

Indulgence



Nickelodeons, Thrill Rides, and Midway Delights

There are dozens of women hiking up their skirts and wiggling around inside Lauren Rabinovitz's computer. They come from the dancing girl theaters of America's early amusement parks. On Rabinovitz's screen, the women have been brought together to star in a string of nickelodeon movies: French can-can beauties and Egyptian belly dancers grace the stage, offering glimpses into their exotic cultures.

Well, not exactly *their* exotic cultures. As Rabinovitz, chair of American studies, points out, one of the dancers hails from Nebraska. Still, authentic or not, they provide valuable insights, because, as it turns out, looking at this kind of pleasurable sight is no idle pastime.

"By examining our forms of entertainment critically, we can get a good grasp on American culture," says Rabinovitz, whose study of cinema led to an interest in early-20th-century amusement parks. In 1996, Rabinovitz first offered her undergraduate course called Fairs and Amusement Parks through the

American studies department. At about the same time, she became interested in developing a new resource about the amusement park's historical and cultural importance, but, not long into her research, Rabinovitz knew the print medium could not come close to capturing the wonderful world of images, music, and movies she was discovering. Her virtual amusement park debuted this summer on a new CD-ROM called *Yesteryear's Wonderlands: Introducing Modernism to America*.

"We wanted to bombard our park-goer with the kind of sensory overload that hit the park-goer back then," says Rabinovitz, who modeled her virtual park after Chicago's White City Amusement Park. "You can get a sense of the spectacle, not only in the movie arcades, but in the band pavilions, the food concessions, the Ferris wheel, the merry-go-rounds, the shooting gallery."

Through a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, Rabinovitz collaborated with Greg Easley (M.A. '91)

and Marty Christensen (M.S. '94) of the Iowa City-based Goyo-Interactive multimedia company. Perhaps the most significant development in the project, according to recent American studies graduate Sarah Toton, is the inclusion of almost 1,000 hand-tinted picture postcards of amusement parks.

Because the artifacts and resources Rabinovitz found are scattered among private collectors and archives throughout the country, the CD-ROM serves as an abundant storehouse of information for researchers and students of all ages.

"The amusement park was an important development that historians tend to gloss over," says Toton, a self-described roller coaster enthusiast who helped with Rabinovitz's research. "I was surprised to see a postcard of Alamo Park in Cedar Rapids. This is a piece of history in my own backyard that I had not heard about."

by Gary Kuhlmann