Theory and Interpretation of Narrative
James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Series Editors
TABLOID, INC.
CRIMES, NEWSPAPERS, NARRATIVES

V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West
To Penelope’s In-laws and Out-laws:

Anne and Brady Deaton, Brady James Deaton, Justine Richardson, Brad and Christina DeMarea, and David and Becca Deaton

And

To all of Nancy’s students, past and present.
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SCARED BUT NOT SCARRED—Virginia Biddle's heart is still thumping and jumping after her thrilling escape from death when Harry Richardson's yacht Chevalier, on which she was a passenger, was wrecked by mystery gasoline explosion at Greenport, L. I., pier. The gorgeous "Golden Girl" was painfully burned about the ankles. Helen Walsh, another show sister, was more seriously injured.

"WHAT A MAN!" Hudson, otherwise the Rev. Guy Edward Hudson, who married Mrs. Minnie McPherson Kennedy, mother of Angel Annie McPherson, was seized in Los Angeles, where he is held as a fugitive on a bigamy charge from the state of Washington.

BINGO! BINGO!—Bingo—Bingo—Bingo—Bingo
That's the ticket—Yah, ah-choo-cha-cha, or something like that resounded from the mixed party with mixed drinks that was going into a battle royal when Hollywood toppers dragged Count (A. C.) Tamburini out of the melee and into the wagon.
We have a confession: this book has sometimes felt like our dirty secret. Utter the word “tabloid” and what comes to mind is a string of unappealing associations: false reportage, gory headlines, libel lawsuits, and very bad prose. To those who know us—a poet and a Victorian scholar whose ignorance about today’s popular culture is downright laughable—this project has seemed an especially dubious choice. “Why are you writing this book?” our friends and colleagues have asked. It’s a question we often posed to ourselves, particularly in the early stages. In fact, we never set out to write a book about tabloids. Originally, we planned a study of film noir’s aesthetic debt to photography, drawn by our love of photographs and all those stylish movies of the 1940s and 1950s. This interest led us to Weegee, New York’s legendary crime photographer, whose images then drew us back to the tabloid issues where they originally appeared. Before we knew it, we were immersed in the smudgy, badly microfilmed pages of the *New York Daily News* and its tabloid rivals, the *New York Daily Mirror* and the *New York Evening Graphic*. Fascinated by their pulsating content and style, we found ourselves irresistibly pulled back to the 1920s and early 1930s, when these papers enjoyed their highest popularity.¹

There, we were surprised and delighted by what we found. Yes, the papers were chock-full of purple prose and emotional excess. But their literary quality was often astonishing, especially given the low level of discourse in the American press today. Reading these papers, we were charmed by their literary allusion, metaphorical wordplay, rich vocabulary, and deft wit. Producing this medley of narrative pleasures, we soon discovered, were wordsmiths like Ernest Lehman, Ben Hecht, Ring Lardner, and Damon Runyon, all of whom wrote for the tabloids
at various points in their careers. Even names we may not recognize now—Florabel Muir, Jack Lait, Emile Gauvreau, Louis Weitzenkorn—were literary celebrities during the period, their tabloid fare constituting only part of their vast production. More surprising still are the guest columnists who often graced the tabloids’ pages, including such Hollywood luminaries as D. W. Griffith, Anita Loos, Norma Talmadge, and Cecil B. DeMille.

Considering the tabloids’ linguistic snap, it’s not surprising that the terms used to describe them were often colorful. “Jazz journalism,” “hot headlines,” “hot news”: these monikers all indicate delight in the vigor the tabloids injected into journalism. At the same time, the names make clear that these papers’ freehanded storytelling favored the incendiary over the factual. And more denigrating labels, such as “scandal sheet” or “scandal rag,” illustrate the anxiety many felt about the tabloids’ potential for reckless misrepresentation. Yet the verve of these negative descriptors suggests that the tabloids had created such a linguistically rich discourse that even their detractors could not resist using it.

Of course, the tabloids were not just verbally inventive; they were also rude, lewd, and sensational. But they paraded these qualities as virtues. And though the Saturday Evening Post, Commonweal, and the New Republic bemoaned their fabrications and exaggerations, the tabloids flaunted their excesses. They pushed readers to navigate a range of literary genres and modes as well as a blend of fiction and fact. To enjoy these tabloids, then, was not necessarily a sign of illiteracy, as many historians have assumed. While it is true that the tabloids’ richly illustrated pages made them accessible to less literate or non–English speaking audiences, contemporaneous surveys—as well as the papers’ enormous circulation—suggest that their readership was much broader than critics have been willing to acknowledge. George Douglas seconds this notion, remarking that while it was easy for intellectuals to imagine that the Daily News was purchased “only by subliterates or morons,” in fact “the writing was good, and would get better, and the mix of materials was very well crafted to meet a perceived public demand” (228). In short, the tabloids offered many narrative pleasures, enticing agile readers as well as the “gum chewers” scorned by detractors.

We are not alone in trying to reclaim tabloid media for serious study. Critics such as John Fiske, Kevin Glynn, S. Elizabeth Bird, Robert W. Dardenne, and Martin Conboy have all found points of praise in examinations that are culturally driven and theoretically sophisticated: Fiske investigates the role of tabloids in 1980s popular culture; Glynn urges us to consider their subversive capability for challenging the “truths” circu-
lated by mainstream news; Bird and Dardenne locate tabloids within a tradition of oral folk narrative; and Conboy writes of the ways tabloids have created an “imagined community” of readers in Britain. Yet these critics focus on the newer breed of supermarket tabloid that arose in the 1960s and proliferated in the 1980s, exemplified in America by the *National Enquirer*, the *Star*, and the *Globe*. These differ from the earlier tabloids not only in their subject matter but, more importantly, also in their storytelling practices. Influenced by television, they pair extreme subject matter with monochromatic language, flattening out the competing linguistic registers we see in the earlier publications. Their stories tend to be recounted in bland prose devoid of the wit that typified jazz-age tabloids. While these supermarket tabloids are sociologically fascinating and even fun (what’s not to love about a new Elvis sighting?), they are quite different from the papers we study here.

Slowly, the New York tabloids migrated to a central position in our study. We realized that in their heyday these publications were so important to American culture that we could have focused on just the years 1927–33, when they reached their collective zenith. Yet because a comprehensive analysis of them remains to be written, we decided our book would be most valuable if we balanced a synchronic with a diachronic investigation. Hence, part I examines several overlapping interactions between the tabloids and Hollywood during the papers’ most fertile period. Here we study the tabloids’ influence on movie advertising, consider how Warner Bros. drew from both tabloid and straight reportage for its “headline news” films, and trace cinematic depictions of tabloid news workers. Part II then moves into the 1940s and 1950s, mapping a two-decade trajectory of the papers’ influence on hard-boiled fiction, autobiography, museum culture, and film noir.

Kevin Glynn declares that the tabloids have long functioned as “the low Other against which the respectable attempts to distinguish itself” (4). Echoing Glynn’s observation, one of our central arguments in part I is that the tabloids have always been crime film’s disreputable doppelganger, shaping the genre’s narratives in a variety of direct and diffuse ways. Other scholars have noted this relationship but have been vague in analyzing it. Movie critics of the earlier twentieth century (e.g., George Jean Nathan) remarked that gangster movies owed not simply their content but also their storytelling strategies to tabloid newspapers. Critics writing on Fritz Lang note his interest in mass media. Meanwhile, scholars have written about the aesthetic similarities between photographs from papers like the *Daily News* and film noir classics like *Double Indemnity*. Nonetheless, these critical discussions tend to be marginal or ahistorical. Everyone,
it seems, agrees that Hollywood and the tabloids have long been partners in crime, but few have actually examined this relationship in depth.

Such neglect is especially surprising when we consider that the connection between sensational journalism and cinema dates back to the earliest days of moviemaking. Pointing to early filmmakers’ interest in spectacle, Tom Gunning has famously designated the nascent movie industry a “cinema of attractions.” Other critics such as Lynne Kirby and Ben Singer have joined Gunning in comparing early cinema with other contemporaneous diversions, including circuses, vaudeville, the railway, and live reenactments of catastrophes. But we would add that sensational journalism was itself a major entertainment venue. As Simon Bessie puts it, “the melodramatic generation which tearfully warbled such paste-pearls of sentimentality as ‘She May Have Seen Better Days’” turned toward these papers as “a primary source of entertainment, guided by the simple principles of human amusement” (44).

The first examples of such journalism in America are generally considered to be the penny papers that flourished in New York and other urban areas during the 1830s and 1840s. These papers carried on the tradition of the “true crime” narrative that, as Karen Halttunen describes, had evolved since colonial days through forms such as the execution sermon, the first-person criminal confession, and reports of murder trials. The expanding print culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries contributed a growing number of secular crime narratives, and after 1820 these took an increasing interest in the grisly interplay of sex and crime. Unlike Puritan sermons that focused on Christian redemption for the sinner rather than on details of his transgression, nineteenth-century crime narratives built on the tradition of Gothic horror, “treat[ing] passion and sometimes the sex act itself with novelistic details, and indulg[ing] a pervasive tone of prurience” (Halttunen 176).

With their interest in murder and mayhem, the penny papers stood in contrast to the practical newspapers of the day, which tended to be expensive, stodgy, and visually forbidding. Yet the wider appeal of the penny papers, as of the later tabloids, resided in their human interest. The inaugural 1833 issue of the Sun, for example, featured a dialogue about an Irish sea captain, a tale about a grain mill tiny enough to be carried in a sleeve, and an account of a “Melancholy Suicide” (Douglas, Golden 6). This broad content, along with simple language and a rhetorical stance as the voice of “ordinary people,” established the penny papers as populist vehicles. In fact, one of these papers, the New York Herald, actually used the figure of “the gossip” as an image of its own role as a “vector for news within the community” (Conboy, The Press 48).
The penny papers did not have the visual appeal that would be central to the later tabloids, however. Because they were short—usually four pages—even the most spine-tingling entries had to be thinned to a few lines. The Sun was the only penny paper to provide lengthier treatment of key stories. Yet while it offered an extended parade of law breakers, it was dull-looking. Dominated by blocks of text set in small typeface, its pages must have induced as much frustrated squinting as fascinated scanning.

It would take two other tabloid precursors—the Police Gazette and the Graphic—to bring visual impact together with racy content. Both papers were founded in New York. The Police Gazette, begun in 1845, was originally a chronicle of criminal activity and a populist watchdog against government corruption. Yet it had transformed by the 1870s (ironically, when an actual police chief took over as editor) into a garish treatment of vice, relying heavily on the illustrations that were its distinguishing feature. Meanwhile the Graphic, founded in 1872 as an “Illustrated Evening Newspaper,” frequently deployed lurid illustrations and often narrated an entire story through images. It was the first paper to use granulating photography, a primitive engraving method that enabled the newspaper to make cuts directly from photographs and to print actual photos of the culprits and victims of crimes such as murder.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the trends represented by the penny papers, the Graphic, and the Police Gazette reached new heights in Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World and William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal. Distinguished by bold layouts, banner headlines, heavy reliance on unnamed sources, staged photos, reconstructions of events, and unabashed self-promotion, these rival publications were both so popular and so big that they won national attention.

Founded in 1883, Pulitzer’s World was soon the most widely imitated newspaper in America. It was, according to George Douglas, “a blatantly popular paper,” packed with eye-filling headlines, line drawings (and later, photographs), and cartoons (96). Its prose style was sentimental and hyperbolic, featuring stories with titles such as “A Bride but Not a Wife,” “A Mother’s Awful Crime,” and “Love and Cold Poison.” Furthermore, in a move that would also mark the later tabloids, the World made an unabashed appeal to a feminized commodity culture with “women’s pages” of etiquette hints and columns on topics related to beauty and the home. Pulitzer was responding to current media thinking: W. Joseph Campbell’s recent book on the turn-of-the-century sensational press cites a Fourth Estate article from 1895 advising the “wise publisher” to “appeal to the women[s] . . . prejudices and preferences” (68). The paper also debuted entertainment items that would become newspaper staples,
including puzzles, diversions for young readers, and a sports section. Tellingly, the World’s journalistic style was nicknamed the “Coney Island Method,” alluding to its myriad entertaining stimuli.

William Randolph Hearst challenged Pulitzer on his own titillating turf in 1896 by purchasing the New York Journal and embarking on reportorial “excursions into the bizarre and the erotic” (Bessie 55). His paper brimmed with articles such as “Strange Things Women Do for Love” and Stephen Crane’s notorious series on the red-light district. It sent out Valentine’s Day cards to potential female readers, urging them to peruse its women’s pages (Campbell 60). And the Journal was brasher than the World. It emphasized “lurid tales of demented criminal activity . . . combined with literally thousands upon thousands of illustrations that were beginning to turn journalism into a visual as opposed to a written expression” (Spencer 88).

All of these papers sparked antisensationalism crusades in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Yet it was not until Pulitzer’s paper came into direct contest with Hearst’s in the mid-1890s that these publications garnered the now-familiar and denigrating term “yellow journalism.” The epithet soon evoked reckless reporting, partisan editorializing, and overblown emotion.

Even a cursory glance at cinema’s subjects in its nascent years—burglaries, lewd scenes, prostitutes picking up country rubes—shows how much film’s content had in common with all these sensational papers. Porter’s The Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison (1901), for example, presents a reenactment of the electrocution of President McKinley’s assassin as covered in the press. Other short films of the period that were adapted from crime stories in the newspapers include the Edison series on the Biddle Brothers (1902), Capture of the Yegg Bank Burglars (1904), The Life of Charles Peace (1905), Biograph’s Great Jewel Mystery (1905), The Man in the Box (1908), The Bank Robbery (1908), and the variety of films dealing with the Thaw-White murder case in 1906 and 1907.13

During cinema’s transitional period into feature-length films, its debt to sensational newspapers became more pronounced. In addition to borrowing content, movies began to adopt the papers’ story-telling strategies. Traffic in Souls (1913), for example, owes its coverage of white slavery mainly to Pulitzer’s World, which took on the subject as a special—and especially stimulating—crusade. Like its journalistic counterpart, Traffic in Souls presents the world’s oldest profession by walking the line between documentary and fiction. Containing scenes set in brothel interiors and location shots of street solicitation, the film clearly tries to authenticate
the actual social dilemma as the World had done. At the same time, it produces a thrilling narrative, full of the impious content and voyeurism that made the sensational papers so popular.\textsuperscript{14}

Nonetheless, while this earlier journalism influenced film, New York’s three jazz-age tabloids provided fresh narrative inspiration and sustained a distinctive relationship with Hollywood. Inspired by London’s Daily Mirror, New York’s Daily News appeared in 1919. Not to be outdone, Hearst introduced his own tabloid, the Daily Mirror, in 1922. They were joined in 1924 by the Evening Graphic. These three were the first of what would eventually be a tabloid wave; by the mid-1930s, there were forty-nine tabloids in circulation nationwide. Nonetheless, we focus on these three papers exclusively because, as progenitors to the rest, they provided Hollywood with the supreme and highest-circulating models of tabloidism. Their connection to New York was also crucial, for, as historians such as Ann Douglas and Steven Adler have documented, New York in the 1920s was the glittering capital of America’s social landscape.\textsuperscript{15} By the late 1920s, speakeasies, dance halls, and Harlem nightclubs abounded. As Damon Runyon once remarked, New York during this period conveyed a “sense of excitement, the heady possibility that just around the corner something extraordinary could happen” (qtd. in Schwarz 37). As a result, Hollywood displayed an almost obsessive interest in the Big Apple during the 1920s and 1930s. The film industry turned to these tabloids, in large part, because they captured the vibrant modernity of America’s most exciting metropolis.

All three papers boasted a smaller, new-fangled format. Made from a regular newsprint page folded in half, they were easy for readers commuting on public transportation. But their form inflected content as well. We might usefully pause here on the meaning of the word “tabloid.” John Osborn explains that it was “coined as a trademark for condensed medicines in 1884” and was then used to describe “smaller-than-average newspapers, compact airplanes and efficiency yachts, and the linguistic condensations of slang” (508). Readers soon expected the tabloids to compact narratives—via photos, zippy language, and blazing headlines—into immediate excitement. These headlines, Osborn remarks, “even if glimpsed for a split second on a street corner,” convey the rush of a whole action “raised and resolved in a single instant” (507). Compared to earlier sensational papers, this condensation allowed the tabloids to deliver a visceral punch. Responding to this intensity, Neal Gabler remarks that the tabloid “really wasn’t a newspaper at all, but rather an entertainment medium, and as such it had far more in common with the motion pictures than with journalism” (72). It is not surprising, then, that the tabloids
would exert such an influence on Hollywood, especially once the movie industry transitioned into sound and began searching for new tales, and a new language and style for telling them.

The tabloids’ compressed vigor also made them eye-catching on the newsstand, where they competed for attention with the pulp magazines whose popularity also crested in the same decade. Named for the rough paper on which they were printed, the pulps were cheaply produced biweekly or weekly periodicals, sporting bright, action-oriented cover art. By the early 1930s, there were well over two hundred pulps in circulation. Specializing in tough-guy fiction, these magazines likely attracted some of the same readers as the tabloids; city residents may well have picked up their copies of Black Mask or Dime Detective as they reached for the Daily News.

Indeed, the tabloids’ language, right from the start, had an edgy, colloquial quality closer to the pulps’ writing than to the stiff Victorian prose of earlier sensational papers. And the tabloids gleefully mixed fact and fiction, proclaiming that they intended to both fictionalize and personalize the news, choosing stories for their emotional value and presenting them via striking visual techniques. Consequently, readers of the Daily News in these decades would find anywhere between five to thirty-five stories a day involving sex, crime, or violence: four times as many as articles on politics or world affairs. Readers were also treated to a rich assortment of genres, including first-person confessions from murderers, serialized novellas based on actual crimes, and man-on-the-street interviews. Accompanied by diagrams and elaborate captions, even tabloid photographs were invested with narrative elements.

Altogether, such “interpretive reporting,” as one writer called it, stands in contrast to both earlier sensational journalism and the mainstream papers. Unlike them, the New York tabloids paid scant attention to government policies or world events. Nor did they get involved in muckraking. As media historians have documented, muckraking had definite social aims and, at times, a progressive political agenda: both Hearst’s and Pulitzer’s papers reported on corruption among union leaders, for example. The tabloids, in contrast, were relatively insular, concentrating their attention on crime, sex, domestic relationships, problems of modern metropolitan life, and entertainment. And while these topics echoed earlier sensational journalism, the New York tabloids were clearly more open—if still conflicted—in their stance toward such subjects. To a great degree, the reason is that the tabloids depended so heavily on guest authors and contributions from readers. The result was a polyvocal forum, evoking what James Carey calls a “model of conversation,” rather than the
This “conversation model” set the jazz-age tabloids apart from their mainstream rivals at a point when standards of journalistic professionalism were being codified. University journalism programs had been established in the first decade of the twentieth century, and by the 1920s specific credentials and regulations, including principles of objectivity, were expected in the straight press. In the decade after World War I, the mainstream press experienced a prosperity and popularity it would never again attain. Papers like the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* were powerful engines of social opinion, boasting attention to national and global events, uninflected prose, and factual accuracy. “All the news that’s fit to print,” the *Times* loftily announced on its masthead. The tabloids thumbed their noses at such high-toned ideas of “fitness,” instead ramping up their bal­lyhoo to distinguish their pages from those of the “snooze news.”

The desire of mainstream news to professionalize itself was a response, in part, to much larger questions of social hierarchy that had been shaping American society since the 1870s. Before this decade, Americans of different economic levels valued similar cultural artifacts and phenomena, from Shakespeare to burlesque opera. But as society became less homog­enous, “crossing cultural boundaries became increasingly problematic” (Kammen 11). By the 1910s these boundaries had hardened, and American culture was stratified into distinct taste and social levels. The term “low­brow,” to describe a person or thing of limited intellectual or aesthetic refinement, was in popular circulation by the first decade of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, “highbrow,” indicating elevated intellectual and aesthetic capabilities, was widely enough known by 1908 to appear in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In the late 1910s and the 1920s, these two binaries were often used to categorize culture at large. Yet in the wake of World War I and in the throes of the jazz age, Americans also saw the demar­cation between “lowbrow” and “highbrow” becoming permeable. Attesting to a broadening cultural spectrum, the term “middlebrow” entered the parlance in 1925 via *Punch* magazine, which described a new class of citi­zens who are “hoping that someday, they will get used to the stuff they ought to like” (qtd. in *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Despite the humor with which *Punch* addressed it, the question of taste level preoccupied many Americans. It also challenged magazines and newspapers that were trying to claim their own audiences. In the fracas, the tabloids—with their rude energy and populist appeal—were the frequent targets of publications working to establish their own higher status. The *Saturday Review of Literature* chastised the tabloids as a “new
black plague,” for example, while Samuel Taylor Moore of the *Independent* described them as “an unholy blot on the fourth estate—bawdy, inane, and contemptible” (qtd. in Bessie 184; 264). The tabloids were “the prankish and irresponsible illegitimate child of journalism,” according to the *Nation* (qtd. in Bessie 342). And Aben Kandel fumed in the *Forum*:

To every thinking man and woman in the United States the menace of the tabloids is apparent. They are converting readers into witless gossips, gutter vamps, and backyard sheiks. They mock at privacy and finger in glee all the soiled linen they can discover. They fill the mouths of readers with intimate details of all the illicit love affairs they can uncover. They fire their restless minds with lewd photographs. They lay stress only on those aspects of modern life that can be interpreted in terms of sensationalism. They implant in children, who are their most avid readers, a dangerous sophistication. They teach youngsters the vocabulary and lurid ritual of illicit love! The tabloids make eavesdroppers of reporters, sensual meddlers of journalists, and reduce the highest ideals of the newspaper to the process of fastening a camera lens to every boudoir keyhole. (384)

These invectives indicate how publications struggling to define themselves as middlebrow or highbrow elevated their own refinement by casting aspersions on the reading matter of the “backyard sheik.” They bring to mind Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s observation that a cultural elite reifies its own status by denigrating forms associated with those lower in the social hierarchy.

To complicate this cultural picture even further, we must keep in mind that, as Kammen points out, the 1920s “witnessed more than its predictable share of audiences participating in multiple taste levels” (110). In part, this was due to the fact that a burgeoning popular culture made new experiences available across social strata. The growth of leisure time; the commercialization of organized entertainment sites; new transportation that made it easier for audiences to access amusement; all contributed to a popular culture that appealed widely. More importantly, perhaps, Kammen argues that this period was still typified by distinct regional lifestyles that gave popular forms a vital connection to their local audience. As a result, popular culture still remained largely participatory and interactive, inviting different taste publics to enjoy its pleasures.

Framed by this uneasy mobility between cultural levels, our book opens in the last years of the jazz age, a time boasting several milestones in cinema and tabloid history. Most obviously, in 1927, sound entered
film. Sound would be crucial to many of the elements that solidified the crime genre and became its evocative clichés: chattering machine guns, screeching getaway cars, slangy dialogue. Meanwhile, 1927 witnessed the initial narrative impulses that would culminate in a cycle of gangster-inflected newspaper movies. As Richard Ness observes, while the 1928 Broadway play *The Front Page* was the most recognized influence on the flurry of press-themed movies that followed, the 1927 picture *The Final Extra* demonstrates that many of the tropes of the newspaper film were firmly established by that year (8). Furthermore, as if signaling how closely crime movies and the newspaper business would mesh on both narrative and extra-cinematic levels, 1927 also saw the release of Joseph von Sternberg’s *Underworld*, considered by many historians to be the first modern gangster movie. Written by Ben Hecht—who would win one of the first Academy Awards for his screenplay—the narrative was drawn from Hecht’s years of writing for a handful of Chicago daily papers (Clarens 31). This was also the time when Queens housewife Ruth Snyder became a tabloid sensation by convincing her lover to help her murder her husband. The case ended with the killers’ executions in 1928, but tabloid coverage rippled outward through time, inspiring James M. Cain’s fiction. By the late 1920s, too, Hollywood was imitating the tabloids in its advertising, inviting moviegoers to equate film viewing with tabloid reading.

Most importantly, New York’s three major tabloids had achieved a zenith by 1927. The *Daily News*’s circulation topped one million, the largest of any paper in the nation and two-and-a half times the circulation of the *New York Times*. The *Daily Mirror*, meanwhile, tagged along in second place with roughly half that figure. The *Evening Graphic*, though falling into third place with a circulation of 400,000, achieved the most notoriety due to its hodgepodge of faked photographs and zany narratives. Simon Bessie observes that though “None of the other New York papers had lost circulation. . . . in less than seven years three tabloids had acquired 1,500,000 readers, apparently conjuring them up out of the blue” (21). This enormous new population of writers, readers, and editors created a powerful culture, however disreputable the tabloids might have appeared to middlebrow and elite scoffers.

Each of these tabloids had staked out an individual style and content by 1927. Certainly, one flagrant error in media history is the tendency to lump these three papers together. While it is true that the *Daily Mirror* began as an unabashed imitation of the *Daily News*, anyone who studies the two papers carefully will observe that, within just a few years, the *Mirror* had departed from its rival. And by 1927, the *Evening Graphic* had come fully into its own as America’s most audacious newspaper.
Given the tabloids’ literary showmanship, narrative variety, and extraordinary cultural influence, it is no wonder that after 1927, Hollywood studios began hiring reporters by the droves in order to meet the script demands of the new talkies. Representing a whole new breed of screenwriter, they took the crime film by storm, reworking tabloid articles into screenplays celebrated for their vivid depiction of a criminal milieu.19

It was easy for these writers to make the transition from tabloid to celluloid in the late 1920s in part because both media were popularly conceived of as serving a similar audience. Though evidence shows that they drew patrons of both genders from all social strata, both the tabloids and Hollywood were persistently charged with pandering to “low” tastes and morals.20 And this criticism was especially directed toward crime films, which were frequently attacked for their “vulgar” and “garish” elements. After seeing The Public Enemy in 1931, for example, one commentator quipped that “if Hollywood keeps up its love affair with gangsters, ‘movie’ will soon be as dirty a word as ‘tabloid.’” He then proceeded to compile a laundry list of offenses shared by each medium, including “a nauseating reliance on melodrama” and “a revolting blend of humor, playfulness and violence” (“Tabloid Offenses” 486).

If the kinship between the tabloids and Hollywood film stemmed from a perceived mutual appeal to working-class Americans, then their often-tense distance over the next two decades speaks to the different degree of social prestige each medium commanded. By the mid-1930s, movies had clearly gained legitimacy as middlebrow entertainment. Meanwhile, the tabloids’ popularity had waned. Crippled by the Depression, the Evening Graphic folded in 1932, while the Daily Mirror meandered along on a steadily declining circulation. The News thrived, but it did so at the expense of its sensationalism; by 1930, as we discuss in chapter 2, it had undergone a facelift, emerging as a much more sober newspaper.

Yet even as the tabloids dwindled in popularity, the idea of “the tabloid” gained new cachet for a growing middlebrow population. As C. W. E. Bigsby argues, “Popular culture . . . can be transformed into ‘high’ art by a simple critical act of appropriation. Indeed so insecure are these categories that the popular culture of one generation can become the high culture of the next and vice versa” (qtd. in Kammen 6). As our diachronous examination shows, Cain’s writing earned “tabloidesque” stories an increasingly respected place within the growing canon of hard-boiled literature. And as America approached the Second World War, jazz journalism was nostalgized as a colorful part of a bygone era. Weegee capitalized on retrospective middlebrow interest in tabloid imagery, landing exhibitions at the Photo League and the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1940s. Mean-
while, Mark Hellinger, a celebrated Broadway columnist for the *Daily Mirror*, relocated to Hollywood to produce movies. Known as the creative vision behind cinematic touchstones such as *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and *The Naked City* (1948), Hellinger specialized in adapting early tabloid material into sentimentalized portraits of New York.

Our examination of the tabloids’ influence across two decades ends in the 1950s, the nadir for both the tabloid press and American crime film. By then, the sensationalism that had been just one element of the New York tabloids had birthed a brutal new type of journalism, the Hollywood scandal magazine. These publications married intrusive reportage to an exclusive focus on celebrity culture. *Confidential* and *Hush-Hush*, the most notorious, published gossip about stars’ homosexuality, adultery, or drug addiction, promising information “Uncensored and off the record,” as *Confidential’s* masthead put it. By 1957, however, lawsuits had been filed against the magazines, resulting in a backlash against their thuggish tactics. Likewise, the late 1950s witnessed the bleakest period in the history of the Hollywood crime movie. Critics generally mark this as the end of film noir’s fertile period. Faced with increasing competition from television, which was producing a spate of crime series including *Dragnet*, even the more prestigious studios were resorting to tired, retrospective biopics of criminals such as Capone and Dillinger. Tabloid journalism and the American crime film had both collapsed in narrative exhaustion.

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**AS WE STUDIED** this history, we discovered a complex web of narrative reinscription. The tabloids were, from day one, expert at recycling the same story types across media, genres, and styles. They multiplied events by shaping them around literary archetypes or by publishing reports emphasizing different interpretations of the same action. They retold the same episode in photos and in text. They also gestured tirelessly toward Broadway, crime fiction, romance literature, and Hollywood, announcing that their own material stood ready for adaptation. In fact, we argue that the tabloids’ most important characteristic is not the sensationalism with which they are always equated; rather, it is their status as the era’s supreme site for mobilizing narratives.

In many ways, what we discovered resembled processes that other media scholars might study as *adaptation* or *remediation*. Yet neither of these two concepts quite fits the tabloids’ relation to narrative. As critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Robert Stam, and Thomas Leitch have pointed out, adaptation studies is still dominated—despite recent broadening efforts—by a
formalist interest in how one medium, the novel, translates into cinema. As a result, most adaptation critics have not engaged seriously with narrative theory, an ironic omission given how central issues of narrative are when converting literature to film. Moreover, the term “adaptation” is problematic, since it implies that the newer text is always a derivative response to an original. Until recently, then, adaptation studies have been concerned primarily with “fidelity,” examining how “faithful” a movie adaptation is to its source. With the tabloids, though, we realized that finding the “original” version of any story would be impossible. “Fidelity” and “originality” make no sense in the cacophonous mélange that typified these papers.

Remediation, a term Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined in the late 1990s to describe the relationship between rapidly developing digital media and older forms such as painting and film, doesn’t quite suit the tabloids, either. Bolter and Grusin are particularly concerned with remediation’s “double logic”—that is, our culture’s desire to multiply media while simultaneously erasing all traces of mediation (5). Given its emphasis on repurposing, erasure, and the conviction that no medium works in isolation, remediation is a valuable concept. More successfully than “adaptation,” the term acknowledges the influence of older media without attributing primary importance to them. And yet, the tabloids do not face the bind of remediation’s double-logic. Rather, they happily foreground the fact that their narratives are mediated and mediating. Moreover, because Bolter and Grusin conceptualize remediation as a way of approaching new media such as computer games and the Internet, it is arguably more suited for theorizing the interface between older and newer visual forms.

We, too, are deeply concerned with the visual. Yet ours is primarily a narrative and literary study. Even when we discuss movies and photography, we are engaged with how images are embedded in language. We pay more attention to screenplays, dialogue, and advertising press books than we do to the purely visual or technological aspects of film. In Weegee’s case, we are as interested in the words he penned to surround his pictures as in his photos themselves.

Crucially, too, because we are studying a popular form of journalism, issues of class, taste, and cultural prestige are paramount. And so we developed the term “narrative mobility” to describe the way that narratives (or elements of narrative), in transiting from one medium, genre, or mode to another, reveal the underlying social class boundaries that circumscribe that movement. Sometimes narrative mobility traces a process akin to “upward mobility,” as when narrative elements from a tabloid
are mobilized into middlebrow fiction. Elsewhere, it reveals how media, genres, or modes use narrative elements to define themselves as they struggle to stabilize their own cultural position at a particular historical moment. Attending to narrative mobility thus deepens our understanding of how different cultural forms rework narrative elements to define their own social status.

Our work departs from most narrative studies in that it tends toward historical specificity rather than transhistorical theory. As literary scholars fascinated by cultural studies, we couldn’t resist reading the cookbooks by *Evening Graphic* founder Bernarr Macfadden, or the glut of hypermasculine autobiographies by news photographers in the 1930s, or the spicy reports of Walter Winchell’s career. This marriage of narrative theory with American cultural history makes our book an unusual contribution, which our concept of narrative mobility deepens. Though theorists have examined how narratives are constructed, how they influence their audiences, how they influence one another, and how they are interpreted, relatively little attention has been paid to how narrative elements move across media, genres, or modes of differing cultural prestige. Yet the status levels across which narrative elements transit can alter both their meaning and their reception.

Our study also offers what we hope is an important contribution to crime film scholarship. Thomas Leitch has noted that “the subgenres of the crime film, like the gangster film of the 1930’s and the film noir of the 1940’s, have been more often, and more successfully, theorized than the forbiddingly broad genre of the crime film itself” (*Crime* 2). The tabloids’ symbiosis with Hollywood is most visible against such a “broad” panorama, however, and we have tried to provide the range for which Leitch calls. Moreover, though Leitch is correct in observing that film noir and the gangster film have been extensively discussed, much of this scholarship is insufficiently historicist. Scholars writing on film noir, for example, have been invested for decades in advancing its “art” while carefully maintaining its perimeters. “As [film noir] has come down to us through the decades, it is an object of beauty” writes Marc Vernet as he argues for more historical study (1). Vernet alludes here to the critical and popular fascination with classical noir’s neatly contained time frame (1940–58), its stylish black-and-white cinematography, and its presentation of Hollywood’s “coolest” performers. Vernet also notes that the two influences critics identify most often when discussing film noir’s contexts are German Expressionism and hard-boiled fiction (7). Yet hard-boiled fiction is as far as most noir criticism has gone in identifying these movies’ popular contexts, leaving the narrative mobility between film noir and the tabloids invisible.24
Given the preciosity of most film noir scholarship, its neglect of the tabloids may not be surprising. What is startling, however, is the scant attention given to tabloid journalism within critical discussions of the gangster film. True, many scholars have commented that movies like The Public Enemy and Scarface owe their plots to tabloid coverage of mob doings. But content is only one point of connection. Gangster films frequently veer toward a sensational mode of storytelling. This is presumably what Richard Corliss also had in mind when he noted of the original Scarface that “its all-but-suffocating vitality is a kind of cinematic version of tabloid prose at its best” (qtd. in Yaquinto 27). Until our study, however, such stylistic overlap had been critically neglected, mainly because, as Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield argue, the gangster movie has generated an “etiolated” body of scholarship (1). Rarely moving beyond discussions of Little Caesar (1931), The Public Enemy (1931), Scarface: The Shame of a Nation (1932), and the Godfather trilogy (1972, 1974, and 1990), criticism in this area has tended not only to ignore the incredible wealth of films engaged with gangster narratives, but also to efface the diverse history preceding the 1930s.

If crime film’s connection to the tabloids remains to be historicized, so too does the broader connection between journalism and Hollywood. Most studies examining this nexus have focused on representations of reporters and other media figures in the movies. While this approach helps us recognize journalism’s cultural standing at various historical moments, it ignores a number of relevant questions that our book addresses. For example, what mediating roles has newspaper reading played in the reception of films? How did Hollywood studios negotiate negative portrayals of journalists without offending the press on which they depended for publicity? And how did Hollywood manage the imperatives for speed and timeliness when adapting well-known stories from the news?

Though our scope is broad, we consider the material complexity of the media we engage. First and foremost, we approach tabloids as more than merely what David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson term an “adjacent” industry to Hollywood. Instead, we draw on extensive archival materials including Hollywood production files, film reviews, and the pages of the tabloids themselves. We also examine what may be the most valuable resource in understanding how films from earlier decades were promoted and received: the advertising press book. Unlike the few critical treatments that exist, we approach the press book as a narrative forum, a space where Hollywood studios imitated the tabloids in order to generate more audience excitement.
Part I, providing a synchronous study from 1927 to 1933, opens with a chapter examining these press books, for they provide ample evidence that the studios saw crime movies as extensions of the tabloids. Chapter 1 offers a reading of these texts informed by narrative theory and reception studies, arguing that studio advertising departments developed tabloid strategies as a way of encouraging potential audiences to regard movie-going as an activity full of the same racy pleasures delivered by the popular press. In this chapter, we give special attention to the Evening Graphic.

Chapter 2 shows that if the Evening Graphic provided the playful ballyhoo Hollywood copied in its advertising, then the Daily News—its increasingly sober sibling—offered a model of hard-hitting populism ideal for Warner Bros.’ headline news films. As many critics have pointed out, Warner Bros. specialized in crime movies that balanced sensational action with a more serious concern for social problems. Through a case study of the studio’s dramatization of the 1930 murder of Chicago reporter Jake Lingle, this chapter investigates how the studio drew from both the Daily News and the mainstream press to give its movie punch and social relevance. At the same time, the studio needed to compensate for the time lag between the headlines on which the script was based and the film’s later release date. It did so by allegorizing the story, thereby ensuring that its treatment—the 1931 box-office hit, The Finger Points—would stand as a “timeless” version.

While the first two chapters demonstrate the open acknowledgment Hollywood paid to the tabloids, chapter 3 complicates this pattern. Here, we find that even while the industry was gesturing toward the tabloids in its advertising and in some of its films, it was simultaneously producing a cycle of movies remarkable for their depiction of tabloid work as a quasi-criminal occupation. We call this hitherto-neglected body of films from 1931 to 1933 the “tabloid racketeer” cycle. The cycle demonstrates how Hollywood mobilized criminal-type characters into newspaper settings in order to extend the gangster’s dynamism at a time when civic and religious forces were demanding that he be censored off the screen.

Part II of the book considers the tabloids’ wider temporal influences on a variety of media. Chapter 4 traces the Snyder-Gray murder trial through countless iterations in the tabloids and into Cain’s hard-boiled fiction. As we see, Cain reworked much of the tabloid narrative’s melodrama in order to locate his story within an increasingly esteemed hard-boiled discourse. Yet a good deal of the story’s emotionalism remains even in Cain’s treatments, a fact we highlight by looking at the story’s evolution in the Daily Mirror, the most consistently melodramatic of the three papers.
Chapter 5 also traces narrative mobility over time, examining how the meaning of Weegee’s photographs shifted as he maneuvered them from the pages of the tabloids into increasingly celebrated settings. This mobilization was part of an elaborate campaign of self-presentation that Weegee carried out not only in visual media but also in his authorship of eight books and dozens of articles. Countering the critical tendency to valorize Weegee as a “noir-like” visionary, we contextualize him within a larger trend of masculinizing the news photographer during the 1930s and 1940s. As part of our study, we argue that Weegee’s *Naked City* (1945)—a seminal collection in the photojournalism canon—must be reconsidered as a hard-boiled autobiography.

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**CERTAINLY,** no form of popular culture seems more degraded than the tabloid. These papers remain especially marginal because the scholar studying them confronts real practical difficulties. First, few libraries in the United States even contain tabloid holdings. The *Evening Graphic* is particularly rare: it is archived in only four libraries, and none possess the paper’s entire run.\(^29\) Compounding this problem, what remains often exists only as dismally copied microfilm. Further complicating these problems is the sheer abundance of material the extant tabloids present; the famous Hall-Mills murder case of 1926, for example, generated 12 million words—enough, according to one critic, “to fill nine volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica” (Bent, “Hall-Mills” 580). This overproduction is symptomatic of the tabloids’ tendency toward excess, a trait they share with popular culture in general. Repetition, hypervisualization, and abundance of detail abound, and once the tabloids got hold of a story, it would inevitably be overplayed. John Fiske observes that such excess is “meaning out of control,” spinning and reinventing itself in defiance of dominant ideologies (*Understanding* 109).

Yet this tabloid material, both incomplete and forbiddingly voluminous, provides a trove of crime narratives and a stunning panorama of strategies for recounting them. To work with this material, we had to accept that it was permanently damaged: reproductions of original photos often appeared blurred; page numbers and dates were not always legible; articles were sometimes impossible to read in their entirety. We were crushed to learn that all issues of the *Evening Graphic* for January 1928—the month Snyder and Gray were executed—appear to be lost.

Meanwhile, many of the relevant early films were difficult to find or exist only as poor copies. Thankfully, the Internet led us to several collec-
tors who were able to provide viewable materials, and the move to DVD has made at least a few of these films easier to access. We hope that this trend continues and that these movies become more available, for this book was motivated as much by our commitment to recovering them as by our pleasure in the tabloids’ happy excess. If the loss of the 1928 Graphic issues was the nadir of our research experience, then the many nights we spent watching thrill-bandit actors like Lee Tracy and Edward G. Robinson were our recompense. The verve of their performances kept the tabloid-celluloid mobility center stage, inspiring us to tell its story and reminding us how vital popular culture can be at its best.
MIGHTY MACKMEN VICTORS in first game of World’s Series, as veteran Connie Mack (upper right inset with Pitcher George Earnshaw) directs destinies of Philadelphia Athletics in 6-to-2 victory over St. Louis Cardinals in opening championship match at Sportsman’s Park, St. Louis. Top telephoto shows general view of packed stands and bleachers in third inning when Athletics scored four runs. Bottom panel shows Frisch, Card’s third baseman, scoring second run for Red Birds during first inning. Inset (lower left) shows veteran Connie Mack studying score in dugout twenty years ago in opening game of series won by Giant. Although pennant was captured by Athletics Earnshaw, only 900 Registerite ball player in big leagues, is expected to pitch for the Athletics in second game of the series today.
FIGURE 1.1 Mock-tabloid herald for Gang War, 1928. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)
For Shopgirls and Stenographers

Narrative Mobility, Hollywood Advertising, and the Tabloids

AUGUST, 1928. Jack Dempsey reigns as heavyweight champion of the world, Walter Winchell is on the cusp of international celebrity, and Amelia Earhart has just become the first woman to cross the Atlantic in a plane. Broadway glitters in the cultural imagination, and the tabloids have gained their highest circulation to date. A weary stenographer, finishing a long day at her Manhattan office, picks up a copy of the Daily Record hoping to escape the workaday grind. Immediately the headline grabs her attention: “Gangster Love Lures Beauty to Her Death!!” (see figure 1.1, opposite). Below, a composite photograph depicts a scantily clad girl collapsed before a gunman. The caption declares this image a “Grim reminder of Olive Gilmour’s tragic visit to the Venetian Cafe, where it is alleged she was having a love seance with Joe Magelli, famous gangster.” The stenographer flips through the rest of the pages, coming across “Dixie Blue’s Advice to Girls,” as well as other articles on racketeering and the Magelli-Gilmour slaying.

This issue of the Daily Record exemplifies the era’s tabloids in several ways. It points to their simultaneous romanticizing and censuring of gangsters; it expresses a moralistic fascination with flapper culture; and, suggestively, it hints at interconnections between crime and fads of the decade, such as spiritualism. But most remarkable is the fact that the Daily Record is not an actual newspaper. It is a movie industry “herald”
or “throwaway,” distributed en masse to cinemagoers as a promotion for *Gang War*, which hit theatres in September, 1928. *Gang War* was just one of many crime films produced in the 1920s and 1930s to include a mock-tabloid herald as part of its advertising.

The *Gang War* herald doesn’t just gesture toward the tabloids; it *exactly* copies the look and tone of the *Graphic*, the paper that reporters, editors, and publishers alike repeatedly scorned as the “pornoGraphic” and the “fornoGraphic.” To one editor, it was the country’s “outstanding example of sleazy, vulgar journalism”; to another, it exhibited “sensational incoherence.” For a film studio in 1928 to loosely model its advertising on tabloid journalism is one thing; for it to offer a studied imitation of the paper castigated as the “most contemptuous of all scandal sheets” is another—especially when Hollywood had spent the last decade building elegant theatres and producing quality films in order to position itself as “respectable entertainment for all classes” (Ross 30). For the most part, Hollywood had achieved this status by 1928. Yet it still lay open to censorship threats and charges—especially from the mainstream press—of indulging in the same lewdness and violence for which civic groups denigrated the tabloids. Given that context, the idea that a studio would invite comparison between its product and the *Graphic* demands explanation.

Since the turn of the century, the movie industry had sought to elevate its public image, in large part by courting a positive relationship with mainstream journalism. The wide circulation of newspapers in the early decades of the twentieth century, Richard Koszarski says, “suggests that their coverage of film was of real significance in shaping the way their readers approached the phenomenon of motion pictures” (191). Good press for a film not only drew audiences to that picture; it also reflected well on the movie industry at large. And this was especially true once film reviews became a news staple during the 1910s. Of course, the flip side was that negative publicity could portray the cinema as a dangerous scourge. Indeed, through the late 1910s and early 1920s, the movie industry faced public censure, often conveyed through the press. For example, when studios followed Cecil B. DeMille’s naughty *Old Wives for New* (1918) with a slew of other suggestive titles—including *Can Wives Be Trusted?* (1919), *Blind Husbands* (1919), and *Blind Wives* (1920)—the result was uproar from some public quarters and a muckraking exposé in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on how the movie industry had paid off censors to get questionable material passed (205).

Criticism of the movie industry throughout these decades was not confined to the content of films. Movie stars’ private lives stirred indignation as well as interest. Mary Pickford’s 1920 Reno divorce and hasty remar-
riage, for instance, sparked print and public criticism. Then, in 1921, Fatty Arbuckle was charged with rape after a model attending one of his wild parties died. Shortly thereafter, director Desmond Taylor was murdered, and actors Wallace Reid and Olive Thomas died from drug overdoses. Altogether, these goings-on “drove Hollywood from the entertainment section of American papers to the front page” (Leff and Simmons 3).

Newspaper editorials calling for studio accountability only increased with the advent of sound. By 1929, over half of the theatres in the United States had been wired for the talkies and, as Richard Maltby puts it, “Hollywood brought Broadway to Main Street” (“Production” 45). And what was this chattering stimulus doing to Main Street’s young audiences? Public watchdogs feared it was contributing to bad behavior. Children and Movies, compiled by sociologist Alice Miller Mitchell in 1929, was the first study to seek a statistical correlation between movie-going and criminal activity. Mitchell’s news was not heartening: according to her survey, 27.7% of Chicago’s juvenile delinquents responded that they went to the pictures five to seven times a week, while only 0.4% of Boy Scouts went that often (Koszarski 27). If that didn’t raise parents’ hackles, surely some of her informants’ remarks did. One reformatory inmate, for example, reported that he committed hold-ups because he “had to have money for the movies” (qtd. in Koszarski 26).1

It is against this fraught backdrop that we find heralds such as the one for Gang War, as well as a wide variety of other advertising materials, all gesturing toward hot news. In fact, for at least a ten-year period between the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, Hollywood alluded openly to the tabloids in its advertising. By the period of classical film noir in the early 1940s, these allusions had mostly disappeared. Yet for a decade, tabloid journalism appears to have been the dominant influence on print advertising for crime movies of all types. By associating its own products with the tabloids, wasn’t the movie industry in effect “slumming” while still trying to extricate itself from the “ghetto” of its origins? And in patterning advertising on mainstream journalism’s favorite scapegoat, weren’t studios begging to be alienated from the respectable press whose attention they sought? This fraternizing with the tabloids seems a risky move, to say the least.

One way of contextualizing this situation is to note that, in imitating the tabloids, Hollywood was following widespread advertising trends. As Roland Marchand has shown, businesses in the 1920s understood the popularity of newspapers like the Daily News and identified what they called a “tabloid mind” that responded to personalized, confessional advertising. Moreover, businesses and public relations firms “began to
surmise [that perhaps] the ‘tabloid mind’ defined a much wider segment of the consumer audience than even the circulations of True Story and the tabloid newspapers revealed” (Marchand 56). Ad agencies began teaching their employees how to write in a sensational way, educating them, as one executive put it, on “The Mental and Emotional Life of a Tabloid Reader.” As a result, advertisements for even innocuous products took on a confessional tone, with captions presumably emanating from a housewife asking “Should I Tell Him?” about her use of a new laundry powder or breakfast cereal. Like these other businesses, the movie industry dosed its products with sensationalism to appeal to the presumed tastes and desires of an “average” tabloid reader.

But Hollywood studios wanted to do more than attract the generalized “tabloid mind” that Marchand identifies. They also wanted to depict crime films as offering elevated versions of the narrative thrills that were boosting tabloids to unprecedented circulation heights. To explore this narrative mobility, we divide our chapter into two sections. The first looks at mock-tabloid heralds that, in overtly copying the look and language of hot news, mobilized moviegoers to imaginatively assume the role of tabloid readers. The second section examines advertising press books—the bound pamphlets containing advertising materials such as heralds, posters, and lobby cards—that were distributed to theatre managers for each film. Here we find that Hollywood employed smaller doses of tabloid language and rhetoric. When mobilized by theatre managers into different promotional contexts, the doses were designed to activate a tabloid-like reading experience.

Advertising offers the ideal site from which to begin this book, for it makes clear that in this period the movie industry worked hard to emphasize connections between its crime films and the issues churned out by the tabloids. As the movie industry’s more “lowbrow” commercial wing, advertising directly acknowledges a kinship with hot headlines that the studios were often reluctant to express elsewhere. At the same time, however, heralds and press books reveal how studios tamed and conventionalized the radical elements of tabloidism, thereby presenting their films as more reputable variants of a truly sensational medium.

Mock-Tabloid Herald

Returning to the Gang War herald, we are impressed by how cleverly it captures the look and tone of the Graphic. It reproduces, for example, the Graphic’s banner headline, front-page layout, and small-box insert identi-
FIGURE 1.2
Front page of the New York Evening Graphic, July 27, 1931. (Courtesy Ellis Library, University of Missouri.)

DOPE ON STARR’S LOVE TRIP
NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC
BOAT BLAST BURNS BEAUTIES

Joyriders Plunge to Death in Wild Jaunt

FIGURE 1.3
Front page of the New York Evening Graphic, October 2, 1931. (Courtesy Ellis Library, University of Missouri.)

RUM-CRAZY RIPPER CARVES DRUNKEN WOMAN TO DEATH

Health World’s Biggest Need, Macfadden Says
fying the edition (see figures 1.2 and 1.3). It also spotlights the “compositograph” technique that the Graphic notoriously pioneered, in which the faces of actual news figures were pasted onto the posed and photographed bodies of models. But beyond simply creating a visual parallel, each page of the throwaway captures the zany tone quite specific to the Graphic. Audiences used to the real paper’s “Affairs of the Heart” column, for example, would have noted how the throwaway’s “letters” to Dixie Blue satirize the amorous dilemmas of actual readers. “Dear Miss Blue,” one letter begins, “I am a young girl, 19, and keep company with a man two years my senior. . . . He is really a refined young gentleman, only he carries a sawed off shotgun which he jokingly likes to aim at me.” Similarly, many would have recognized the mock tabloid’s notice of an “Indignation Meeting,” at which citizens were invited to gripe about crime, as a direct commentary on the Graphic’s theatrical crusades against racketeering.

To understand why a studio would so closely imitate a specific tabloid, we might consider heralds as a type of paratext. Gérard Genette coined this term to describe the varied materials around a text, emanating from the author or publisher, that serve as “thresholds” to it. Prefaces, titles, and introductions are all paratexts; other materials at some physical distance from the text, such as author interviews, may also be considered paratexts. Each of these elements is “dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its raison d’être. This something is the text” (12). If we take the (admitted) liberty of transposing Genette’s literary concept onto film and the promotional materials around it, we may find his methodology helpful. Key to Genette’s practice is asking what function each paratext serves in relation to the text. Posing this question of crime film heralds and press books, we see that they allowed the studios to project an alternative tabloid identity for each film. For Gang War in particular, the studio crafted a paratext offering its movie as another version of the newspaper that most exuberantly gabbed about crime.

Gang War’s herald suggests that, despite the disdain it drew from highbrow commentators, the Graphic was not only wildly popular but also culturally potent. Writing about it in 1927, Silas Bent grudgingly admits that “the Graphic’s despised sensationalism forced competing papers to adopt a louder tone” (Ballyhoo 205). As Bent’s remark makes clear, though critics have generally dismissed the Graphic as an outrageous blip in the history of journalism, it exerted a shaping stimulus on the rest of American media and culture at large. A movie studio likening its product to the Graphic was making a pronounced claim that the film, too, had a splashy, fast-paced, narrative style.
In large part, the Graphic’s influence can be attributed to its publisher, Bernarr Macfadden, one of the oddest characters in New York history. Variously termed a “buffoon,” “an abomination,” and a “disgrace to all publishers,” Macfadden has been the target of scathing criticism by many historians. A zanier version of William Randolph Hearst, Macfadden was “a one-man media empire, fusing interests in magazines, movies, radio, and all manner of popular culture” (Wallace 23). In 1899, at a time when health information was not readily published, he inaugurated the successful magazine Physical Culture. Its popularity led within the next few years to a slew of companion publications, including Beauty and Health and Physical Culture for Boys and Girls. Urging readers—women as well as men—to exercise vigorously, abstain from tobacco, eat natural foods, and regard sex as a healthy part of life, Macfadden was far ahead of his time. Yet because his habits also included walking into the city barefoot and swimming at Coney Island in winter, his regimen retained a cultish aura. And his strategy of spicing up his magazines with real photos of nearly nude men and women doubtless improved the circulation of many readers.

Macfadden expanded his media interests in 1919 by founding another monthly magazine, one that, as Robert Ernst notes, “would revolutionize popular periodicals” (75). Called True Story and pitched toward women, it published confessional nonfiction in which ordinary readers were invited to “tell their stories in their own clear and simple way, recounting events of young love, betrayal, good or bad fortune, marriage, motherhood and family, and countless challenges to innocence” (Ernst 78). By the end of World War I, True Story had nearly 300,000 readers. Its success led to imitations from competing publishers. Macfadden’s response was to generate his own knock-offs for varied audiences, including True Romance, True Experiences, True Detective Mysteries, and Master Detective. Subsequently, he began two fan magazines, Movie Weekly and Movie Mirror. His biggest coup was acquiring Liberty, a weekly periodical that first published Cain’s fiction. By 1935, Macfadden’s magazine empire had a circulation surpassing the total of all other magazine publishing giants combined.

Macfadden brought all his interests to the Graphic, interweaving them with reportage of gangland crime and pictures of gruesome accidents, thereby making his newspaper as different from the mainstream dailies as possible. On the Graphic’s first day of publication, a reader turning to the second page would have seen an editorial from Macfadden admonishing her to take charge of her destiny: “Don’t be a dead one! Gird up your loins . . . and go after what you seek in life!” To help her achieve that goal, the Graphic’s pages were flooded with articles on physical improvement.
To satisfy her love of the grotesque, photos of accidents and crime scenes were splashed across the front page. To keep her amused, the newspaper carried an abundance of cartoons and other humorous items. And to slake her desire for romance, two or three confessional stories appeared in every issue.

The Graphic embodied the smorgasbord of narrative entertainments typical of the tabloids in general, yet it mixed story types and tones to an even wilder degree. A case in point: one typical Graphic article from June 1929, “Criminals Are Made by the Food That They Eat as Children,” combined Macfadden’s fascination with gangsterism as a social problem with his crusade to introduce whole grains into the nation’s diet. Meanwhile, the regular feature “Antics of Arabella” insouciantly blurred exercise with news. Depicted in photographic sequence, “Arabella”—a lithe young woman in a body stocking—did calisthenics while her “talk” about current events hung in dialogue balloons above her head. As these examples suggest, the Graphic represented in extreme form precisely the kind of multifarious, democratic entertainment Hollywood was claiming for its own products.

As part of this populist appeal, the Graphic solicited active participation from its readers. Macfadden announced frequently that he would pay a dollar for published contributions to the newspaper’s personal columns, including “Why I Blushed,” “How I Won My Husband,” and “The Fat Women’s Club.” Friendless people were invited to describe their loves and hopes in the “Lonely Hearts” department. Readers were thereby “enlisted in the production of news,” as Aurora Wallace describes, creating a sense that New Yorkers were not just the subjects of the newspaper but its authors. These audience participation devices illustrate Kevin Glynn’s important observation that the pleasure of reading a tabloid like the Graphic was not simply getting information. Rather, as with any popular text, readers gained satisfaction from knowing they were part of a communal in-group. By reading and then discussing its contents, the Graphic’s patrons enjoyed both self-expression and “the experience of solidarity with others,” as John Fiske puts it (Understanding 134).

Riotous and titillating as it was, the Graphic also assumed a decidedly moralistic stance at times. Punctuating its pages with Bible quotations, it continually reminded readers that the newspaper’s more salacious contents were to be enjoyed from a distance. According to Joseph Valente, all tabloids possess this “double directedness”—on the one hand channeling readers toward the lewd, violent, and vulgar, while on the other hand reinforcing that what readers are enjoying is taboo (14). Like the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which through its wild performativity defines
the border of what is acceptably transgressive, the *Graphic* and its rivals allowed audiences to read about sensational events while maintaining that the “kiss-and-kill sheiks” and “two-gun sallys” of tabloidia were outside the range of acceptable behavior.

Given the tabloids’ associations with social transgression and violence, it’s not surprising that Hollywood would model crime film advertising on them. In fact, it’s likely that studio executives believed potential moviegoers would be ready to regard crime films as extensions of the tabloids’ narrative fare. These papers were famed for bringing crimes of passion and racketeering to the public as entertainment. A mock-tabloid herald therefore served to connect the real tabloids’ speedy conversion of gats and gangsters to edge-of-the-seat cinematic thrills.

Given how little information exists regarding the creation of these heralds, we can only speculate that ad agents got the idea from their own proximity to hot-news production. The advertising departments of most studios were located in Manhattan, just a short cab hop from the nation’s leading tabloids. On their way to work each day, ad agents would have passed newsstands hustling these papers. Riding on subways packed with commuters reading the *News* and the *Mirror*, overhearing people in elevators and at lunch counters discussing the *Graphic*’s latest publicity gimmick, perhaps picking up their own copies before sitting down to work, these agents could not have missed the fact that the tabloids were running a roaring business selling crime.

And this urban crowd was precisely the audience the movie industry wanted for pictures like *Gang War*. According to Richard Maltby, it was in the 1920s when, under the direction of their sales departments, the major studios began organizing their production around different taste publics, divided according to such binary distinctions as “class” or “mass” and “hicks” or “flappers.” We speculate that crime film advertising began referencing the tabloids so heavily because studio executives believed the movies would attract their largest audiences in urban areas, the same locale where these papers held their greatest circulation (Maltby 30).

Numbering among those patrons was our stenographer, whose gender no doubt also affected the studios’ decision to imitate the tabloids in advertising. Melvyn Stokes remarks that Hollywood in the 1920s and early 1930s pitched its ads toward “Woolworth sirens” and those employed in the “stenographer trade,” since polls taken by various sources, including the *New York Times*, suggested that women constituted the majority of moviegoers (35). As Stokes puts it, “Whether women really formed a considerable majority of the cinema audience of the 20s and 30s . . . may actually be of less importance than the fact that Hollywood itself assumed
that, both through their own attendance and their ability to influence men . . . [women] were its primary market” (44). And this presumed female audience was also depicted as composed of tabloid readers eager for sensational stories. Lea Jacobs cites a Variety article from 1931 announcing that “Women love dirt. Nothing shocks ’em. They want to know about bad women. The badder the better.” The article goes on to state that the “women who make up the bulk of the picture audiences are also the majority readers of the tabloids. . . . It is to cater to them that all the hot stuff of the present day is turned out” (23). Though scholars note that it is uncertain whether women really comprised a statistical majority for either media, and whether and to what degree this presumed tabloid-celluloid overlap truly existed, studios operated on these assumptions.4

We surmise, then, that the mock-tabloid herald was calculated to draw more women to crime movies, the one genre that surveys reported was preferred by men. The New York tabloids provided an invaluable model in this arena, since they were making crime stories of all kinds attractive to female readers. Indeed, this appeal to “everyday women” was part of their stated mission. Hearst claimed that he founded the Daily Mirror for the “average New York reader—you know, the secretary and stenographer” (qtd. in Stevens 111). Macfadden’s Graphic addressed much of its material to women. And the Daily News, at least in its early years, pitched heavily to women readers.5 In fact, the News in the early 1920s was nicknamed “The Stenographer’s Gazette” due to the large number of help-wanted ads for women it carried alongside its tales of transgression (McGivena 43). If the tabloids could generate such interest in crime among “stenos,” then surely movie advertising could learn from them.

Hollywood advertising no doubt also likened its product to the tabloids because of these papers’ populist appeal. Invoking them allowed Hollywood to promote movie-going as a social, egalitarian experience. By the mid-1920s, even as its sales departments were busily identifying different taste publics, the movie industry had adopted rhetoric claiming to offer entertainment that cut across class, gender, and even regional lines. Movie theatres were billed as places where, as the owner of the Roxy Theatre said on its opening in 1926, a “truck driver and his wife” could “feel like a king” (Ashby 188). The creators of the Gang War herald may well have turned to the tabloids for inspiration because of how well these papers built imagined reader communities. While all newspapers seek to form such patron identification, the tabloids were distinguished by the animated, interactive ways they did so. A mock-tabloid herald suggested that movie audiences could join a similar type of exuberant in-group.
For the scholar interested in narrative mobility, however, the most compelling way to understand the mock-tabloid herald is to consider its function in engaging moviegoers across the taste spectrum. Though as we noted, statistics about actual movie audiences in these years are ambiguous, it appears that the studios assumed an “authorial audience” (the audience that an “author” imagines will view his product) composed of people familiar with the tabloid phenomenon. We believe that the mock-tabloid herald worked because it invited those who enjoyed the tabloids as well as those who didn’t into the “narrative audience” role of hot-news readers. Peter Rabinowitz explains that the “narrative audience” is “a role the text forces the reader to take on” in relation to its fiction, an imaginative persona the reader is willing to assume for the pleasure of engaging in the fiction (Before 95). Although Rabinowitz conceptualizes this term in relation to fictional works, we argue that some advertisements can be described as inviting a narrative audience, especially if they overtly reference a popular fictional form. Ads in the first decades of the twentieth century were learning to exploit the power of fiction, as Marchand details. And advertisers were increasingly conscious of targeting a specific audience and pitching a “product narrative,” if we may call it that, to that group. Part of this process was imagining what the consumer wanted before the consumer herself was aware of the desire, and inviting the potential buyer into an imaginary world (the happy home; the exotic locale) to occupy a persona (the savvy homemaker; the dashing traveler) implied by ownership of the product. This process was no different when advertising a movie, even if it were an experience rather than material goods being marketed. And though the mock tabloid was intended to sell tickets, it functioned by addressing a fiction to an audience familiar with tabloid narrative tropes.

If the average member of the studios’ authorial audience was a shopgirl or a stenographer, then the tabloid herald makes perfect sense for crime films. Playing along with the fiction that the herald was a “real” tabloid, this steno would take on the narrative audience role of hot-news reader. She would pick up the snappy-looking pages, glance at the headlines, skim the articles, study the photos and gossipy tidbits about stars revealed in the columns, and chat with those seated nearby about whether the advertised movie would be as “smashing,” “shocking,” or “stunning” as promised.

Given the tabloids’ popularity, it is not surprising that the studios imagined an audience composed in part of people who read the papers as gospel. And no doubt some members of the actual audience met this
expectation. In rhetorical terms, these patrons would be parallel to what Rabinowitz calls the “ideal narrative reader.” If, as he posits, every fictional text implies a narrator (in the case of *Gang War*, the imaginary publisher of a paper called the *Daily Record*), then the ideal narrative audience is the one “for which the narrator wishes he were writing . . . [one that] accepts his judgments, sympathizes with his plight, laughs at his jokes even when they are bad” ("Truth" 134). Moviegoers whose actual practices placed them close to such an ideal narrative audience might read the *Daily Record* herald and make the correlation: tabloids cover crime in a punchy way; *Gang War* is like a tabloid; therefore this movie will present an exciting crime story.

But did the studios really assume an authorial audience made up only of tabloid-lovers? Studio executives knew that, even if the majority of moviegoers fell into this demographic, not all would. And those who did not fancy the tabloids might well have a condescending view of them after reading the denunciations raging in the middlebrow magazines. How would a mock-tabloid herald serve the movie with these viewers? A rhetorical analysis suggests that the herald may have been effective in this case because it pushed these moviegoers to imagine the ideal narrative audience, thereby evoking a sense of irony vis-à-vis the real tabloids and their readers. Invited by the herald to assume the narrative audience role of hot-news lovers, they might enter the fiction and study the zippy headlines and vivid graphics. At the same time, understanding that the herald’s immoderation exaggerated the actual excess of papers like the *Graphic*, they might experience a pleasurable gap between themselves and readers who regarded hot headlines as true. The herald probably provoked a chuckle from them at the expense of tabloid audiences. Borrowing from James Phelan’s further distinctions about audience, we can say that, for some potential viewers, the tabloid heralds likely worked by creating a complex (if condensed) fiction that positioned them as both “believers” and “observers” in relation to the fiction (145). In turn, these patrons might have responded positively to the herald’s implication: the advertised movie was influenced by the tabloids’ thrill-power, yet was wise enough to wink at their claims toward veracity.

The number of archival copies suggests that mock-tabloid heralds were indeed successful. Over this period, studios created them for at least thirty crime movies, including *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, *Scarface*, *G-Men* (1935), and *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), as well as lesser-known offerings such as *Silent Witness* (1932) and *Gangster’s Boy* (1938). Given their number, it seems likely that these heralds were among the advertising items moviegoers saw regularly. In fact, theatre managers were
encouraged to purchase mock tabloids by the thousand, with unit prices decreasing the more the manager ordered. Those who purchased more than 15,000 copies of the *Scarface* herald, for instance, could get them at just $3.60 per thousand. This enormous volume suggests that the studios worked hard to place them into moviegoers’ hands.

Studios specializing in both feature films and shorter, more economical B-films employed the mock tabloid. On the fancier end of the spectrum were four-page heralds, such as the ones for *Gang War* and *Scarface.* Yet
even Poverty Row studios like Monogram were able to offer fairly sophisticated mock tabloids. For *Gangster’s Boy*, a melodrama about a young athlete falsely accused of murder, the studio created a four-page herald that borrowed both its name and its centerfold photo layout from the *Daily News*, leaving the last page blank for exhibitor information. That even less affluent studios created elaborate mock tabloids suggests how widespread the device was.

More common were one-page heralds featuring the name of the theatre printed in its headline as part of the “news.” Before Warner Bros. released its FBI-drama *G-Men* at the Strand in New York, for instance, it created a “4-star” edition of the “United States Eagle,” embedding the theatre’s name in a banner at the bottom of the page (see figure 1.4). For easy use by theatres across the country, the herald might be more generalized. Alluding to the *Daily News*’ self-description as “New York’s Picture Newspaper,” Warner Bros. created a “Picture News Flash” template in the 1930s. Standardization meant that the studio could simply plug facts about each new picture into a ready-made tabloid format, thereby associating the studio with jazz journalism through repetition. Heralds for *San Quentin* (1937) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1939) are just two that made use of the template (see figure 1.5).

At this point it is crucial to make clear that, even when a studio copied the look and style of a tabloid as outré as the *Graphic*, the resulting herald is never as extreme. In fact, our findings suggest that, even as the studios mobilized tabloid narrative elements, they tamed them. The result, oxymoronic as it seems, is a kind of restrained sensationalism. Of course, this makes perfect sense in context: mobilizing and taming tabloid tropes suited the film industry’s larger efforts to elevate its image by standardizing its publicity mechanisms. Small-town theatre managers in this decade were encouraged by the studios to create their own advertising for films showing at their theatres. The problem, as studio correspondence indicates, was that managers sometimes went overboard in their gimmickry, presenting films in a risqué manner that offended local audiences and generated bad press (Miller 171). Exploiting the excitement of the tabloids while controlling the actual shock potential of their content, the mock-tabloid herald was a stroke of publicity genius. Fiske remarks that while certain popular forms “have derived their innovative energies from culturally and socially disreputable sources . . . they have also operated under systems of convention and regulation that keep contained the subversive potential of their origins” (41). As if illustrating Fiske’s point, the *Gang War* herald—unlike the *Graphic*—contains no photos of
real crime scenes, no nudity, and no mention of “orgies” or “wild parties.” Its “love seance” is spiritual enough to leave readers wondering whether any actual anatomy was involved. It invites comparison to the country’s loudest tabloid without quite reproducing its lurid aspects.

If viewed alone, the mock-tabloid herald might appear a clever but relatively anomalous advertising device. When we turn to the press books, however, we find a dizzying barrage of materials that mobilize tabloid language and rhetoric in the service of crime movies.
Press Books

Their very name evoking Hollywood’s dependence on journalism, press books constitute the richest body of paratext in film studies. Thousands of them, dating from 1915 to the present, fill the archives of cinema research centers. Each book offers a range of materials for advertising a given film. Since theatre managers were largely responsible for publicizing movies to their own communities, they needed facts about each picture with enough time to get the word out. Yet under the era’s block booking system, managers often knew little about the films they had agreed to rent. Press books filled this gap. Originating in the 1910s, the press book was by the late 1920s the standard publicity device, distributed by every studio, regardless of size, for every movie.

Yet the single book-length study of press books addresses only Warner Bros. movies during a brief period, and it remains unpublished. Meanwhile, the volume of press books daunts; like the tabloid, this is a medium characterized by dizzying excess. Excess and, paradoxically, invisibility: since the press book was made for theatre managers to extract material from, moviegoers would rarely have seen the whole books that we find in the archives. And because press books have not achieved the retro popularity of old movie posters or fan magazines, today’s readers are unlikely to have any familiarity with them. Yet press books are crucial to our understanding of the relationship between tabloid and celluloid in this period. They demonstrate that studios mobilized an alternate identity for crime films even through small doses of tabloid language and rhetoric.

Usually measuring a handy 12" by 17"—just an inch larger than a tabloid newspaper—press books packed information and photographs about each film into four sections. An opening “Publicity” segment featured pages of canned articles and reviews, actor biographies, and anecdotes from studio publicists on the West Coast. Designed to be clipped and sent to local newspapers, these publicity treatments visually aped journalism: laid out in columns measured to newspaper proportions, they opened with a “headline” and often included a film still positioned to mimic a news photo (see figure 1.6). Each press book also included an “Advertising” section of variously sized “mats” that managers could purchase from the studio to place in the press. The ad mats combined robust graphics with headline-like taglines. Another section, “Exploitations,” listed ideas for publicity stunts and audience participation gimmicks through which managers could drum up attendance. Finally, a fourth section offered “Acces-
sories” such as lobby cards, posters, publicity stills, and heralds that managers could rent or purchase. The format of the press book evolved from 1915 through the 1920s. By the 1930s, Mark Miller states, individual press books varied from ten to as many as fifty pages, but the four-part structure was unified across the different studios and used for all film genres (5).
Press books were made to be mobilized. As one guide to Paramount’s books explains, material was “quickly accessible” for extraction and insertion into other settings. The books featured single-sided pages (so that materials could be clipped out), along with suggested publicity stunts adaptable to varied locations. Manipulating this carnivalesque flurry was the theatre manager, whose job demanded that he act as a “Great Mobilizer.” If, as Douglas Gomery indicates, an average theatre in the 1930s booked roughly one hundred films a year, then we must picture the manager reading through a couple of press books every week (68). As the only person who would see the hyped-up assemblage in its entirety, his ability to sell tickets depended on his skill at channeling promotional materials so that they would make the biggest impact in his community.

As this description suggests, the press books were filled with bloated claims, aggressive phrasing, enlarged visuals, and an overall spirit of hyperbole. In this, they and their individual components such as the herald exemplify Hollywood advertising practices. A glance at this advertising history will help us contextualize press books as material phenomena. Jane Gaines has written about press books as part of her larger focus on Hollywood’s promotional flamboyance during the early twentieth century. She notes that, although advertising in general had by then developed more restraint than in the previous century, movie publicity still employed levels of exaggeration that harked back to earlier days. During the 1910s and 1920s, in fact, advertising for movies was flashier than for other products, since its goal was not to sell a tangible product but to entice audiences into an experience. Sandwich-board men paraded the streets barking enticements to pedestrians; theatre lobbies were staged to look like movie sets; and, for a film like *Tarzan* (1918), audiences might have spotted an elephant lumbering through town caparisoned in a giant movie poster. Gaines traces such carnivalesque spectacles to nineteenth-century traditions of theatrical showmanship, vividly exemplified by P. T. Barnum.

Although Gaines’s argument that the sensationalism of Hollywood advertising had been muted by the late 1930s is mostly true, the ballyhoo she describes continued to shape the reception of many films produced during this decade. Unfortunately, while their influence on movie reception must have been powerful, such exhibition contexts have disappeared from our cultural memory. As Gaines points out, “the transience of the promotional apparatus, the disassociation of the theater from commerce, and finally later critical interest in the film ‘itself’ over its reception context have contributed to the vision of early motion pictures as unencumbered by commerce” (39). These factors have erased exhibition history, just as they have hidden Hollywood’s long association with the tabloids.
But ample evidence suggests that this carnivalesque dimension to Hollywood advertising was in operation all through the 1930s, and that it was designed to mobilize a popular audience that would transcend presumed taste divisions between classes. We use the word “carnivalesque” deliberately, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous notion of carnival, which refers to the “undisciplined” pleasures stereotypically associated with the lower classes. Though focused on early modern Europe, Bakhtin’s observations have been widely applied to many forms of popular culture from cockfighting to television game shows; meanwhile, Fiske, Martin Conboy, and Feona Attwood have considered the carnivalesque dimension of contemporary tabloids. As Bakhtin writes, carnival can be many things at once: festive pleasure, the mocking of those in authority, bodily enjoyment, the inversion of rules that govern everyday life, the parody of official discourse. As such, the carnivalesque is fluid enough to attract audiences across class strata, a point Bakhtin and others stress repeatedly.

Published in 1990, Gaines’s article was among the first to recover the lost history of film publicity and reception. Since then, numerous scholars have revealed the commercialized, untamed, and even oppositional nature of movie-going in America through the Second World War. Nonetheless, much remains to be considered, including the question of how press books, by mobilizing an alternate tabloid identity for crime films, contributed to the widespread perception of the genre as vulgar entertainment. With their constant flashing of guns, frenetic energy, and noisiness once sound was introduced, gangster films were especially suited to the kinds of showmanship Gaines describes. And their press books prove it: even those created during the Depression, when the era’s “sobriety” supposedly tamed advertising, still draw heavily on inflated lasciviousness and exaggerated violence.

Indeed, much of the material in these press books prompts us to ask whether critics charging gangster movies with “indecency” may have been responding more to what John Ellis calls their “narrative image,” generated by studio publicity, than to the film itself. Maltby argues that this was the case, observing that the industry’s “most vociferous critics judged the movies on their advertising far more frequently than on their content” (“Production” 50). And that advertising played up tabloid-like sensationalism. As a case in point, press book ads for MGM’s rather flaccid 1931 gangster picture Dance Fools Dance feature titillating illustrations of Joan Crawford in skimpy lingerie. Raising the film’s most risqué moment as a representative image, the ads imply that Dance Fools Dance is far racier than it actually is.

We must also wonder whether certain movies that now strike us as
relentlessly bleak were viewed more lightly by their original audiences because of the ballyhoo surrounding them. For example, a press book plug for the grim *Little Caesar* admonishes managers to “print out plenty of quizzes on underworld slang” for patrons. Meanwhile, an exploitation tip for *Each Dawn I Die* (1939), a hard-edged Warner Bros. picture about a reporter wrongly imprisoned for murder, recommends that ushers dress up as convicts. The whole atmosphere in the theatre for any of these films might well have been antic anticipation as raffles or costume contests bracketed the screening. In going to see *Gang War*, a tragic story about a mobster who dies to save the woman he loves, our stenographer may well have been shown to her seat by a man dandied up as a racketeer—that is, before she herself won a prize for being dolled up like a moll. Janet Staiger argues that “context is more significant than textual features in explaining interpretative events,” and even if we quibble with her prioritizing, we must acknowledge that press books likely mobilized interpretations different from those that we, watching the same films in our more sedate spaces, now posit (*Perverse* 30).

The tabloids provided a superb model of ballyhoo for crime films. Indeed, the word “ballyhoo” itself, popularized in the 1920s to describe cultural forms characterized by noisy excess, was regularly used to describe both publicity campaigns and tabloid news. Certainly, no media in the 1920s functioned more obviously than the tabloids as a site of exaggerated narrative freedom. By mobilizing their look and style, press books implied a similar freedom for movie audiences.

But liberation from what? Whereas tabloid newspapers promised to free audiences from the authority of mainstream journalism, we might see the function of press books as that of offering release from the tyranny of the movies themselves. That is, while individual films presumed a movie-going experience shaped by the narrative dictates of Classical Hollywood filmmaking, by the moral injunctions of the Production Code, and by other social and economic constraints, press book components invited a far more transgressive cinematic experience. As scholars such as Staiger, Altman, and Miller also point out, press book materials encouraged audiences to activate their own meanings for any movie by presenting them with a dizzying array of alternate readings. Variant plot lines would be presented side by side; a single film would be billed as embodying characteristics of multiple genres; numerous snippets of information about the actors would direct attention away from the movie itself into the extra-cinematic realm. Press book materials, in fact, did not so much provide information about a film’s actual content as mobilize a frantic overlapping of all its possible narrative permutations.
Leafling through crime film press books today, we are struck by how often they invite viewers to make associations between the film and the tabloids simply by using language that suggests a tabloid “sender.” As Genette explains, the “sender” of a paratextual message “(like the sender of all other messages) is not necessarily its de facto producer, whose identity is not very important to us” (8). The producer of these press book paratexts was, obviously, a studio. Yet a potential moviegoer, encountering in her local paper one of the ads, would likely be grabbed by the dose of sensational language whose “illocutionary force,” to use Genette’s term, derived from its seeming to “come from” tabloid reportage. Ads for _The Public Enemy_ or _The Secret Six_ (1931), placed in a straight paper, created the jarring sense that the sedate page was being commandeered by the hot news. And this tabloid language erupted in the host paper to show that the advertised film was possessed of the same vigorous essence.

Perhaps the most obvious examples are ad taglines that flaunt crime movies as direct cinematic analogues to tabloid reportage. _Gang War_ is touted as “a story torn from last night’s paper on the talking screen.” As this tagline indicates, movies were being advertised for their similarity to hot news at least two years before Warner Bros. famously announced its “headline news” policy in 1930. And though Warner Bros. was loudest in its claim to pull scripts from the press, other studios consistently employed the same trope, equating movies with tabloid reportage. _Making the Headlines_ (1938) uncovers how “murder writes the headlines”; _Silent Witness_ offers “the strangest love crime that ever burned the headlines”; and _Boys Reformatory_ (1939) features “Faces You See in the Headlines!” Meanwhile, _Missing Girls_, a 1936 offering on white slavery from Chesterfield Motion Pictures, takes this rhetoric to the full, promising to “scoop the film world” and “reveal for the first time the inside story” of a racket that is “to-morrow’s news! To-day’s facts!” To some degree, calling a movie a “story” is a common device that illustrates classical cinema’s foregrounding of narrative as the prime reason for film viewing. But the accent on “headlines,” alongside the insistence on “scoops” and “exposés”—terms expressly associated with the tabloids—reinforces how these promotional materials are made to sound as if they are emanating right from tabloid reportage.

In a related vein, press book materials often insist on the melodramatic veracity of their narratives, a trope familiar to tabloid readers. Publicity for _I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang_ (1932) pledges that the book from which it was adapted is “not a scenario writer’s dream, but the true, unshackled facts,” the pun heightening the drama in which “every anguished, blood-stained word is True!” In this and many similar ads, “facts” and “truth”
are equated with titillation, secrecy, and disclosure, rather than with duller concepts like judgment or analysis that dominate the straight news.

Press book materials also repeatedly borrow a staple of tabloid rhetoric that we call the “guarantee of immediate insider revelation.” When it appears in the tabloids, the guarantee lures readers to buy multiple editions by promising that hidden details of a current drama will be presented within a specific time frame. Readers were consequently exhorted to “see the next edition,” “read all about it tomorrow,” or “get the inside scoop tonight,” emphasizing how “fresh” and “exclusive” news should be for full effect. Crime ads often adopt this strategy for added suspense.

Elsewhere, press book ads deploy confessional language, a tabloid staple. One ad from Little Caesar shows Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. above a “personal” caption spoken by his character: “I was a gangster, but I fell in love with a beautiful girl. If I leave the gang Rico will put me on the spot. If I stay she will squeal. What shall I do?” Below the caption, a short passage promises us we’ll “[s]ee his strange story thrillingly unfolded in Little Caesar.” Using the newsprint imagery of “unfolded,” the caption emphasizes the private glimpse of a public figure, implying that movie audiences, just like tabloid readers, will get an immediate insider perspective on secret activity.

Even at the level of diction and syntax, press book materials read as if emanating from tabloid pages. As Martin Conboy explains, the tabloids utilize a style that should be understood not as a downgraded version of straight press talk, but rather as “a distinct linguistic compendium with its own, highly influential range of language use” (15). Most obviously, press books use highly emotive language, especially an extreme application of adjectives, verbs, and punctuation. Hyperbole, of course, is key to advertising and public relations in general. Yet when we look at these press books, we see how often their verbiage imitates the tabloids’ exaggerated lawlessness. The films are described as “hard-hitting,” “blazing,” “smashing,” “heart-pounding,” “scorching,” and “dynamite”; adjectives that also dominate tabloid pages because they are intended to produce an immediate visceral response.

As these snippets suggest, slang abounds in the press books. A prominent element in sensation reportage and the columns penned by figures like Walter Winchell, slang allowed the tabloids “to talk to a readership in its own, informal manner” (Conboy 23). Similarly, publicity for crime films, far more than for other genres, exploits informal language as a means of appealing to audiences. Slanginess was even one of the selling points for early gangster movies: the advertising for Gang War boasted that the picture would deliver “Gangster jargon” along with “Gunfire! Police sirens!
Machine guns in action! Bedlam! Bomb explosions!” And while the gangster genre is famous for making slang an integral part of the talking film, the tabloid condensation in many ads actually results in their “outslanging” the movies themselves. These ads deploy vernacular language on a grand scale: they abound in contractions; address characters (and occasionally audiences) as “girls,” “boys,” and “mugs”; and employ a litany of informal compound expressions from the tabloid pages, such as “red-hot,” “white-hot,” “man-bait,” “love-nest,” “love-crime,” and “thril-la-minute.”

The press books also employ flamboyant linguistic tropes that echo the alliteration, punning, and metaphor of hot headlines. Like slang, these headlines locate the tabloids within a terrain of linguistic irreverence that is inconceivable for more serious-minded newspapers. Press books copy this alliteration and punning to affect a similarly insouciant attitude. One ad for *Little Caesar*, for example, smacks audiences with the promise that its central character “Backs His Gaff with His Gat,” while the female gangster in First National’s *Blondie Johnson* (1933) is drolly described as “The Girl Who Set Hell’s Kitchen on Fire!” These tropes are taken to melodramatic extremes in taglines as frequently as they are in tabloid headlines: “When killers meet... the loser goes to the morgue... the winner goes to the chair,” one ad for *Each Dawn I Die* blares. As with hot headlines, these taglines succeed by leaving out most actual information while still creating a strong “scenario” in readers’ minds (Lindemann 54).

As well as slanginess and colorful turns of phrase, press books borrow the frantic transitivity stereotypical of tabloid language, with verbs applied in a rowdy way to indicate who does what to whom. Notorious for this hyperactive emphasis on action, the tabloids even present speech acts as a form of physical violence. Individuals “blast” one another; a complaint is a “slam”; to comment is to “expose.” This kind of transitivity, says Conboy, simplifies events by making individuals “figure prominently in verbal expressions either as victims or subjects” (35). It is not surprising, then, to find such transitivity used prominently in crime film publicity. An ad for *Road House* (1934), for example, promises that viewers will see its star “land [a] surprise k.o.” on his nemesis, while *Each Dawn I Die* prepares audiences to see James Cagney and George Raft “pack dynamite” that will “sock” viewers “right between the eyes!” This aggressive verbiage is certainly not confined to publicity from major studios. Ads for the low-budget *Trapped by G-Men* (1937) pledge that viewers will get the whole “bullet splattered story” of the feds “mopping up the last of the mobsters.”

These ads so successfully appeared to emanate from tabloid pages that, when they were placed in an actual tabloid, they were activated in a way that *amplified* their sensational qualities. This gave them a startling
resonance with the paper’s own content. In 1930, an average issue of the Graphic ran forty-five to fifty theatre and movie ads per issue, with four or five of them spreading across a quarter- or half-page. And unlike the straight papers, the tabloids were less likely to segregate movie news onto a single “entertainment” page. Instead, articles on Hollywood were often splayed through each issue. As a result, movie ads often read like sidebars or sections of a larger news story the paper was running.

In one dramatic example from the Daily Mirror in January 1931, for instance, we find advertisements for Little Caesar placed near a serial called “The Truth about Al Capone, ‘Potentate’ of Crime.” The language in both ad and story accentuates the power and angst of, as the serial puts it, this “modern Robin Hood’s rise to power.” In another instance, also from 1931, the Graphic ran a front-page headline about a local child slain in mob crossfire: “Tiny Victim of Butchers Goes to His Grave Today.” Page 5 of the same issue then features a full-page “Open Letter to District Attorney Crain and Police Commissioner Mulrooney.” The “letter” announces:

This is not a publicity stunt. It is not our idea to capitalize on one of the most unfortunate incidents that has happened to New York and America. But because we too are aroused and appalled by the wholesale slaughter of little children, WE ARE READY TO PLACE IN YOUR HANDS, AND ARE FORCING AHEAD THE SHOWING OF THE PICTURE, “THE STAR WITNESS,” WHICH, IN OUR ESTIMATION IS THE GREATEST INSTRUMENT FOR PUBLIC GOOD THAT HAS EVER BEEN DEVISER! . . . Months ago we foresaw this last terrible happening. Months ago we put our hearts and hands to the task of finding some means of coping with the dread forces of the Invisible Empire to which our Nation has apparently capitulated—And so we made THE STAR WITNESS—our answer—YOUR ANSWER—America’s answer—to its greatest menace.

Signed by “The Management, Winter Garden Theatre,” the “letter” illustrates how advertising could be activated, via the heading, to tie in with the host paper’s reportage of current events.

If the mobility we have traced throughout this chapter emphasizes Hollywood’s imitation of tabloid narrative style to market its own products, then the placements we have just looked at suggest that this exchange was not one-directional. The tabloids were not simply passive “style donors” and “hosts” for the resultant movie publicity. Although a theatre manager selected the ads to send to the Mirror and the Graphic, it was the layout editor at each paper who positioned the material in relation to the stories
filling the pages. At least in these cases, it seems the tabloids were intentionally laid out to encourage readers to see movie publicity as an extension of the papers’ own narratives.

**Sensational Schlock: Later Mock-Tabloids**

By the 1940s, many of the tabloid elements we’ve seen were toned down or eliminated in crime film press books. These later books contain far less visual clutter, far less hyperbole, and far fewer references to specific newspapers. And while earlier press books often used tabloid rhetoric to
exaggerate the naughty “sins” of the films they promote, later press books do just the opposite. Publicity photos for *Double Indemnity* (1944), for example, all downplay the sex appeal of Barbara Stanwyck and accentuate Fred MacMurray’s “wholesomeness”; one photo even features the two of them huddled together with Edward G. Robinson, all of them flashing toothy grins, as if they were advertising a musical rather than Hollywood’s grittiest genre. These more subdued products can be explained in part by tighter restrictions on Hollywood’s advertising, but they also point to the fact that by the 1940s, tabloids no longer occupied center stage in the cultural imagination.

Curiously, it seems that mock-tabloid heralds were created for films well into the 1970s, though they seem less common and their associations clearly change after the mid-1930s. Noticeably, they no longer have a specific connection with crime movies. Instead, studios created exaggerated mock tabloids for B-films like *Invasion, USA* (1952), *The Psychopath* (1966), or *Boxcar Bertha* (1972). Elsewhere, heralds were created as comically anachronistic gags, as in the mock tabloids for *Julius Caesar* (1953) and *One Million Years BC* (1966) (see figure 1.7). None of these later examples imitate a particular newspaper, as we saw with *Gang War*. And rather than asking moviegoers to lightheartedly assume the role of hot-news readers, the heralds for these later movies push audiences to guffaw at the tabloids’ inanities, to see them as cheap entertainment, and to view them as literally anachronistic rather than sensationally provocative.

This anachronistic slant can be traced to the tail end of the 1930s. Press book materials for Warners Bros.’ nostalgic gangster film *The Roaring Twenties*, for example, draw on tabloid features such as slang and hyperbole. Yet they do so to distance and sentimentalize the period when jazz journalism was the rage. “The heyday of the hotch! The shock-cramped days G-men took ten whole years to lick,” as one of the film’s taglines puts it, were, of course, also the glory days of the *Daily News*, the *Graphic*, and the *Mirror*. Making the decade sound as if it were one hundred rather than just ten years earlier, the press book flattens the era into clichés. The authorial audience for this film no longer seems to be hot-news-loving shopgirls and stenographers. Instead, this press book implies an audience that will regard the tabloids as relics of a bygone era. Nostalgia replaces carnivalism.

Reading this shift rhetorically, it is not hard to surmise that the studios initially imitated tabloid tropes because they imagined an overlap between their target audience and that of the tabloids. But after the mid-1930s, tabloid allusions in the press books increasingly suggest that movie audiences are *not* tabloid readers. By 1953, MGM seemed to expect that
Julius Caesar’s audience would simply giggle at the Daily Chariot herald, understanding it as a gag with no serious connection to the prestigious film.

Scholars may be right when they observe that popular texts are “resources to be used disrespectfully, not objects to be admired and venerated” (Fiske, Understanding 123). But we cannot help regretting such disrespect. Though “higher” cultural forms are forever aping “lower” ones, we do not always recognize this mobility because popular forms are so frequently ephemera. As Gaines notes, the transience of promotional materials like the press books has contributed to a long-standing, naïve perception of Hollywood movies as somehow “unencumbered by commerce” (39). From our vantage point, neglect has also done something else: combined with the tabloids’ fragility, it has ensured that Hollywood’s obvious debt to these papers can be only partially recovered. As a result, we are just now beginning to see how closely tabloid and celluloid were intertwined.
Introduction

1. Readers wanting information about the history of the tabloids in Britain should consult Conboy’s work, as well as Horrie’s *Tabloid Nation*.
2. See McGivena’s “Finding the Factual Sweeney” in *The News*. As he notes, “Many *News* readers were status conscious and unwilling to disclose that they read a tabloid” (164).
3. See Fiske’s *Understanding Popular Culture, Reading the Popular,* and *Media Matters*; Glynn’s *Tabloid Culture*; Conboy’s *Tabloid Britain*; Biressi and Nunn’s *Tabloid Culture Reader*; Fox and Van Sickel’s *Tabloid Justice*; Gamson’s *Freaks Talk Back*; Langer’s *Tabloid Television*; and Debriss’s *Tabloid Terror*.
4. George Douglas dismisses today’s supermarket tabloids as “much more banal and insipid than the daily tabs of old” (230).
5. These supermarket tabloids appear to have been the inspiration for the virtual tabloid *Avastar,* launched recently in Second Life (http://secondlife.com/?v=1). The *Guardian* reports that this online weekly paper is “designed to sate the virtual population’s appetite for news and gossip.”
6. See Jenkins’s *Fritz Lang, the Image and the Look* and Gunning’s *The Films of Fritz Lang*.
7. Two texts that discuss film noir’s affinity with tabloid photography are Hannigan and Sante’s *New York Noir* and Bergala’s “Weegee and Film Noir.”
8. One exception is Ruth’s *Inventing the Public Enemy,* a fascinating study of what Ruth calls “the media gangster.” Another is De Stefanos’s *An Offer We Can’t Refuse*.
9. Gunning’s first use of this term appears in “The Cinema of Attractions.” Since then, Gunning has refined his concept in other publications, including “Primitive Cinema—A Frame-Up?”; “Now You See It, Now You Don’t”; “Tracing the Individual Body”; and “The World as Object-Lesson.” Hansen has also developed these ideas in her work on early film spectators, *Babel and Babylon.* See also Staiger’s *Perverse Spectators,* chapter 2.
10. See Singer’s *Melodrama and Modernity,* Kirby’s *Parallel Tracks,* and the essays in Charney and Schwartz’s *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*.
11. See Van Every’s *Sins of America* and Gene Smith and Jayne Barry Smith’s *The Police Gazette*.
12. Inspired by the London newspaper of the same name, the *Graphic* was published
until 1889. It is no relation to the later New York Evening Graphic.

13. Our thanks to Tom Gunning for directing us to some of these titles.

14. Another borrowing from the pre-tabloid sensational papers is Griffith’s The Musketeers of Pig Alley (1912), which drew on newspaper reports of gang wars on New York’s Lower East Side.

15. Among the many excellent books that discuss New York in the 1920s, see Douglas’s Terrible Honesty; Adler’s On Broadway; Oja’s Making Music Modern; and Dumenil’s The Modern Temper.

16. Originating in 1896 with Argosy, these magazines flourished during the 1920s. For further discussions of these magazines, see Robinson and Davidson’s Pulp Culture; Smith’s “Ragtag and Bobtail”; Bloom’s Cult Fiction; McCracken’s Pulp; and Breu’s Hard-Boiled Masculinities.


18. For further discussion of the 1920s as the apex of newspaper journalism’s popularity, see Schudson’s Discovering the News and Douglas’s Golden Age.

19. For more on this Hollywood migration, see Hecht’s A Child of the Century; Prover’s No One Knows their Names; Witt’s Hardboiled in Hollywood; Hamilton’s Writers in Hollywood; McGilligan’s Backstory; and Fine’s Hollywood and the Profession of Authorship.

20. A study by the Daily News in the early 1920s suggests that readership was broad. Of sales before 9 a.m., 50.53% were to women, while the balance tipped toward men in the afternoon. The same study showed that at least 30% of News readers were from the professional or business classes. See McGivena, 145–46.


22. For discussion on the decline and reconfiguration of the crime genre in the 1950s and 1960s, see Clarens’s Crime Movies; Leitch’s Crime Films, chapters 2 and 3; Yaquinto’s Pump ’Em Full of Lead, chapter 6; Rafter’s Shots in the Mirror; and Mason’s American Gangster Cinema, chapters 5 and 6.

23. Critics like Naremore, Ray, and Stam have called for a more dialogic approach to adaptation, and some excellent work has been done recently in this area. See, for example, Naremore’s introduction to Film Adaptation; Ray’s “The Field of ‘Literature and Film’”; Stam’s A Companion to Literature and Film and Literature and Film; Hutcheon’s A Theory of Adaptation; Leitch’s Adaptation and Its Discontents; Elliott’s Rethinking the Novel/Film; and Sanders’s Adaptation and Appropriation.

24. Since Vernet’s essay appeared, many scholars have taken up his call to historicize film noir. The most notable example is Naremore’s More than Night. Yet, despite its excellence, the book contains no mention of tabloid journalism. Dimendberg’s Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity is a brilliant study of noir’s relation to urban spaces; Paula Rabinowitz’s Black, White, and Noir locates noir within the discourses on poverty and welfare; and Biesen’s Blackout grounds the genre in the details of production and urban history. For an illuminating discussion of why scholarship on film noir remains underhistoricized, see Paul Young’s “[Not] the Last Essay on Film Noir.”

25. We are aware of how totalizing a statement this is, but as a generalization, this difference between gangster films and film noir is helpful.

26. For useful period criticism of the rise in gangster films in the 1920s, see “Films of the Post War Decade” in Jacobs’s The Rise of the American Film, first published in 1939. Among the pre-1930s underworld pictures Lewis notes are Black Shadows (Howard M. Mitchell, 1920), The Girl in the Rain (Rollin S. Sturgeon, 1920), Outside the Law (Tod Browning, 1920),
Partners of the Night (Paul Scardon, 1920), Kick In (George Fitzmaurice, 1922), One Million in Jewels (J. P. McGowan, 1923), Boston Blackie (Scott R. Dunlap, 1923), Dollar Devils (Victor Schertzinger, 1923), The Big City (Tod Browning, 1928), Tenderloin (Michael Curtiz, 1928), Chicago After Midnight (Ralph Ince, 1928), The Drag Net (Josef von Sternberg, 1928), The Docks of New York (Joseph von Sternberg, 1928), The Racket (Lewis Milestone, 1928), and Alibi (Roland West, 1929).

27. See, for example, Ness’s From Headline Hunter to Superman; Saltzman’s Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist; Zynda’s “The Hollywood Version”; Manvell’s “Media Ethics”; Ehrlich’s Journalism in the Movies; Leonard’s News for All; Vaughn and Evensen’s “Democracy’s Guardians”; Langman’s The Media in the Movies; and Good’s four books: The Drunken Journalist, Girl Reporter, Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies, and Outcasts.

28. There are several outstanding exceptions, including Pizzitola’s Hearst over Hollywood and Cook and McLean’s edited collection, Headline Hollywood.

29. The four libraries containing significant holding of the Evening Graphic are the University of Missouri-Columbia; the University of California-Irvine; The Ohio State University; and the New York Public Library.

Chapter 1

1. Civic outcry, voiced in large part through the newspapers, led to interventions. The first motion picture censorship ordinance was passed in Chicago in 1907, and in 1915 the issue reached the national level when the Supreme Court declared state censorship constitutional; seven states had censorship boards by 1921. See Maltby, “Production,” 42. In response, the movie industry from the 1910s through the 1930s self-censored its films with a variety of measures. See Maltby’s “The Production Code and the Hays Office” and Left’s The Dame in the Kimono for fuller discussions of censorship.

2. Macfadden lived into his late 80s, outlasting the Graphic by several decades. For more on his life, see Oursler’s The True Story of Bernarr Macfadden; Macfadden and Gauvreau’s Dumbells and Carrot Stripes; and Ernst’s Weakness Is a Crime.

3. All three New York tabloids exploited tactics to involve readers. The Daily News paid readers $1 to $5 for submitting captions, jingles, and proverbs. Meanwhile, in 1925, the Daily Mirror ran a contest to find New York’s “homeliest girl.” The prize went to an Italian seamstress who aspired to be an opera diva; her prize was free plastic surgery and an audition. See Stevens’s Sensationalism and the New York Press, 129–35.

4. See Maltby’s “Sticks, Hicks and Flaps” and Stokes’s “Female Audiences of the 1920s and Early 1930s,” in Identifying Hollywood Audiences, edited by Maltby and Stokes. Balio notes that “Hollywood assumed that the motion picture audience was mostly female, although the industry never collected the empirical evidence to substantiate this claim” (235).

5. Though as we discuss in chapter 2, the Daily News evolved a more cynical tone throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it continued to invite female readership by featuring women authors and emphasizing their friendliness and accessible writing style.

6. See especially Marchand’s chapters “Keeping the Audience in Focus” and “Advertisements as Social Tableaux.”

7. See Rabinowitz’s “Truth in Fiction.” Rabinowitz eventually dropped the term “ideal narrative audience” from his paradigm when the article was incorporated into his book Before Reading, finding that it had little practical use. Phelan recuperates it, discovering the concept salient in second-person narration, where it helps define a role somewhat different from the more widely used “narratee” role proposed by structural theorists. See Phelan’s “Narratee, Narrative Audience, and Second-Person Narration.” For our purposes here, the
distinction between narrative and ideal narrative audiences is crucial. The tongue-in-cheek
detail in the herald is effective precisely because some readers will situate themselves in the
tabloid reader/narrative audience role while simultaneously recognizing and enjoying that they are not actually the gullible ideal narrative audience.


9. Under the block booking system in place until the mid-1940s, the studios tried to sell independent theatres a complete package of films for a year. Typically, films would be described only by number or as a picture featuring a specific star. The manager often had little information about what he was renting until the press book arrived. See Gomery’s Shared Pleasures, 68.

10. Staiger points out that, once film distribution channels regularized in 1909, film companies created publicity materials. But these were seen as another product to be sold to exhibitors; since films at this point were rented for a flat fee, actual ticket sales were irrelevant to the manufacturer and distributor. See Staiger’s “Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals.”

11. This chapter is indebted to Miller’s exhaustively researched dissertation. The few other studies that address press books in an extended way are geared toward a popular audience. See Sennett’s Hollywood Hoopla and McGee’s Beyond Ballyhoo. For a short discussion of press books alongside other movie publicity after World War I, see Gomery’s Shared Pleasures, 69. Staiger mentions early press books with movie trailers, fan magazines, and movie industry trade magazines, in “Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons.”

12. During the late 1920s and 1930s, the major Hollywood studios each produced an average of fifty pictures a year, with a press book for each.

13. See Attwood’s “A Very British Carnival”; Conboy’s “Carnival and the Popular Press”; and Fiske’s “The Carnivalesque,” all in Biressi and Nunn’s The Tabloid Culture Reader.

14. Useful work in reception studies includes Gomery’s Shared Pleasures; Hansen’s Babel and Babylon; Klinger’s “Digressions at the Cinema” and Beyond the Multiplex; Kuhn’s Dreaming of Fred and Ginger; Mayne’s Cinema and Spectatorship; Stacey’s “Textual Obsessions”; and Staiger’s three books: Interpreting Films, Perverse Spectators, and Media Reception Studies. See also The Place of the Audience, edited by Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings.

15. For more on narrative image, see Ellis’s Visible Fictions. Especially useful is his chapter “Cinema as Image and Sound.”

16. For more on these variant readings, see Miller, 111–12; Altman’s “Reusable Packaging,” 9; and Staiger’s Perverse Spectators, 71.

17. Fuller’s At the Picture Show discusses how press books interacted with other promotional media, as does Barbas’s Movie Crazy. In relation to extra-cinematic information and its impact on alternative readings of a film, see chapter 5 of Staiger’s Perverse Spectators.

18. With gangster films, this no doubt stemmed from the studios’ desire to avoid censorship. Studios advertised gangster films as love stories, social problem films, quasi-documentaries—genres, in other words, which did not bear the taint of crime. See Grieveson’s “Gangsters and Governance in the Silent Era.”

19. In contrast, an average daily issue of the New York Times in 1930 ran between twenty to twenty-five movie ads and articles in its entertainment section.

Chapter 2

1. For more information on the policy, see Higham’s Warner Brothers, 85–86; Custen’s Twentieth Century’s Fox, 133–53; and Mosley’s Zanuck, 105–17.
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