



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Menus for Movie Land: Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1911-1916

Institution: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Project Director: Richard Abel

Grant Program: Fellowships Program

NEH Fellowship Application Narrative
Richard Abel, University of Michigan

Menus for Movie Land:

Newspapers and the Emergence of American Film Culture, 1911-1916

In early 20th-century America, a primary function of the daily newspaper was to offer “menus” or social maps by which its readers could make sense of the complexity of modern urban life and imagine how to order and interpret their own daily lives. More specifically for this project, in the early to mid-1910s a reciprocally profitable alignment developed between newspapers and motion pictures in which innovative menus mediated the interests of manufacturers/distributors, local exhibitors, and the rapidly expanding audience of movie fans. The five-year span from 1911 through 1916 arguably was a crucial moment in the formation of American film culture. First, the institutionalization of cinema as a mass entertainment depended not only on newly standardized practices in film production, distribution, and exhibition but also, just as crucially, on the emergence of weekly pages and amusement sections (often in Sunday editions) and daily columns on the movies that encouraged audiences of frequent, regular spectators quite different from those of the nickelodeon period. Second, in negotiating among national, regional, and local interests during a unique period of transformation in the industry, this newspaper discourse played a significant role in shaping audiences’ ephemeral experience of moviegoing, their repeated encounters with the fantasy worlds of “movie land,” and their varied attractions to certain kinds of stories and stars.

This project examines the formation of American film culture from the perspective of actual historical groups and individuals, from manufacturers/distributors to newspaper journalists (a surprising number of them professional women) and young movie fans. Extending my recent scholarly work (see my resumé) and that of other early cinema historians (see the selected bibliography), *Menus for Movieland* addresses several related questions. To what extent did the industry exert some measure of control over this newspaper discourse (and assumed readers/spectators), and how did its promotional strategies change as cinema programs came to include not only single-reel films but also series and serials and feature-length films? To what degree, by contrast, did newspapers and exhibitors attempt to control this discourse (and readers/spectators), and how did their efforts shift with changes in cinema programs? To what degree, then, was film promotion a *national* phenomenon that tended to produce a more or less *homogeneous* fan culture, or was promotion just as often *local*, perhaps different from one city or region to another as well as specific to certain social groups, with the result that fan culture or the alleged interests of “actual” moviegoers was *heterogeneous* and in flux? Finally, given that much of this newspaper discourse was written and/or edited by women, to what extent did it tend to target women readers/spectators, and could these writers/editors, along with other women finding professional work in the new industry, be seen as influential figures of the American ‘New Woman’?

I began doing original research on this newspaper discourse at state historical societies and public libraries (particularly in the Northeast and Midwest) as I wrote *Americanizing*
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the Movies and "Movie-Mad" Audiences, 1910-1914 (California 2006). Since then, colleagues have been unusually helpful in locating new sources; several on-line archives—i.e., newspaperarchive.com and chroniclingamerica (Library of Congress)—also have revealed a wealth of material well beyond my initial geographical range. In the very large photocopy collection I've amassed, newspapers in certain cities have become especially important: i.e., Chicago, Cleveland, Toledo, Washington, D.C., Des Moines, and even small towns such as Waterloo (Iowa). During the past four months of a sabbatical leave, I've also found unexamined material in newspapers from New York and Philadelphia to Atlanta as well as in a rare Detroit weekly film bulletin and begun closely analyzing an equally rare set of movie fan scrapbooks at the Margaret Herrick Library (Los Angeles). Currently, I'm reading in several subject areas in order to contextualize the emergence of this sustained early discourse on the movies: i.e., studies of newspaper history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (guided by a colleague who is writing a book on the development of North American Sunday editions) and recent theories of "imagined communities" or "social imaginaries" in which media (from newspapers to motion pictures) work to enable groups of people, such as early movie fans, to live together as a community, at least in their imagination.

My work plan for this summer includes 1) further reading and newspaper research (the latter aided by a graduate assistant), which will involve trips to state historical societies and public libraries in cities such as Cleveland and Pittsburgh, 2) writing a paper on the movie fan scrapbooks for a Women and the Silent Screen Conference and proposing another on the Detroit weekly bulletin for the 2011 Society for Cinema And Media Studies conference, and 3) drafting the preface, introduction, and at least one chapter for a book manuscript on the subject of this project. During the 2010-2011 academic year, I will be engaged primarily in directing the Graduate Program in Screen Arts & Cultures at Michigan and teaching one course each semester. During the summer of 2011, I plan to return to several archives and/or libraries, begin drafting other chapters of the manuscript (see below), and complete drafts of all chapters during the period of an NEH Fellowship.

One outcome of this project will be professional conference papers—i.e., Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Women and the Silent Screen—and one or more published essays. Yet the principal outcome will be a book manuscript tentatively organized into the following parts:

A preface summarizing the book's arguments, methodology, sources, and structure.

An introduction situating this discourse on the movies within developments in the late 19th- and early 20th-century history of newspapers, especially Sunday editions.

Part I: The Industry and Film Culture

Chapter 1: An analysis of the industry's *national* efforts to exploit newspapers as publicity organs. These will include the "free" distribution of "cuts" and graphics for single- and multiple-reel fiction films (e.g., the unexplored Selig promotional materials at the Herrick Library), syndicated film story synopses and fictionalized serial stories,

syndicated interviews with and gossip about stars, Universal's promotion of its west coast studio tours, and Paramount's unprecedented publicity campaign for its feature films.

Chapter 2: An analysis of a *local* industry trade weekly, the *Pittsburgh Moving Picture Bulletin* (1913-1916), disseminated throughout western Pennsylvania, and, on loan from a collector, a *local* exhibitors' *Weekly Film News* (1915-1916), distributed free to the audiences of a major Detroit cinema chain—both in relation to newspapers in those cities.

Part II: The Newspaper and Film Culture: the Beginnings of a New Profession

Chapter 3: An analysis of the development of weekly newspaper pages (i.e., *Cleveland Leader*, *Waterloo Reporter*, *Toledo Times*, *Washington Times*) and sections devoted to the movies (i.e., *Philadelphia Ledger* in late 1915), many often associated with the Sunday women's pages. Particular attention will be given to the period of 1914-1915 and to Mae Tinee (*Chicago Tribune*).

Chapter 4: An analysis of the development of syndicated gossip columns about the industry and particularly stars, from Gertrude Price of the Scripps-McRae newspapers (1912-1915), Mae Tinee of the *Chicago Tribune* (1914-1915), and Britt Craig of the *Atlanta Constitution* (1915-1916) to Dorothy Day of the *Des Moines Tribune* (1915-1916) and Daisy Dean of the Central Press Association (1916).

Chapter 5: An analysis of the development of daily "independent" film reviews (1914-1915), especially those of Kitty Kelley (*Chicago Tribune*), Wid Gunning (*New York Evening Mail*), and Louella Parsons (*Chicago Herald*), with particular attention to their evolving principles of criticism and assumptions about readers/spectators.

Part III: The Beginnings of Fan Culture

Chapter 6: An analysis of the six-volume movie fan scrapbook (1914-1915) composed by Edna Vercoe, a teenager in Highland Park, Illinois, in collages of texts and images devoted to serials and stars from Chicago newspapers, fan magazines, and even industry organs as well as her own "critical" notations on favorite films and stars.

An epilogue analyzing the many women writers and editors of this newspaper discourse as influential figures of the American "New Woman" and their creation, in the titles of their columns, of an imaginary discursive space of work and play, "movie land" or "film land," that would soon morph into an equally magical space—both here and nowhere—Hollywood.

By the summer's end of 2010, I plan to submit a proposal for this book manuscript, along with several draft chapters, to University of California Press, whose acquisitions editor already has expressed interest in its publication.

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