In the late 1990s, the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa began an ambitious project to install and upgrade the media equipment in over one hundred campus classrooms. Over the following decade, computers, VHS VCRs, DVD players, data projectors, screens, televisions, TV tuners, and internet access became standard tools in University of Hawai‘i classrooms. This expansion of instructional resources for higher education reflects how forms of media like cinema have made new approaches to teaching possible. Indeed, the creative and critical use of film in the classroom demonstrates that the medium can play an important role in university education and is not simply a form of mass entertainment at odds with the pursuit of knowledge. The theme of this issue of Educational Perspectives is that film and other forms of media, particularly those made possible by digital technology, open up important areas of pedagogic potential that supplement the traditional lecture format and seminar discussion.

The use of film and new media in the classroom invites students to explore questions, illustrate ideas, and examine events that are not immediately represented in textbooks or through lectures. For example, film enables the teacher to introduce novel, timely, and critical perspectives on topics that challenge students to take a fresh look at familiar things—to question their biases and to re-examine entrenched beliefs. However, using cinema as a critical tool of instruction is not simply a matter of showing films in classrooms. It requires their judicious use by teachers who wish to avail themselves of the potential of these media to open up new ways of thinking and perceiving. Michael Shapiro explains how film provides “a critical perspective on the world that exceeds what mere perception can achieve.” Other authors in this collection of articles describe a similar alteration of perspective—in how, for example, film can be used to teach students about other societies, represent minority perspectives that counter popular misconceptions of indigenous cultures, and expand a student’s response by helping him/her to see how cinematic effects are achieved.

With a majority of university classrooms now equipped for film screenings, it is instructive to explore how film and other visual media are being used in the university curriculum. In this issue of Educational Perspectives we have invited a number of faculty from different disciplines to write about how they are using new media technologies in their classrooms. The resulting discussions offer some very imaginative uses of film and computer technology and demonstrate how their use can enrich instruction and lead students to a more profound understanding of representation, education, culture, and difference.

In “Film Form and Pedagogy: Beyond Perception,” Michael Shapiro, in the Department of Political Science, explores the pedagogical value of cinema’s capacity to offer a ‘decentered’ mode of perspective for the audience. Shapiro illustrates a film’s ability to present a different perspective with reference to Sean Penn’s The Pledge (2001) and Ivan Sen’s Beneath Clouds (2002), which show how cinema allows viewers to recognize the implications of actions and states of affairs that are not captured by our subject-centered perceptions.

In “Asian Cinema and the Social Imaginary,” Wimal Dissanayake, in the Academy for Creative Media, explores how cinema can be a window into the dynamics of contemporary Asian societies and cultures. Through “aesthetic style…concomitant representational strategies, and preferred visual registers,” Dissanayake suggests that films reveal the emotional relationships and political understandings of its characters and how they are affected by the “imperatives of historical events[…]offering] useful point[s] of departure for classroom discussions.”

Glenn Man, of the English department, describes how he instructs students in his introductory film course to show how one can reveal film’s ideological dimensions in teaching. In his article, “Apparatus, Genre, and Spectatorship in the Classroom,” Man traces the progress of his student’s arc of learning, from their relative lack of awareness of film’s influence on the construction of identity to a more sophisticated recognition of film’s ‘cumulative effect’—that
is, how film aesthetics, narrative, and genre essentially constructs a “point of view” and thus, presents a specific way of thinking about what is represented. Man concludes with a valuable list of further readings on film, genre, and classical Hollywood cinema.

In “Made in Hawai’i: Critical Studies and the Academy for Creative Media,” Konrad Ng, an assistant professor in the Academy for Creative Media (ACM), offers a brief history of the ACM—the University of Hawai’i’s primary academic program for the production and study of film, animation, and computer game design—and its mission to fulfill the Hawai’i state government’s agenda to diversity the economy with creative media and high technology. In contrast to this mission, Ng highlights the importance of cultivating a curriculum that encourages critical thinking and the creation of ethical representations rather than sustaining the current imagery of Hawai’i as tropical paradise and site of historic and national importance.

Cynthia Ning’s “Engaging a ‘Truly Foreign’ Language and Culture: China Through Chinese Film,” shares how she uses Chinese film in her Chinese language and culture classes. Ning, the Associate Director for the Center for Chinese Studies, demonstrates how Chinese films can help students “navigate the uncharted universe of Chinese culture” with reference to several contemporary Chinese films. Ning describes how intensive viewing of films can develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what she refers to as small “c” culture—how people express affection, for example, or show displeasure. She recommends some useful assignments and films that students can use in order to become more familiar with Chinese culture, practices, and beliefs.

Graham Parkes, professor of philosophy at University College Cork in Ireland, argues, in “Thinking Images: Doing Philosophy in Film and Video,” that film and video can be used to philosophize as well as to teach philosophy. Parkes’ own creative compositions, or video essays, a number of which are excerpted on the Educational Perspectives website (see his article for URLs), exemplify his approach and outline a variety of techniques that he employs in his work. Parkes shows how the creative use of media can be not only a means to enhance instruction, but an extension of traditional literary methods of philosophical composition.

In “Coffy, You Tube, and Uncle Ben: The Use of Film and New Media in the Teaching of African American Studies at the University of Hawai’i,” Elisa Joy White, a professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies, discusses how she uses film and new media to “teach students to comprehend the complex historical, social, political, and cultural dimensions of the African American experience.” White uses D.W. Griffith’s 1915 Birth of a Nation, a number of “Blaxploitation” films, YouTube videos, and cultural tropes common to African America and Hawai’i—such as plantations and rice—to direct her students’ attention to the African American experience.

James Skouge, of the Department of Special Education, and two of his colleagues, Kavita Rao and Brian Kajiyma, explore the potential of what they call “digital stories” in their work with students with disabilities. In “Finding a Voice,” Skouge and Kajiyma relate a story about the transformative power of technologies for voice. They relate Brian Kajiyma’s personal odyssey—what might be described as a journey from unvoiced to vocal—in learning to use a DynaWrite, a type-and-talk device that Brian uses as a communication tool. In “Digital Storytelling in Teacher Education,” Skouge and Rao provide an account of their work with students across the Pacific region with the various forms of digital storytelling and explain how, in several cases, they have put their ideas into practice. They demonstrate how the composition of digital stories can become an empowering experience for disabled students as well as a valuable learning tool for special education students. In addition, they explain how the digital stories can be used to provide authentic accounts of life in a variety of communities across the Pacific.