Spectatoritis vs. World-building: Sandbox spectatorship in American children's silent film culture

Fabrice Lyczba

Université Dauphine Paris / London

Abstract:

Through a document-based ethno-historical approach, this article shows how cinema in the 1920s managed to inform urban children's games and world-building activities, contrary to contemporary assumptions from early education reformers and sociologists that informed research into children's play. I first show how most of this research tried to prove an early version of the 'displacement effect' theory, constructing modern media as impoverishing children's imaginaries by transforming them into passive spectators – a modern disease identified as 'spectatoritis'. At the same time, this research ignored its own data that pointed to the many ways in which children were actually developing their own mode of active spectatorship, poaching material from feature films and serials to inform and organize play – a mode of spectatorship I propose to call 'sandbox spectatorship'. I then turn to some of these testimonies from 1920s children to recover the rhythms, places and roles of this extensive re-appropriation of film texts as sandbox spaces. The article concludes by suggesting three potential avenues for more research into the history of the deployment of movie-worlds into children's world-building play.

Keywords: World-building; play; children's culture; spectatorship; reception; silent cinema

This article is an effort at constructing an archaeology of the uses of media, old and new, into children's world-building play by focusing on the links between 1920s US film culture and children's games. Inspired in large part by the conclusive findings of Annette Kuhn's (2002) study of 1930s movie-going in Britain, this article wishes to offer an archive- and document-based version of Kuhn's ethno-historical project of reconstructing the circulations of film into audiences' cultures of the everyday.[1] The questions this article raises are thus

both methodological and historical. The historical issues concern the analysis of the expansion of cinema into children's play, and in particular the existence of an active *media culture* among US children during the 1920s that fed into their games and role-playing activities off the screen and away from theatres. I wish to flesh out and historicize Henry Jenkins' insight that 'children have long played with the core narratives of their culture', and that the stories offered by 20th-century mass media to children were understood by them 'as extending from the screen across platforms and into the physical realm, […] as *resources out of which they could create their own fantasies*' (Jenkins 2010; my emphasis). These play-fantasies structured and fed by resources extracted from the movies I propose to study here as evidence of movie-inferred world-building activities, after the vast literature on how modern media is today incorporated into childhood and youth cultures and games. This intervention thus relies on the notion of 'world-building as a human activity' (Wolf 2012: 3) to consider not the *products* of media producers as they create transmedia worlds but the *process* of what Ito (2008: 398) has called 'authoring through personalization and remix' – a process often linked to new media 'convergence culture' (as, for instance, in Ito 2008) but that considerations of children's play cultures allow us to historicize and relate to older media. 'World-building', in this essay, will therefore refer to the imaginative efforts deployed by children in their make-believe games, what child psychologists often refer to as their 'world-play'. As remix culture, this world-building, we will see, does not necessarily extend movie worlds in any significant, coherent, or narratively faithful way; it builds children's worlds more than it helps build movie worlds. But as early as the 1920s, it did provide hours of imaginative game-play for American children and helped structure their imaginary play-reconstructions. Movie culture, in this way, provided tools for meaning-making for American children.

A look back at the 1920s offers the opportunity to observe some of the first encounters between the modern 'culture industry' (in the words of Frankfurt School early mass culture critics Adorno and Horkheimer) and children – a demographic group identified early on by Hollywood producers as key to their success (Dale 1935: 5). What is it that children 'poached' at the movies, to use the term popularized by Henry Jenkins to refer to contemporary fan activities (Jenkins 1992)? Which films did children cite and elaborate on most often in their games? Which props, characters, settings, inspired children for their role-playing activities? How were props, settings, and costumes reconstituted during role-play? How would film imaginaries tie in with pre-existing cultures and imaginaries as broadcast in book, illustration, magazine and other media cultures? How did movie consumption fit in with the rhythms of children's role-playing games, and with the geographies of children's lives? Today, these questions are by and large the province of childhood ethnographies and psychologists, but largely ignored by media, let alone film studies, at least in their historical dimension. When contemporary communication research studies do focus on the links between children and media, it is often to look at such issues as media's potential 'displacement effect' and the links between media consumption and other perceived social and/or physical ills (social isolation, obesity, etc.).[2] In addition to throwing

considerable doubt over the validity of claims that media consumption may have endangered (or may still be endangering) children's creativity (as exemplified through role-playing activities),[3] I argue that such questions further matter as they may help provide an insight into the active culture of film spectatorship as it existed during Hollywood's classical period. Thus, this analysis proposes to study a mode of spectatorship that I term *sandbox spectatorship,* as it involves the deployment of a 'world-building' gaze that submits movie worlds to poaching, disjunctions, fragmentation, for later re-composition in children's role-playing games. Through this gaze, the film itself becomes a children's sandbox and 'the new playground' – a metaphor indeed that first appeared in the 1920s in American social reformist discourse as an essentially *negative* metaphor. I employ the metaphor here, however, as a fundamental tool to understand in their historical dimension the complexities of media influence in children's lives and the circulation of media imaginaries into children's world-play creativity – an issue still active and hotly debated, to say the least, in communication and media research today. Ultimately, the article also stands as a demonstration that the concept of poaching, remixing, and re-imagining media texts significantly pre-dates participatory culture and the development of so-called 'new media' technologies.

Methodologically, this article is an attempt to construct a non-speculative account of an essentially ephemeral phenomenon that leaves few, if any, archival traces (children at play) while relying on mostly secondary material and indirect evidence designed, oftentimes, to provide evidence for the very opposite: the idea that movies *prevented* American children from playing. In a context where survey and question-based audience studies have become, perforce, all but impossible, such evidence must be carefully weighed and deciphered, read, as it were, as a negative, to shed light on what was really happening behind and between the researchers' assumptions. The sources used here, mostly sociological and educational reports published in the 1920s and early 1930s analyzing American children at the movies or at play, could certainly be complemented by further sources, as I will indicate in my conclusion; in this sense, the present article is still limited in its scope. However, because these sources also relied, at times, on personal statements from 1920s children, they allow us to draw conclusions about U.S. children's modes of spectatorship and movie-derived role-playing that are non-speculative. Thus, I will first turn to an analysis of the debates among reformers and sociologists of the 1920s – where a relationship between children's play and movie attendance is first problematized – before unpacking how children explained their movie-derived, world-building activities in a few personal testimonies where such activities have been recorded. This, I hope, will allow us to start tracing the contours of film-derived world-play activities of American children in the 1920s: the contours of a film culture poached, re-configured, and ultimately kept alive by children in their role-playing games.

How children play, and the agenda of early 20th-century reformists

The question of how children play became of central concern to parents in the 20th century, an 'adult 'invasion' of children's culture' that historians have linked with the rise of a new urban middle-class (Chudacoff 2007: 101). Modernity, as defined by a transformation of the public space into the marketplace of consumerism, with its attendant wonders and enticements, was seen to offer both (educational) opportunities and (commercial) perils to children. 'Play organizers' (Cavallo 1981) emerged in early 20th-century America as central figures in trying 'to transplant [play] from city streets, where it was […] unorganized and uncontrolled, onto supervised playgrounds' (Cavallo 1981: 1). One of the earliest efforts of the American Reform movement – progressive educators, social settlement workers, child psychologists, soon joined by commercial interests[4] – was thus to redefine and control children's play in American cities, by offering spaces (playgrounds) where play could take place in a safe, protected, and most of all adult-controlled environment: as particularly clear examples of adult *utopian* projections of what childhood should be and of what childhood games should be about. Play, in other words, became the site where parents, aided by a host of professionals, came to exercise their duty to protect childhood from adulthood, and to protect it in some sort of innocence centrally established through play, games, and toys (Cross 2004). The utopia of childhood rested, as Gary Cross has reminded us, on a host of industrial and discursive practices of what 'proper' toys and 'proper' games ought to be – practices targeting *parents* as opposed to children for the choice of toys and games, at least well into the 1930s (Cross 1997: 91-92).

Yet, despite this early twentieth century 'language of social control' (Chudacoff 2007: 113), and as Andrew Burn has recently reminded us, borrowing his vocabulary from Foucault (1984), playgrounds in schools and cities have in fact functioned less along the lines of the utopias adults may have wanted them to become when designing them ('sites', as Foucault defines utopias, 'with no real place') and more as the *heterotopias* ('at once absolutely real […] and absolutely unreal', according to Foucault) that children actually turn them into while playing: as spaces inhabited by imaginary characters and made-up, temporary rules dependent on the make-belief play-spaces children invent in their 'constant layering of imaginary over real' (Burn 2014: 24). Helping them in this construction of heterotopic play-spaces, the media, both new and old, have proven central to children's games (Willett 2014).

Spectatoritis: modern media, modern passivity?

All throughout the 1920s, the movies found themselves at the heart of reformers' interest in defining and controlling children's play and games. Movies mattered not just, as we might expect, because of their content alone – the fear that films exhibiting loose morals, looser clothes and downright criminal mores may lead to increased delinquency – but also, and even more crucially, by the mode of reception they were associated with. Movies, play reformers argued, were a commercial and, what's more, a *passive* form of leisure. At the

movies, children merely *spectated* – as opposed to the model of sound physical outdoor play that informed reformers' particular utopia of child development. *Spectatoritis*, as this particular danger came to be known, threatened children's ability to grow and learn as it allegedly threatened their health, their morals – and their very imaginative life (Gleason 1999: 259-264). Civilization, New York University professor of education Jay Nash wrote in 1932, faced a new question: 'what will man do with [his] machine-formed time' (Nash 1932: 8). For him, as for so many other observers of the period, the answer was all too obvious: machines had liberated Americans for *passive* forms of leisure.

> [T]he average man who has time on his hands turns out to be a spectator, a watcher of somebody else, merely because that is the easiest thing. He becomes a victim of spectatoritis – a blanket description to cover all kinds of passive amusement, an entering into the handiest activity merely to escape boredom. (Nash 1932: 5)

While neither restricted to children nor to the movies,[5] this criticism found particularly fertile ground when applied to child film audiences. As early as 1910, in her book *The Spirit of Youth and the City Street*, Jane Addams had articulated this concern in the chapter 'House of Dreams' where she looked at the (for her) already worrisome influence of movies on children (Jowett 1976: 77-79; Butsch 2000: ch.10). Not only were movies seen to be potentially influencing the morals of young audiences, but they were also literally threatening to take over play. As proof of what she called 'a direct influence' of movies on city youth (Addams 1910: 93), she offered the example of three boys, all under thirteen, who 'had recently seen depicted the adventures of frontier life including the holding up of a stage coach and the lassoing of the driver' and had 'spent weeks planning to lasso, murder, and rob a neighborhood milkman' (their 'watchword': "Dead Men Tell No Tales"). Because of the rich and detailed imaginary that movies provided to young people ready-made, as it were, 'normal' play, she thought, would soon seem less attractive:

> We might illustrate by the 'Wild West Show' in which the on-looking boy imagines himself an active participant. The scouts, the Indians, the bucking ponies, are his real intimate companions and occupy his entire mind. In contrast with this we have the omnipresent game of tag which is, doubtless, also founded upon the chase. It gives the boy exercise and momentary echoes of the old excitement, but it is barren of suggestion and quickly degenerates into horse-play. (Addams 1910: 94)

Interestingly, Addams here fails to note that models for how children actively integrated ready-made media imaginaries into their games already existed by 1910. Children's literature offered numerous examples of children playing with *book*-derived imaginaries, sometimes with mischievous intent but seldom with criminal consequences – as when, for

instance Tom Sawyer insists on organizing a gang that will 'ransom' people, simply because 'I've seen it in books and so of course that's what we've got to do. […] Do you want to go to doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?' (Twain 1985 [1885]: 17). Books, it was accepted, could clearly help *structure* playtime and world-play. But films were a different proposition for the spectatoritis thesis, as the regime of *passive* visual absorption that they seemed to impose represented a particular and modern threat to children's physical activities. Film ostensibly promised a complete imaginary reconstruction, requiring little mental effort, thus offering a better opportunity of reward than physically-demanding play and sports. In 1929, another reformer, Alice Miller Mitchell, was still articulating similar opposition between the attractions of passive movie-watching and the active play of children in her large study of the movie habits of some 10,000 Chicago youth.

> In the movie the child sits and has his make-believe world revealed to him without any effort on his part. On the playground he must exert himself to make the play come true. In the movie it is done for him. (Mitchell 1929: 76)

As yet two other childhood reformers summed it up in their 1934 book on childcare:

> Through play we have to create opportunities for children, physical and mental challenges, which once were offered by life conditions before we began to live altogether in a push-button civilization. […] And the hold which the movies have, the vogue of the 'Westerns' and the wild-life pictures, is that they satisfy vicariously a hunger which in children's own experience is unsatisfied. (Glover and Dewey 1934: 251)

The vicarious pleasures of movie *spectatoritis* were thus perceived as a medium-specific problem, and a clear sign of encroaching commercial modernity. Even more specifically, they were creating a dangerous, and, for reformers, false sense of satisfaction among the children of America, endangering their appetite for imaginary play by satiating their imagination and encouraging passivity.

BEYOND SPECTATORITIS: THE RESISTANCE OF PLAY

The most serious effort to look at the potential 'influence' of movies on young Americans – the Payne Fund studies commissioned in 1929 and published, for the most part, in 1933-1935 under the leadership of Chicago university sociology professors – included some consideration of the question of play, games, imaginary world-building and the movies. The links found, however, failed to comfort reformers. Shuttleworth and May, for instance, in their study contrasting the habits of movie-going and non-movie going children (*The Social Conduct and Attitudes of Movie Fans*, 1933), failed to find conclusive proof that movie-going was displacing all other activities that children should be encouraged to join. The 'non-

movie group' (defined as children going to the movies less than twice a month) did report 'playing games' (66-67) during evenings more often than the 'movie-group' – but movie-going children reported reading much more (both books and magazines) than non-movie-going children (in a perfect illustration that media does not replace media, and that media consumption is invariably an additive process).[6] Their conclusion remained cautiously sympathetic to what they called 'the non-participation theory', calling it 'suggestive as far as it goes'. As the authors explained it, this theory offered a good summary of the spectatoritis problem. It stated that

> non-participation is one of the essential features of movie going. For two or three hours, three or four times a week, the movie children are spectators, passive and being entertained. They may identify themselves with the hero […] but they take no active part. […] When children are given the chance of participating in a common enterprise to win a prize for the class, the movie children fail to do their share and work harder for the individual prize. This theory would claim that children with the spectator and non-participating habit would tend to prefer the movie as an avenue of recreation. (91)

This conclusion, equating lack of *cooperation* with lack of *activity* (and, therefore, lack of *participation*), represented a generous interpretation, to say the least, of the authors' own data, especially as the authors recognized that the 'movie-going children' were found to 'work harder for individual prizes.' But it painted a by-now classic portrait of the spectatoritis thesis: movies were claimed to encourage a passive, socially-fragmented imaginary experience – an experience radically opposed, therefore, to the benefits of group-play based on cooperative world-building among children.

Yet, despite such fears of a take-over of children's imaginaries and playing instincts by movies, there was a silver lining for play reformers of the 1920s. Indeed, children, interviewed by social workers, sociologists or psychologists, tended to declare their love for the movies as merely 'second-best': as something to do because of a lack of more interesting activities available. As Jane Addams noted by the end of her review of the attractions of the movie theatre: 'the theatre even now by no means competes with the baseball league games which are attended by thousands of men and boys' (Addams 1910: 95). A similar note of enthusiasm can be found as late as 1934 in a New York Times article reporting on a survey conducted by the Better Films Committee in Englewood, N. J., among a population of '1,500 grade and junior high school pupils,' as the title trumpets: 'children prefer games to movies.' Even though the children of Englewood went on average to 4.3 film shows a month (with some reporting attendance as high as twenty times a month), the newspaper claimed in its opening paragraph that 'given their choice of something to do after school hours, the children of Englewood prefer athletics to attending the movies.'[7] Such results, the article noted with hope, 'should encourage those organizations furthering boys' and girls' activities.' Paul Cressey, one of the Payne Fund study researchers who would

later break away from the dogmatic assumptions imposed by the study's framework (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller 1996: ch. 1), expressed surprise at an apparent contradiction in the answers of his respondents (self-declared delinquents from New York City's East Side): children who reported having great respect for – and detailed knowledge of – the stars of the screen, and who flocked to their movies, just as frequently declared contempt for films (and, more precisely, film plots, regularly referred to as 'baloney') and for their local film theatres ('dumps').[8] In the only draft known to exist of his unpublished study on movie-going in the life of young boys in East Harlem, New York, Cressey remarked that while there was 'high frequency of attendance at the motion picture theatre […] only six out of a total of more than twelve thousand boys – but one-twentieth of one percent – reported attendance at motion pictures as a 'hobby.'' (Cressey [1996]: 138). Another Payne Fund researcher, Robert L. Whitley, had reported in 1930 that 77.8% of the 207 'delinquent' boys he had studied in New York ''liked best' physical activities and games making a special demand for space' (quoted in Cressey [1996]: 138). The implicit assumption here was that, if only the reform movement – starting with the creation of enough playgrounds and sports fields in American cities – could tap into this self-reported dissatisfaction with the Hollywood fare offered at the local movie theatre, then children could continue to enjoy healthy play.

Other studies and surveys in the 1920s failed to establish any sign of a disappearance of play activities among children caused by movies (or what modern media effect research would call 'displacement effect')[9] – any sign, therefore, of the 'spectatoritis qua modernity' thesis, despite alarming signs of cinema's continuing popularity among children and teenagers. A study, published in 1926, put this very thesis to the test by comparing the play habits of town and rural children in Kansas – the 'town children' being chosen from public schools of Kansas City, Lawrence, Bonner Springs and Moran, the 'rural children' selected from 'one-teacher, country schools' in the counties of Shawnee, Douglas and Franklin (Lehman 1926: 455). Ranging in age from 8 ½ to 15 ½, respondents were asked to select, out of a list of 200 possible activities, the ones 'which they ha[d] engaged in during the preceding week'. The first result reported pointed to a decisive presence of movies in urban environments: while some 60% of town children on average (63% for boys, 57% for girls) had reported going to the movies in the preceding week, only 18% of rural children (18.5% for boys, 17.5% for girls) had done the same. Yet, this massive presence of movies in the life of city children failed to translate into a lack of play activities: in fact, both groups tended to report an equal number of total play activities engaged in during the week (467), with the only differences being in what *sorts* of activities were preferred by each group. Rural children, for instance, enjoyed horseback-riding more, whereas city children preferred bike riding, and games played by younger children fell out of favor with older children faster in the city environment. Clearly, movie culture did not prevent children from engaging in play activities, though there was an observable difference between the city and rural play-cultures of children. Indeed, the only conclusion that this study could support was, conservatively, that '[urban] life offers certain recreational opportunities to the child that rural life does not offer, but that country life likewise offers its own peculiar opportunities,

including opportunity for natural spontaneous self-expression that tends to be eliminated by town life [such as whistling among boys]' (476).

THE MOVIES AS NEW FORM OF PLAY: 'PLAYING MOVIES', AND 'THE MOVIE PLAYGROUND'

Even reformers or sociologists alarmed at the passivity that movies supposedly induced in children often had to admit that movies may have been actively involved in helping children play, although such a conclusion would have failed to offer them any solace. Immediately after disparaging the movies for offering children a 'make-believe world […] without any effort on [their] part', Alice Mitchell was also forced to recognize that

> [T]he movie playground serves another purpose. Not only is it a better and a more interesting playground to the child, but it makes more attractive to him his own playland, for when he returns from the movie to his 'back yard' he has new ideas of what to play and how to play it (Mitchell 1929: 76).[10]

Indeed, a worried version of this recognition that children used movies as resources for their world-building play activities circulated throughout the 1920s across the US, often in articles from the popular press that insisted on the dangers of such transfers. The *New York Times* alerted its readers to the dangers of what it termed 'playing movies' in sad accounts of movie-inspired play that had gone wrong: on June 11, 1924, a twelve-year old boy had hanged himself while recreating a gallow scene for his six-year-old brother in Philadelphia, as the two boys were 'play[ing] at 'movies' on the third floor of their home' ('Boy is hanged'). Another tragic story, on November 1924, reported the involuntary murder by a six-year-old boy of his four-year-old sister in an Italian household in Brooklyn: looking for a game, 'the children suggested 'movies',' and settled for a cowboy story – complete with father's loaded revolver ('Boy Kills Sister'). In December 1920 another boy, aged ten, had used his father's gun 'to play 'movies' with Joseph Jackson, eleven, the son of a neighbor' and wounded him (though, this time, not critically) ('Boy Playing 'Movies''). Similar stories appeared in print throughout the 1920s, and were abundantly used by reformers to demand increased censorship of the movies. For Rowland C. Sheldon, at the time general secretary of the Big Brother Movement (an association that still today pairs troubled youth with adult mentors), the responsibility of movies in causing crime – to him, amply established[11] – started with movies providing scenarios for dangerous 'movie play.' One of the boys he visited at a reformatory in 1921, Jim, 'guilty of killing a playmate,' echoed press stories in explaining how in 'playing hold-up' a loaded revolver had gone off, shooting 'the playmate 'victim' dead' (Sheldon 1921: 243). While such stories reinforced popular fears that movies were having a negative influence on children – though more tentatively than a lot of reformers' discourses, insisting as they did on the accidental nature of such incidents – they also clearly reveal that 'movies' for younger Americans were not just films to be enjoyed at the local theater, but also the name of a play activity that one could indulge in when

'spending an afternoon indoors' ('Boy Kills Sister'): a world-building, role-playing activity derived from the movies.

Of course, such press stories of 'playing movies' gone wrong are not indeed limited to the 1920s, and many contemporary echoes can still be found today.[12] Since the 1960s, however, ethnographic studies of childhood play have constructed far more complex analytical models than 1920s reformers to account for the presence of media content within children's games. While some have continued the 1920s tradition of blaming modern media for a perceived 'disappearance' of children's games (Postman 1983), ethnographic studies of childhood folklore have had to account for the observed productive uses of media culture within modern children's games (Opie 1969; Cross 2009). Bishop et al. (2006) have notably proposed that children's practices of embedding media references in their play could be categorized in four ways that remain interconnected in children's practices: first, as *onomastic allusions* (as when media names or gestures are used out of context in play, for instance the name of a TV star in a traditional song); second, as practices of *syncretism* (when a media referent is combined with an older game, e.g. 'Spiderman Tig' for a game of touch chase that incorporates the web-weaving gesture of Spiderman); third, as forms of *mimesis* (pretend-play, world-play, that imitates some existing media text or texts); and fourth, as *parody* (ironic elements are woven into the performance of some media text or texts). Rebekah Willett thus concludes from her ethnographic study of two UK playgrounds in 2009-2011 that media referents continue today to circulate within children's constructions of their own 'play-scapes' as 'resources for play' that help 'children produce meaning from the variety of texts with which they engage in their remix culture' (Willet 2014: 149).

For the 1920s, direct evidence of such remixing activities within children's play is difficult to come by, and I have here relied mainly on three main sources. Gregg Bachman, as part of his PhD requirement at the University of Wisconsin in 1995, conducted an oral history research project on 1920s US silent film patrons (Bachman 1995). Based on recollections of silent movie spectatorship by seniors, his oral history project revisits the 1920s movie-going experience in the US in the words of its audience and offers occasional clues as to the play uses of movie worlds. Complementing his findings, are the autobiographies penned either as part of Herbert Blumer's 1933 Payne Fund Studies research by his University of Chicago undergraduates (10 of which have survived out of a reported 80 cases) ('Motion Picture Autobiographies', quoted in Jowett *et al*.), or as included in his Payne Fund financed study of the influence of movies on children's behaviors (Blumer 1933) – testimonies that confirm the pervasiveness of movie-derived imaginaries in children's world-building play activities, 'the most tangible influence of motion pictures on [children's] conduct' (ibid.: 13). As Bachman notes, 'the movies did cast an imposing shadow over their lives in the games they played and in the looks they affected' (Bachman 1995: 111). Blumer also reported:

of 200 small boys under twelve years of age who were asked if they played at things seen in the movies, 75 per cent answered in the affirmative. Of 70 ranging in age from 12 to 14 years, 60 per cent indicated that they played at what was seen in the movies. (Blumer 1933: 20)

In Blumer's compilation of early 1930s undergraduates' testimonies, both boys and girls (in their early twenties by the time the testimonies were solicited) confess to the power of film imaginaries to direct play activities based on re-enactment of movie-roles. 'Case 1,' though insecure as to her own appearance ('I, the lanky and freckle-faced child') would nonetheless enjoy playing 'the part of the heroine' as with her friends '[they] used to play show on the sidewalk every evening' ('Motion Picture Autobiographies', 246). 'Case 2,' a fan of the serial, nonetheless recalled that features on occasion exerted that power to direct play activities, even when alone:

> the day after I saw *The Poison Letter*, I wrote weird notes to my friends using smears of catsup instead of blood as the heroine was supposed to have used. As I wrote these, I sat with a shawl over my head just as Miss [Ethel] Clayton had in the movie. (246)

For some, movies provided endless hours of earnest play. 'Case 4' recalled that

> often it was that we re-enacted what we had seen that afternoon during the show [Saturday serials]. (I recall how we would imagine we were cowboys and would gallop on imaginary horses all the way home. Playing cowboy and Indian, cop and robber, and the like, was not infrequent among us. (Strange as it may seem the role of the robber was not always the one sought after.) (252)

'Case 8', a girl who grew up on a ranch 'fifty miles from the nearest town', wrote of her early passion for the actor Tom Mix – and of the cross-gender appeal of cowboy antics:

> the result of these pictures was the inspiration for my brother and me to attempt fancy riding, as for example, sweeping the ground with our hats, turning in our saddles, crawling under the horse's belly; attempts which, I must confess, resulted more frequently in injury than in success. (271)

Later, 'in the sixth grade', the imaginary transfer of powers took on a decidedly more romantic (and more traditionally gendered) turn, as she remembers watching a jungle serial with many 'love-scenes': 'never can I forget the thrill I experienced when the lad put his arms around me as we watched a similar scene on the white sheet' (272). As those testimonies show, movie-inspired pretend-play mixed *syncretic* practices (incorporating cowboy subtext to a game of chase) with *mimetic* practices (play-acting being Ethel

Clayton). Typical of 'remix' mashed-up cultural practices, those testimonies show how children would pick up on *details* of movie texts, rather than on coherent narrative information, to animate and structure play-time: the 'shawl over the head', the tricks of circus cowboy horse-riding, the pleasures of the chase over the pleasures of character identification (imaginary gallops taking precedence over the scheming of the villain). Compared to the scope and content of original movie texts, the world-building poaching exhibited by these children constructing play activities out of movie resources may seem negligible. But this very negligibility allows 'movie play' to become more easily integrated within children's routines, and to perform several functions within their lives: from dramatizing routine exchanges among friends (the letter-writing experience of 'Case 2'), to helping rural children connect the everyday rough-and-tumble of farm life with the glorified antics of Hollywood stars ('Case 8'), or to providing an insecure child with a sense of communal friendly integration ('Case 1'). In each of these cases, elements of movies are being mapped onto and/or integrated with the spaces of children's everyday world – the sidewalk, the bedroom, the farm, or the streets – spaces that become heterotopic, part-real, part-imagined, through this process of meaning-making.

MOVIE PLAY: A COMMUNITY OF WORLD-BUILDING

While in earnest, and potentially dangerous, such movie-derived play activities also indicate a degree of critical freedom with the movie worlds exhibited by the players. For some, the part played in the re-enactment mattered obviously less than the opportunity to join play. 'Case 10', thus,

> can't remember that I ever quibbled very much over the part I was to play in the re-enactment just so long as I got variety, one part today and another tomorrow. Whether I was the hero or the villain I always played the part with a gusto that was exemplary from the point of intenseness, at least. (277)

Several testimonies compiled by Blumer further exhibit some form of ironical detachment from the movie-material used, often as a marker of this 'superior attitude' that movie attendance inspired as the child 'knew something that the family didn't' (263) – a sign, as Burn and Richards have found with modern media references in children's games, that media form the 'folklore' of children's plays, and a specific type of culture protected from adults (2014: 16-17). Thus, 'case 7', for whom their love of the western had prompted the desire to own a BB gun at an earlier age, recalls that at age 14

> we [a gang of boys] followed the serials regularly, but now I was much too blasé to find them [anything] other than amusing. We never failed to see a 'Western', but I found myself incapable of taking them seriously. ('Motion Picture Autobiographies', 258)

Far from the 'vulnerable' audiences that much of 1920s reformist discourse projected children to be, such testimonies show that the border between *mimesis* and *parody* in children's movie-derived play acting was already in the 1920s, as Rebekah Willett has remarked for today's UK children, of 'a slippery nature' (Willett 2014: 137), and a practice of considerable critical refinement. Intense *performativity* appears to have been far more essential in the pleasures of sharing movie references that may or may not have had much of an earnest hold on young consciences. 'Case 3', thus, though she remembers that 'love pictures played no vital part in my childhood', nonetheless goes to recount how

> I used to think them [love pictures] 'awfully silly' and well can I remember how we girls would get together and mimic, by way of ridicule, the technique which we saw on the screen. (249)

Much like their modern counterparts, and contrary to contemporary reformist discourses that overemphasized the social isolation of the movie experience or the dangers of film *content*, children in the 1920s used movie-worlds to create bonds with other children through the intensity of play practices where they could share their movie culture. Whether films were 'liked' or not, whether the children were fans or not, whether the play-acting was sincere or ironic, the pleasures of pretend-play lay in the *performing together* of movie references, more than in any notion of coherence, fidelity, or authenticity of the performance. In this way, re-enactment of film worlds in play could be made to serve several purposes in children's cultures: from direct influence on children's imaginations, complete with a strong desire to replicate the props and stunts exemplified in the films, to a more complex role in growing up and adapting to changing sentimental and social environments. Though a limited sample, and written by maturing teenagers possibly eager to distance themselves from their younger selves, the Blumer autobiographies are nonetheless valuable in that they reveal how natural it felt for children of the 1920s – middle-class, urban children for the most part – to rely on movies as key sources of imaginary material that they would later use, re-imagine and manipulate in their own games, thus corroborating Bachman's oral testimonies. Very little of the highbrow, condescending professional reformist discourse so prevalent in the 1920s on the topic of the 'influence' of the movies permeates those first-person accounts. While the power of films to infiltrate children's imaginaries is abundantly clear from them, the capacity of children to imagine games and use such film imaginaries for the *production of social bonds* comes through just as clearly.

Sandbox texts: the serial as stock characters, props, and stimulation

The Blumer autobiographies, just like Bachman's oral testimonies, further reveal how much of children's movie-culture was based on certain kinds of film texts to be poached at will for their games. All of the surviving autobiographies and all the excerpts provided by Bachman indeed testify to the particular power of the film serial, rather than the feature film. One

after the other, each one cites serials as the true source of wonders for young film-goers. The first reason for this is that serials were part of an established routine, a fixed schedule of movie-going coinciding with Saturday or Sunday afternoons, often with other younger members of the family, or with friends (deCordova 2002: 162-163): in other words, a time away from adult supervision and school-directed schedules. Edgar Dale, in his questionnaire-based study of movie-going in Ohio, noted that among the 50,000 children that answered, weekend attendance represented three quarters of the total attendance. Surprisingly, a clear *minority* of children (12% for boys and 22% for girls) reported going to the movies with one or more adult, the rest admitting going to the movies either with friends, siblings, or alone (Dale 1935: 3). Movie-going as both a practice that children enjoyed on their own and a play-time eating away at weekend leisure-time may have worried researchers,[13] but the children themselves seem to have seen this time as liberating. 'I recall that every Sunday afternoon my sister and I received a quarter with which to go to a movie and buy popcorn or a taffy apple', wrote 'Case 2' ('Motion Picture Autobiographies', 246), while 'case 1' remembered 'I often went [to the movies] three or four nights a week because I was following up some serial' (242). 'Case 3' would 'ask Mother if I could go to the movies on Saturday afternoons with the 'kids'' (248) and 'case 4' remembered that he was not alone in his movie preference:

> While I was still a youngster a nurse would take my brother and me to the matinee [Sundays]. I used to get to the show as early as possible for apparently no good reason at all. Comedies and serials were my favorites. The show was usually packed with children on Saturday afternoon and they all seemed to have tastes like mine, as, when the feature picture was over and the comedy flashed on the screen, we would cheer wildly. (252)

Simply put, for 'Case 10',

> those serials were very real things to us fellows. [...] Our play was always influenced by the current type of serial we were inhaling. If it had to do with cowboys and Indians we played cowboy and Indian, if it had to do with cops and robbers then we played cop and robber. (277)

Movie-going itself, in those testimonies, is shown to already belong to a universe the child shares only with his or her siblings or friends, in other words, a play space to be shared only with peers: even before the show starts, movie-going is already integrated in children's worlds, appropriated as their very own, their space to indulge in fantasy world-building. Reflecting, some sixty years later, on her childhood growing up in New York City tenements in a recently immigrated Jewish family, Kate Simon remembered this sense of movie culture as being shared among children, and separated from the adult world, with fondness:

> The brightest, most informative school was the movies. We learned how tennis was played and golf, what a swimming pool was and what to wear if you ever got to drive a car. […] We learned to look up soulfully and make our lips tremble to warn our mothers of a flood of tears, and though they didn't fall for it (they laughed), we kept practicing. We learned how regal mothers were and how stately fathers, and of course we learned about Love, a very foreign country like maybe China or Connecticut. (Simon 1989: 43)

In these accounts, movie-going is also revealed as a play-space where world-building is text-dependent only in a very generic way. Often the texts of the different serials are remembered as a blur of fiction, remembered mostly for the *fiction continuum* that the serial creates by expanding fiction worlds over a time span covering several weeks. Shelley Stamp (2000: 114-124) has written persuasively about the non-classical, heterogeneous pleasure of serial watching among specifically female audiences of the 1910s as the pleasure of 'narratives suspended diachronically across a serialized text' (115), 'the enjoyable aspects of suspending narrative desire across and between episodes' (113). The Blumer autobiographies offer concrete evidence that 'serialitis', as the 'affliction' was known in the 1910s, continued to afflict young audiences into the 1920s, that the pleasures of the serial were, notably, the pleasures of building play-worlds *in between* serial episodes,[14] in that waiting period from one episode to the next that specifically *enabled* play by opening up an *interpretative interstice*: 'the serial we saw one week would stock us up with plenty of conversational material to hold us over for the next installment', as 'case 10' explained it in Blumer's autobiographies (277), or as one of Bachman's respondents remembered some eighty years later about a *Robin Hood* serial:

> that was a weekly series. So, every week we went and saw *Robin hood* and us kids would go around with bows and arrows. We absorbed what was going on at the time. During the week, we would probably reenact some of the things we saw. It's wonderful what they did at that time. It started our imaginations (M. Peterson). (Bachman 1995: 112)[15]

Thus the caption 'To Be Continued Next Week' functioned as an appeal to further conjecture, and greeted – as 'case 2' put it – not with regret, as the end of a film might be, but with excitement:

> Then, just as we all began to get interested and hope that the hero would come on the scene, the announcement came on the screen that 'the serial would be continued next Sunday afternoon.' What ah's! What oh's followed! ('Motion Picture Autobiographies', 246)

Stamp (2000: 113) has shown, for the preceding decade, that the suspension of narrative was itself subject to critical evaluation if 'skillfully placed', and that it 'fostered a particular kind of viewing pleasure, built precisely around the suspension and deferral of narrative desire.' The *Moving Picture World* of 4 April 1914 thus commented that 'the period of waiting between installments is rather a pleasant experience' (quoted Stamp 2000: 114). This 'viewing pleasure' must be further understood in the context of children's role-playing games, utilizing both information and deferral of information to animate their play, and making the rhythms of serial distribution key to their incorporation into children's play. While specific feature film texts might indeed be remembered as specific turning points in the formation of a child's movie culture (Rudolph Valentino in *The Sheik* [1921] being the most frequently cited in the Blumer autobiographies), it is the serial, often nameless, with its interchangeable plots and heroes and heroines identified *only* through the stars that played them, and its specifically open-ended time-frame spanning from one movie show to the next, that clearly penetrates the imaginaries children tended to draw on the most for their playful movie-derived world-building activities. In this context, to 'be' Tom Mix, or act out 'Bill Hart', would be shorthand for character definition, allowing to quickly establish 'rules of the games' among children in streets, playgrounds, or at home.

Lastly, those autobiographies, just like Bachman's oral testimonies, all underline the use of the serial as generic texts for world-building activities, rather than as precise plots to be carefully re-enacted. Cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, jungle material, all inform play in generic ways that may not even be exclusively movie-derived but probably tie in with existing, book-derived imaginaries. When details are remembered (stunts, props, individual scenes), they are always remembered in isolation, abstracted from any plot element. Indeed, when plots *are* recalled, they are recalled by these youngsters in a context that places film reception as part of a social game – as *play* itself to be shared with other members of the audience, presumably all youngsters too: 'I was easily excited and cheered and whistled with the best of them when the sheriff arrived just as the fuse was nearing the bomb' (261) recalled 'Case 6'.[16]

Limited though they may be due to the very small size of the cases still accessible today to researchers, such findings on the nexus between movies and children's games are, however, largely corroborated by the findings of contemporary sociologists and reformers who looked at the knotty problem of the 'influence' of movies on children in the US. While the vast majority of the literature on this question concerned itself with the 'fact' that children were taking away from films much more than they should, and that what they were taking away from films was 'beyond their age', very few stopped to analyze the metaphor of 'the movies as playground' (Mitchell 1929) beyond the inescapable observation that going to the movies was one of the many play activities that children in the 1920s had in their lives. Paul Cressey, moving beyond the confines of the Payne Fund Studies and its insistence to establish a direct, causal relationship between movie-going and delinquency, chose to emphasize the total 'motion picture situation' (Cressey 1938: 519). His later research, in the 1930s, clearly show how the movie *theatre* may have been used by children of the Lower

East Side in New York as a *playground*: as a social space where children congregated – again, mostly on their own – to engage in playful behavior, ranging from cheers to jokes to peanut throwing to playful sexual explorations. Yet our first-hand accounts and memoirs of growing up with the movies in the 1920s further reveal that while the theatre may have acted as a playground – in Alice Mitchell's evocative phrase, 'the new back yard' (Mitchell 1929: 75) – the film *texts* themselves were experienced by children as *sandboxes* proper: as material opened to mining, exploring, and re-organization through manipulation in later re-enactments, thus allowing for imaginative world-building activities.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH: THE PERSISTENCE OF MOVIE WORLDS

In their repurposing of movie material for their world-play, American children were helped by a host of commercial practices that would deserve another study to be explored in detail. Tie-in merchandising, first, flourished throughout the 1920s, and considerable evidence exists that theatre owners exploited this marketing possibility to link films for children with specific, concrete objects. Though this is very different from the Hollywood-controlled movie merchandising that Walt Disney was later to pioneer in that this is a decentralized effort happening at the point of consumption of films, near film theaters, and inscribed in the quotidian spaces shared by theatre managers and local audiences, it is still a sign of the circulation of film imaginaries in concrete, commercial objects – an embodiment of fiction in the everyday, material environment that children could have drawn from in their movie-derived games. As Paul Cressey noted with dismay in his 1934 analysis of 'the motion picture as informal education':

> In a variety of ways, through the screen, through the play world of childhood, and through countless commercial devices Hollywood has in one way or another become intimately associated with some of the most vital interests and activities of childhood and youth. (Cressey 1934: 511)

Tie-in strategies have been studied in specific contexts (Stamp 2000 for 1910s serials; Gaines 1989 and 1990, for Hollywood cinema in the 1910s and 1940s, respectively), but a comprehensive review of such strategies as directed to American children in the movie audience has yet to be written. Such a study could indeed form part of a research project that would look at the history of the presence, in the midst of the structures of modern life, of a vast imaginary derived from mass media, and animating urban life – what modern media studies are (re)discovering, from the practice of psycho-geography to studies on ARGs. Together with the evidence here presented of children's uses of public spaces as play-spaces (the backyard, the street, the sidewalk, etc.), such material could provide the resources for a history of the movie-derived *enchantment* of everyday life through the persistence of movie worlds into concrete reality.[17]

Second, modern research into the toys and tools of American childhood has concluded that 'toys' became a site of a contested tug-of-war between parents and children

during the 20th century. While Brian Sutton-Smith (1986) has demonstrated that toys are important as part of 'family-centered rituals', and are imbued with far more rigid meanings by adults than by children, Bernard Mergen, in his historical survey of the American culture of toys, insists that 'historically, toys have been relatively unimportant to children compared to games and play that do not require objects […] There is good evidence that children simply place less importance on toys than adults do.' (Mergen 1992: 87, 89) And yet, 1920s children's movie-derived world-building did rely on identifiable props, borrowed from generic fiction universes, often constructed with available material rather than bought ready made. More investigation is required here, relying on exploration of the collections of movie ephemera in the Bill Douglas Center for the History of Cinema and Culture at the University of Exeter, at the London Museum of Childhood – and mostly in American toy museums, and in the catalogs of American toy manufacturers – to evaluate the extent of commercialization that such world-building activities may have encountered. Gary Cross (1997) has found evidence that 'fantasy toys' started circulating in 1920s American culture, with dolls modeled on popular comic or movie characters (Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Jackie Coogan, or other 'Our Gang' characters; Cross 1997: 91), and Matthew Freeman has started working on the transmedia circulation of movie imaginaries through toys in the 1920s (Freeman 2014).[18] However, a more exhaustive review of movie-derived toys, and the roles that they play in audiences' lives, imaginations and identities, remains to be written.

Third, this appropriation by US children of film texts as sandboxes was further helped by discursive formations and exploitation methods that opened up film texts to potential re-appropriation – that *invited* children's appropriation and play by in effect 'licensing authoring' to children who made up such a large part of the regular film audience in the 1920s. This 'authoring system', never articulated as such by any industrial source, can however be read in a host of practices and commercial practices to which 1920s US children would have been subjected. There are three main discursive tools, available through magazine, newspaper and marketing practices, that seem to me to enable the film as sandbox, to create fertile ground for children's world-building re-appropriations of movie universes, and to effect this transfer of authorship from film producers to children at play. These are: (1) the discursive formation of Hollywood as playground (cf. the many fanzine discourses that portray Hollywood as play-land), (2) the genres of the 'toy film' (cf. Motoy films produced around 1917 [Crafton 1997: 265]) and the 'kiddies' films that would stage playful re-enactments for child audiences of films acted by adults and *imaged* movie-play for all children to potentially imitate (cf. the 'Our Gang' Hal Roach comedy series, but also efforts such as *Robin Hood Jr.* of 1923, a story that 'deals with two youngsters and their creation of an imaginary kingdom in which they and others in their environment are cast as the fabled characters', according to the *AFI Catalog of Feature Films*), and (3) the marketing practices of *ballyhoo* and, even more importantly, theatre lobby decorations, that opened the film texts to mining by emphasizing fictional details, and bringing fictional elements out in the streets, where children could gaze on, manipulate, daydream about, and re-appropriate them.[19]

CONCLUSION: FOR A HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK IN ANALYZING MEDIA ABSORPTION

In conclusion, and awaiting the results of such extensions to the present research, this article – drawing on historical evidence from 1920s and 1930s sociological research into children at the movies, from play reformers' efforts at addressing what was then perceived as a problem, and the analysis of journalistic and marketing practices linked to movie-worlds – can propose the following preliminary conclusions regarding 1920s American children's uses of the movies in their world-building games:

1. Just as today, movie culture provided a *lingua franca* for U.S. children, a modern lingo they shared together through their knowledge of movie culture, *contra* their parents. Movies provided a cultural play-space to be shared between *peers.*

2. The movie culture of U.S. children in the audience was, to a significant degree, a *serial-derived movie culture*. Feature films tend to appear in testimonies at later ages (around 13-14), and researchers reported that older children tended to look down on serials as pictures that 'only kids see' (in the words of an eighth-grader quoted in Blumer, 1933: 138). The serial culture provided unique fertile ground for movie-derived children's games as it offered an opened fictional space, extended from one week to the next through the 'to be continued' gimmick, which allowed for extended and ongoing fictional engagement from children.

3. Direct testimonies prove not only that American children used movie-based lore in their games, but that 'playing movies' was extensive, concerned boys and girls, if a more urban population. This playful world-building was supported by data-mining that was essentially generic rather than plot-centric, detail-oriented, focusing on stunts, props, and localized incidents of story (the thrills).

4. Lastly, while numerous early studies located signs of activity at the movies *in the theatre space*, and in practices that show Classical Hollywood audiences as singularly *inattentive*, this article establishes film spectatorship among 1920s U.S. children as *highly attentive* – a process of active data-mining that directly informs later *playful world-building long after having left the theatre space*. Film fiction worlds, in the testimonies we have studied, appear not as closed texts but rather as particular kinds of game worlds to be expanded and played with, inhabited by types of characters sufficiently stereotypical and sufficiently embodied in stars to allow for imaginary immersion and playmaking activities.

Children's world-building activities through role-playing, thus, appears as 1920s children's ad-hoc answer to adult reformers' concerns about 'spectatoritis', social science's first and influential concept about the effects of modern mass media on Americans and the fundamental *passivity* that they seemed to both demand from audiences and create in them. This tale, I suspect, will sound familiar to most. Too much 'screen time', we are still told today, with its consumption of 'ready-made' imaginaries, has supposedly transformed childhood into a 'toxic' moment in life[20] – when it has not killed it off entirely,[21] as young children have become 'exposed'[22] to more sexually explicit images and more violent content at younger ages.

It is essential, however, that we realize that such concerns were not born with networking technologies in the last two decades or so, but can be already clearly observed in the 1920s at the critical juncture of the expansion of industrialized mass media and the booming modern research in sociology and psychology. As Wartella and Reeves noted in 1985, research into 'media effects' – from the first such studies about movies in the 1910s to studies about radio, then TV, then comics, to today's new media – has essentially remained focused on the same questions. *Absorption* into media, then as now, has been consistently analyzed as potentially dangerous,[23] a matter of 'mental hygiene' as the term was used in the 1920s, but also a matter of social issue; immersion into media has appeared problematic both because of potential media manipulations (fears relayed by developmental psychology and fears over the capacity of children to distinguish between fiction and reality),[24] and because of potential harm to children – in terms of impoverishment of their physical and creative life, notably by taking them away from play. In the United States, these issues were articulated at least as early as the 1910s and 1920s, and the concern over a disappearance of play *because* of media owes much to the early-20th-century agenda of well-meaning reformists that came to articulate a nostalgic definition of childhood and of childhood culture[25] that failed to understand the modern evolutions of childhood in the mass-media age. Returning us to an analysis of 1920s American children and their integration of movie culture into their play thus matters, in the end, as a cautionary tale against generational bias, the age-old urge by adults to frame their children's present childhood in terms of their own past, and to wish to inscribe their children's play into pre-conceived, conservative, and in the end misinformed, utopias.

Biographical Note:

Fabrice Lyczba is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies in the Global Bachelor Programme for Université Dauphine, London campus. He has published in French and English on issues of historical reception and film audience engagement in the film journal *1895* (*1895 Revue d'Histoire du Cinéma*, 72 [Spring 2014], 39-66) and in several collections for McFarland and Palgrave. An article looking at ephemeral Ballyhoo paratexts in the 1920s is due for publication this Spring in *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media: Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*, edited by Sara Pesce and Paolo Noto, for Routledge. Contact: fabrice.lyczba@dauphine.fr.

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Notes:

[1] This approach is of course indebted to the 'ethnographic turn' in media reception studies, articulated by David Morley as early as 1974 in *Reconceptualising the media audience: towards an ethnography of audiences,* University of Birmingham, Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Occasional Stencilled Papers. It further identifies with the need, expressed most eloquently by Phil Wickham in 2010, to integrate the study of film ephemera into the study of 'the weft and weave of cinematic experience as it was understood' (Wickham, 2010: 317).

[2] For a review of current communication research on such topics see *The Routledge International Handbook of Children, Adolescents and Media* 2013. Lyness P. 'The place of the media in the lives of boys and girls', *Journalism Quarterly* 29, 43-54, 1954, is an early example of a consideration of such issues, though mostly about TV. The classic study on the 'displacement effect' remains Williams Tannis M., ed. *The Impact of Television: A Natural Experiment in Three Communities*. Orlando, FL.: Academic Press, 1986. The 'ethnographic turn' in media studies has of course produced scores of excellent research into the integration of contemporary media (mostly, again, TV) into the lives of audiences.

[3] In their review of the existing literature, Dorothy and Jerome Singer remain ambiguous about the effect of TV on children's imagination and day-dreaming: while they contend that 'displacement effect', and thus impoverishment, can be observed (though mostly for very violent content), they also recognize that there is no impoverishment, but stimulation, when it comes to day-dreaming. Singer Dorothy G. and Singer Jerome L., 'Make-Believe Play, Imagination, and Creativity: Links to Children's Media Exposure'. *The Handbook of Children, Media, and Development*. Calvert Sandra L., and Wilson Barbara J. (eds.), Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2008: 290-309.

[4] In 1926 retailers and manufacturers in New York City attempted to mount a campaign for a national Children's Day (to be placed, they hoped, in the commercially slower summer months). Their model for such a campaign was New York City's 'No Accident Day', a day declared in 1925 by New York City mayor as a response to car accidents involving children playing in the streets (477 children were killed in car accidents in New York in 1922). Cf. Chudacoff 2007:113.

[5] Sports spectatorship also came in for criticism, one of the many 'pre-digested pastimes, prepared in little packages at a dollar per' that made 'spectatoritis (…) almost synonymous with Americanism', according to Nash (1932:9-11).

[6] As opposed to the famous principle enunciated by Victor Hugo in 1831, in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, that the medium of print was going to replace, and, in his words, kill off ('tuer'), the medium of architecture ('Ceci tuera cela. Le livre tuera l'édifice. (…) Qu'on ne s'y trompe pas, l'architecture est morte, morte sans retour, tuée par le livre imprimée').

[7] 'Children Prefer Games to Movies', *New York Times* (12 Nov. 1934), p. 21.

[8] This contempt brings to mind the disinterested response of teenagers to the plot of action movies observed, in 1998, by Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (Barker & Brooks 1998: 53, 105). More specifically, dove-tailing the existing evidence from 1920s children at the movies, Barker and Brooks found that to explain the pleasures of action movies among 1998 Bristol-based teenagers, the following principles applied (among a list of twelve): 'Once you've seen the first one, you understand them all'; 'these boys know their cinemas'; and 'they know what stars are and do'. In other words, these teens expressed a mix of extensive knowledge about film culture and the operations of films, and disregard for film plots as beneath their interest (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 53-54).

[9] Patti M. Valkenburg, in a 2001 review of the existing literature on the 'displacement effect' and the 'passivity model' in current research on TV consumption and its influence on children, similarly concludes to the lack of conclusiveness of current research ('Television and the Child's Developing Imagination.' *Handbook of Children and the Media*. Dorothy G. Singer, and Jerome L. Singer(eds.), Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001: 121-34)

[10] Mitchell however immediately abandons this insight to turn to the preference expressed by children in her survey for outdoor play over movie-going – with automobile-riding an absolute favorite among all activities for all groups of children. In her survey, it is to be noted that only for the

group labeled 'delinquents' are movies consistently as attractive as other forms of play: a self-reinforcing negative spiral of lack of socialization for these children, or, on the other hand, a self-censorship reflex from other groups of 'non-delinquent' children that conform to perceived expectation from the researcher? Cf. Barker & Brooks (1998: 22-23) for a discussion of the impossibility of the researcher to be 'a neutral moderating focus'.

[11] 'How I wish that the men who write such scenarios and the men who produce them could visit the criminals they have made', he typically declared, with no trace of irony, in 1921 (Sheldon 1921: 243).

[12] A recent and tragic example could be 'Girl in Japan falls to her death after watching anime cartoon about children who could fly', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2016.

[13] For more on these worries, see Richard deCordova 2002: 162-163.

[14] Much like the function played by Star War toys as 'ways to keep the series alive', as Jonathan Gray has proposed (Gray 2010: 181).

[15] Importantly, this respondent remembered *Robin Hood* as a serial, rather than the now more famous *Robin Hood* feature film with Douglas Fairbanks (1922).

[16] Interestingly, Herbert Blumer, while attempting to establish 'the power of motion pictures in arousing states of emotion which some individuals experience difficulty in resisting' (117)—a short-lived though potentially dangerous condition he termed 'emotional possession' which rests on the assumption of children's passivity at the movies—provides multiple examples of children's activities while movie-watching, activities that are key to forming a sense of community-building—of children *playing* together (Blumer 1935:117-128).

[17] Along the lines of the project initiated by Michael Saler, in his book about 20th-century literary efforts to project fictional characters as living beings and literary worlds as persistent: Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Predecessors of Virtual Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012.

[18] Thank you to Richard McCulloch for pointing out Freeman's text to me.

[19] This research would thus offer historical expansion on the work done on movie paratexts, 'Third Space' branding and other forms of contemporary 'prankvertising'. Challenging Jonathan Gray's assumption that movie paratexts act mostly as 'framing the narrative' (Gray 2010), I have written about the peculiar narrative negligence of a host of 1920s Ballyhoo practices in '"The Living Realities of Romance": Ephemeral Ballyhoo Paratexts of 1920s Film Reception, Participatory Media, and the Resilience of Film Culture" to be published Spring 2016 in *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media: Permanence and Obsolescence in Paratexts*, edited by Sara Pesce and Paolo Noto, Routledge.

[20] In the words of one such popular pamphlet, Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging our Children and What We Can Do About It*, 2007.

[21] More careful than most, David Buckingham, in *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), warned that with 'new media' came new, convergent uses by children of media, with children at the vanguard, he explained, of 'trans-media intertextuality' (90). Our present analysis questions, of course, how 'new' such intertextual uses of media, building on merchandising, really are, as intertextuality describes very well the processes studied by Cressey in 1934 quoted above.

[22] As Martin Barker points out in a recent publication ('The "Problem" of Sexual Fantasies.' *Porn Studies* 1.1-2 (2014): 143-60), the very word 'exposed', common in such debates, ignores all the media research on the uses of media by audiences.

[23] Gillian Brown has called this focus in communication research 'the narrative of absorption' and shown how it intersects both film and play studies. Brown Gillian, 'Child's Play', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11.3 (Fall 1999): 76-106. The present analysis shows how the early 20th-century literature on the nexus between children's games and children's attendance of the movies established the template, still activated today in the press and public opinion, that children being absorbed into media leads to amnesia and real-life delinquency.

[24] As I write this, two news stories of potential dangers of media manipulation are circulating over diverse media: one is a discussion going on in academic blogs of a presumed serious scientific study of 'emotional contagion' through the manipulation of news feeds over Facebook (Kramer Adam et al., 'Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111.24, June 2014); the other is about Facebook users reacting to a 1993 picture of Steven Spielberg, sitting, safari hunter-like, in front of the carcass of the sick Triceratops that appears in *Jurassic Park* (1993), with some users that appear to criticize him for harming animals as though they cannot distinguish between fiction—live dinosaurs—and reality ('People think Steven Spielberg killed a Triceratops', *USA Today*, 12 July 2014).

[25] See George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* (London: Warburg Institute, 1966).