

I recently attended the Annual Conference of the PCA/ACA (Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association) in Indianapolis from March 29-March 31, 2018. This conference featured over 4,000 attendees and hundreds of individual presentations on all aspects of American Popular Culture. I chose to attend sessions that focused on education, subjects that I teach in my own classes, and areas of professional interest. For example, I attended sessions focused integrating technology into the classroom, adapting popular culture classes into online formats, and “using civic hymns and protest songs to teach US History.” Perhaps the most useful teaching session I attended was entitled “Improvisation in the Classroom” presented by Jim Robinson, a Psychology Professor and 20-year veteran of improv theater. This session focused on using the basic principles of improvisational theater (Listen, Always Say Yes, and Unconditional Acceptance) to increase student involvement and to improve retention of information. I have attempted to use some of the techniques that I learned in this session in my upper-level class this semester, and I hope to continue to use some of these teaching techniques in the future.

I also attended several sessions at the PCA Conference based on professional interest. For example, a session on “Popular History in American Culture” featured papers on Public History (historical displays and interpretation at the Rosson House Museum in Phoenix, Arizona) and on comparative historical Civil War Fiction as teaching tools (*Gone with the Wind* v. *The Wind Done Gone* and *Little Women* v. *March*). I chose other sessions simply because of personal interest, including sessions on “Generation X and the Cold War” and “Portrayals of Immigration in Recent Television Programming.” Overall, the conference was a great opportunity for me to learn some new teaching ideas and to improve my knowledge of a variety of different topics related to America’s cultural history.

On the final day of the conference I participated in a session entitled “Film and History: The Wonders of Exhibition.” I was part of a three-person panel that shared three original research projects related to the history of movie projection and movie theaters. The first presentation was given by Elizabeth Ann Collins, a graduate student at Bowling Green University who discussed her research into the Graham Opera House of Washington, Iowa. This opera house was one of the first in America to convert from live performances to movie exhibition, and it continues today as the longest continuously-operating movie theater in the world. The second presentation was given by Dr. Christopher J. Smith, an Associate Professor of English, Humanities, and Social Sciences at Vermont Technical University. Dr. Smith shared his research into “Bank Night” and other promotional contests that were employed by movie theater owners to attract patrons during the Great Depression. Finally, my own presentation entitled “The Autoscope Theatre: A Missouri Love Story,” discussed the history of a failed drive-in movie projection technology that was invented in Missouri in the 1950s that failed to gain a foothold in the national market. All three presentations were well-received by an audience of approximately fifteen people, and several audience members agreed that it was the “best session of the conference.” An abstract of my research is included at the end of this blog as is a copy of the powerpoint presentation that I shared with the audience.

In conclusion, my Title III trip to the 2018 PCA/ACA Conference was a successful one. I was able to share some of my original research with a receptive audience and receive valuable feedback. I also picked up some new teaching ideas and topics that I plan to slowly integrate into the courses that I teach at Lincoln University. It was a valuable experience to attend this conference, and I may seek additional Title III funding to attend future PCA/ACA Conferences.

ABSTRACT

The Autoscope Theatre: A Missouri Love Story

The autoscope drive-in theatre represented a unique effort by a small town entrepreneur to offer a lower-priced alternative to traditional drive-ins. Tom Smith, a drive-in theatre owner from Urbana, Missouri, created the autoscope projection system in 1953. Smith's unique theatre accommodated 43 cars that could view movies on small, individual screens measuring 30 by 40 inches. The movie was projected from a central, turret-shaped tower that used a patented "fly-wheel" lens to project multiple versions of the film. Smith believed that this system was ideal for smaller rural communities that could not support large, single screen drive-in theatres, but his unusual projection system never gained a national or local following.

Smith's autoscope design experienced a brief revival in the early 1970s as drive-in owners across the nation sought a way to show X-rated films while avoiding local indecency charges. Reat Younger, a distributor of adult movies, opened the "Mini Drive-In Theatre" on the outskirts of Joplin, Missouri, in February 1971. The Mini Drive-In featured an autoscope system with a central projection turret and individual screens, allowing for private viewing of adult movies. The Mini Drive-in closed down in 1985, a victim of changing social mores and new technologies that allowed for private viewing of erotic material. Numerous additional autoscope theatres operated throughout the nation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but none survive.

Overall, the autoscope drive-in and projection represents a lost element of the American landscape. Studying the autoscope provides both an illustrative case study of the impact of changing technology on the movie industry in the mid to late 20th century as well as changing social mores related to the public exhibition of erotic films at American drive-ins.