. Each film, clip, text, or image was tagged with multiple identifiers to allow students to navigate the many resources for the course via search and sort functions, tags and hyperlinks, creating an interactive and rich learning environment. We added further functionality to the website by customizing interactive plugins, such as the "Comments" function, which allowed us to create a thread for each film as a weekly assignment in which students could respond to the specific prompts for the week and timestamp the specific parts of the film to which their comments referred.

Additional Resources

- Omeka: https://omeka.org
- MSE Library webpage on "Omeka for Instruction": https://blogs.library.jhu.edu/2016/08/omeka-for-instruction
- CTEI's Technology Fellowship Grant Program is now known as Instructional Enhancement Grants Program: https://ctei.jhu.edu/ie-grants

Author's Background

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Anne Eakin Moss is Assistant Professor in the Department of Comparative Thought and Literature, and a board member of the program in Women, Gender, and Sexuality and of the Center for Advanced Media Studies. She was the 2017 recipient of the KSAS Excellence in Graduate Teaching/Mentorship Award and a Mellon Arts Innovation Grant, and a 2019 KSAS Discovery Award winner.

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A Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Comparative Thought and Literature, Hale Sirin also holds an M.A. in Philosophy from JHU. A recipient of the Dean's Teaching Fellowship and the Women, Gender, and Sexuality teaching fellowship, she has taught courses in comparative literature, philosophy and intellectual history. Her research interests include early 20th-century philosophy and literature, theories of representation and media in modernity, and digital humanities.