**Title: The Motion Picture Theatre Exhibitor**

**Name of Instructor: Liz Clarke, Assistant Professor, Brock University,** [**lclarke@brocku.ca**](mailto:lclarke@brocku.ca)

**Course Title and Level: Film History, 2nd year, Popular Cinema, 2nd year**

**Description: Students are asked to do primary and secondary research about film exhibition in the silent period. The range of years is up to the instructor (I allow the entire silent period, others have chosen to limit to the nickelodeon era). Students must work primarily with exhibitors journals such as *Moving Picture World, Motion Picture News, Variety,* etc, to design an evening (or afternoon) at the theater. Students choose the location and the year and then make decisions such as size of theater, what films would show, would there be other entertainment, what would the music be, how would the theater/films be advertised, etc. A written report details their research process and a creative component may include an ad or a poster for the theater.**

**Learning goals: Familiarity with digital archival material of film history beyond the film text itself. An understanding of the rapidly changing norms of exhibition during the silent period, as well as the wide differences between small-town exhibition and large cities. Exposure to the many film titles that did not survive.**

**The Assignment**

This assignment is the major project for this class and will require primary research of exhibitors’ trade journals available online, historical newspapers and secondary research of scholarly texts about exhibition and regional film-viewing practices.

**Assignment Rationale**

Exhibition trends of the early 20th century are a growing field of film studies inquiry. To this end, students are asked to imagine themselves as early cinema exhibitors to create a variety program based in primary and secondary research. As exhibition varied dramatically across regional boundaries and was in a constant state of flux from film’s earliest years to the coming of sound, students must engage with these differences to create a program of possible interest to a particular audience of early film. What subjects were popular? What films could be combined to make a program? What types of sounds and music accompanied these films? How did exhibitors advertise their theatres and the films shown? These questions, and others, are of central importance to film historians working on exhibition in silent film. Through the creation of a film program—which exemplifies its time and location—students will engage firsthand with some of the concerns facing early exhibitors.

**Assignment Objectives**

To demonstrate the dominance of variety programming in early cinema.

To introduce students to the decisions facing exhibitors from 1895-1927.

To allow students to engage with primary texts including both films and exhibitors’ trade journals.

**Creative Portion Instructions**

1. **Decide on the year (during cinema’s silent period), location** and name of your theatre, vaudeville house, nickelodeon or other typical location for early film screenings.
2. **Read trade journals, historical newspapers and/or fan magazines** to research what films and tastes were popular and available for your chosen time period. See below for available resources. **TIP**: Begin by flipping through an issue. Do not try to think of a film you know, let the historical document show you something new!
3. **Perform secondary research to inform your decisions on creating a program and advertising**. [This research will be written up as a formal report in the research section of this assignment.] For example, if you choose to create a theatre in 1906, you will likely do research on nickelodeons to discover what the theatres of that era were like, how they advertised to audiences, how many films they showed in a given program, and where they obtained their films.
4. **Create a program, which can include musical numbers, titles of short films, feature films, and variety acts**. Also consider what your advertising techniques may include: newspaper ads, gimmicks, posters, contests, etc. Will you advertise the film itself or focus on developing clientele based on the reputation of your theatre? You will present your program as a print source (like an advertisement in a magazine or a lobby flyer with the titles and variety acts listed). You must then provide a written rationale (see below) to explain all of your decisions.

a. Some ideas to consider are whether or not to stick to a theme or to provide a wide variety of subject matter. Whether you are targeting a specific group (women, children, immigrant populations, ‘upper class audiences,’ etc) or attempting to make your program accessible to the largest possible audience. In relation to the last point, does your location affect your choices and your audience? What do the trade journals seem to argue is popular amongst audiences during this period? Etc.

The creative portion will be presented to the class to encourage a discussion of why and how students did their research. The creative portion can be designed as an advertisement that might be posted in a newspaper, magazine, or on a poster. You should include film titles, additional entertainment (if applicable—for example, illustrated songs, vaudeville acts, etc), and information about your theatre. This may contain pictures or just print: be creative. You will be expected to give a brief (no more than 5 minutes) presentation to the class describing your theatre and film choices, and explaining what materials you used for research.

**Research Portion Instructions:**

Provide a seven- to eight-page rationale explaining your creative choices. See the above considerations when writing your rationale and include both your findings from primary and secondary research. Structure your rationale as though answering the question “Why did you choose these films for this location and date?” Imagine the choices faced by early film exhibitors: what films would you choose, what music would you choose, how would you dress your ushers, what theater chairs might you purchase, etc? This rationale must include (in addition to the 7-8 page written portion) a works cited list of both primary and secondary sources. MLA citations are required.

You are permitted to improve upon your visual program if you wish, but the final submission will be graded on the presentation of your research in written form and the rationale that you use in choosing films, advertising ploys, theatre design, etc.

**Grading Breakdown:**

The majority of your grade will be based on the rationale and the evidence of research that informs your decisions. In other words, you will not be graded on the possibility that your program might have been popular but rather on the evidence used to substantiate your claims. Use the films and the trade journals as primary sources and the readings on reserve (or other readings you find) as secondary sources to support your claim.

----% - The Program/Presentation: including the detail to which you engage with your fictional theatre: name, location, demographic, the program itself, advertising choices, size of theatre, etc. Based on your engagement with primary sources: trade journals, fan magazines, etc, to find film titles, and other options for your theatre.

----% - Written rationale and works cited: including an emphasis on primary and secondary sources. Your rationale must be written in full sentences but does not need to be in ‘essay format’ (i.e, with thesis and supporting claims). It must be double spaced, 1-inch margins, 12 pt font, Times New Roman.

\*\*\*The following lists are only a few of the examples of resources that may be useful for this assignment. Students are encouraged to perform further research where possible.

**Available Secondary Resources: Books**

Allen, Robert C. *Vaudeville and Film 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction*. Diss. U

of Iowa, 1977. New York: Arno Press, 1980.

Altman, Rick. *Silent Film Sound.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. Fell,

John L. *Before Hollywood: Turn-of-the-Century American Film.* New York:

Hudson Hills Press. 1987.

Fuller-Seeley, Kathryn, ed. *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of*

*Local Moviegoing.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Gunning, Tom. “The World as Object lesson: Cinema Audiences, Visual Culture and

the St. Louis World's Fair, 1904.” *Film History* 6.4 (1994): 422-444.

Hark, Ina Rae, ed. *Exhibition: The Film Reader.* New York: Routledge, 2002.

Musser, Charles. *Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907.* New York:

Maxwell Macmillan International, 1990.

**Sample Available Resources: DVD Collections**

Treasures from American film archives 50 preserved films.

Keaton, Arbuckle & St. John.

More treasures from American film archives, 1894-1931.

The Origins of Film. Charlie Chaplin the early years. Volume 3.

The Movies Begin: a treasury of early cinema, 1894-1913.

The Charley Chase Collection

Hal Roach: The Lot of Fun

Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers

Biograph Shorts: 1909-1913

Gaumont Treasures

Fantômas

Treasures 5: The West

Keystone Tonight!

Cinema Europe

**Available Primary Resources: Trade Journals, Fan Magazines and Newspapers**

http://bioscopic.wordpress.com/library/journals/

\*\*\*\*\*http://mediahistoryproject.org (THIS IS THE MAIN SOURCE FOR TRADE JOURNALS)

http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/ (Historic newspapers)

http://www.archive.org/ (A great source for historical handbooks written for people planning to open theatres)

Examples: *Motion picture handbook; a guide for managers and operators of motion picture theatres* (1916)

***-****Motion picture making and exhibiting. A comprehensive volume treating the principles of motography; the making of motion pictures; the scenario; the motion picture theater; the projector; the conduct of film exhibiting; methods of coloring films; talking pictures, etc.* (1914)