



Orphaned Films: Digital Film Practices by Today's Children

Filmes Órfãos: Práticas de filmes digitais pelas crianças de hoje

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Abstract

Today's children start making digital films at a very young age by the use of smartphones, compact cameras and other mobile media devices. For these youngest filmmakers, filming is a form of play. In general, once the film has been recorded, the child loses interest in it. We propose to call children's digital video recordings "orphaned films," not only because they are generally destined for oblivion, but also because they are not claimed by their very own makers. Instead of studying these digital "home movies" within the tradition of domestic media practices, we take them as a starting point for discussing children's contribution to media archaeology as a practice, that is, as a concrete engagement with media's materiality and temporality. By probing the borders between recording and recorded, for instance, children intuitively create connections between the past, the present and the future of the moving image. They are resisting the planned obsolescence of today's technological devices by repurposing them, by turning them into playful tools and by using them to explore not only the world around them but also the limitations and potentialities of the media.

Keywords: Children, digital filmmaking, orphan films, media archaeology, play.

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Resumo

As crianças de hoje começam a fazer filmes digitais ainda muito jovens através do uso de smartphones, câmeras compactas e outros dispositivos móveis de mídia. Para estes cineastas mais jovens, filmar é uma forma de brincadeira. Em geral, uma vez que o filme tenha sido gravado, a criança perde o interesse pelo mesmo. Propomos chamar as gravações de vídeo digitais das crianças de "filmes órfãos," não apenas porque são geralmente destinados ao esquecimento, mas também porque não são reivindicados por seus próprios realizadores. Em vez de estudar estes "filmes caseiros" digitais dentro da tradição das práticas da mídia doméstica, tomamos como ponto de partida para discutir a contribuição das crianças para a arqueologia da mídia como uma prática, ou seja, como um compromisso concreto com a materialidade e a temporalidade da mídia. Ao sondar as fronteiras entre gravação e gravado, por exemplo, as crianças intuitivamente criam conexões entre o passado, o presente e o futuro da imagem em movimento. Elas estão resistindo à obsolescência planejada dos dispositivos tecnológicos de hoje, redirecionando-

os, transformando-os em ferramentas lúdicas e usando-os para explorar não apenas o mundo ao seu redor, mas também as limitações e potencialidades dos meios de comunicação.

Palavras-chave: Crianças, produção de filmes digitais, filmes órfãos, arqueologia da mídia, brincadeira.

Introduction: Filming for Oblivion?

In this article, we engage with a type of film that has not yet been carefully addressed by film scholars: digital “home movies” made by today’s children. So far, research on children’s films has mainly focused on material made within the educational context of schools and media literacy workshops, on the one hand, and on its use as research tool in fieldwork, on the other. Such research is mostly conducted in the realm of social sciences (WILLETT et al., 2013; WILLETT, 2009). Within the field of film studies, however, the negligence of research on children’s films can be understood in relation to its disciplinary tradition that is historically rooted in literature studies and art history – a tradition that, for a long time, has taken a rather ambivalent position towards objects produced in the context of ephemeral, utility, amateur or nontheatrical filmmaking. Yet, in the last two decades, there has been a growing sensibility and interest in those “marginal” film practices and objects, as, for instance, industrial films, educational films and home movies (with a strong focus on pre-digital ones) (ACLAND; WASSON, 2011; ORGERON; ORGERON; STREIBLE, 2012; HEDIGER; VONDERAU, 2009; MASSON, 2007; ISHIZUKA; ZIMMERMAN, 2008). Last but not least, social media has become – among many other things – incubators for the proliferation of amateur media practices triggering an increased scholarly interest, also among film scholars. Even if research on those so-called marginal objects within film studies has helped sharpen and differentiate our understanding of the significance of moving images in past and contemporary societies, digital home movies and especially those made by children have not obtained much academic interest so far.

One might say that the home movies made by today’s children are “orphaned” because of this neglect of attention from film scholars. They are academic orphans: abandoned, left aside, not seriously taken into consideration. But they are also destined for oblivion in more general terms. Often, the films are found by the children’s parents by pure coincidence – during a backup of a smartphone or the transfer of a full memory card to a computer. If not deleted immediately, most of them are soon erased from memory, for being considered trivial, badly made or of no significance beyond the “institution” in which they have been made – beyond the everyday child’s play. Yet, as we discuss below, the films are also abandoned by the young filmmakers themselves. In other words, we

propose to call them "orphaned films" not only because they are not considered worthy of preservation and, therefore, are easily forgotten, but also because they are not claimed by their very own makers¹.

Our own scholarly interest in children's orphaned films is inspired by our respective expertise in home movies (SCHNEIDER, 2004, 2018) and media archaeology (STRAUVEN, 2013, 2015). In this article, we aim at combining both perspectives, by exploring how this new domestic media practice of today's children can be conceptualized as a contribution to media archaeology. Similar to the field of nontheatrical film research, media archaeology has transformed from a marginal into a legitimate research framework over the past fifteen years. At the same time – and this is important for our current project – we are not so much interested in the transformative process of nobilization or canonization of previously neglected perspectives, but rather in the epistemological challenges that marginal objects and practices can offer us as scholars.

After further explanation of our media-archaeological approach, we first propose to counter the dominant discourse on contemporary children's use of mobile media devices by means of a thought experiment that will explore the idea of rethinking children's digital filmmaking practice along the practices of drawing and crafting with pencil and paper, by revisiting some early scholarly discussions on children's drawings in the 19th century, namely the work of Corrado Ricci (1887) and Rodolphe Töpffer (1858). This will then offer us a possible framework for the analysis of some digital home movies made by young children. As it is the case with home movies in general, the question of how to discuss private material is also at stake here: a thorough description is in need as the examples are not accessible to other researchers. Yet, as we will argue, it is not only the films themselves we need to engage with, but also the whole practice of filmmaking as a form of activity or play, which includes the process of shooting (SCHNEIDER, 2004).

Children's Filmmaking as Media-Archaeological Activity

While one of the initial objectives of media archaeology was to counter dominant views (ELSAESSER, 2004; ZIELINSKI, 2006; HUHTAMO; PARIKKA, 2011; PARIKKA 2012),

¹ With this notion of "orphaned film" we want to give a little twist to the more commonly used term "orphan film" which is described by the organizers of the biannual Orphans Film Symposium as follows: "Narrowly defined, it's a motion picture abandoned by its owner or caretaker. More generally, the term refers to all manner of films outside of the commercial mainstream." Among the long list of about 25 different types of orphan films that follows this definition, there is no mention of children's films: <http://www.sc.edu/filmsymposium/orphanfilm.html>. The authors gave a presentation on children's films at the 12th Orphans Film Symposium in Amsterdam 2014, of which the present article is a further elaboration.

today it tends to become a rather dominant view itself. Even more problematic, in our view, is the fact that it is often used as a fancy buzzword or smokescreen for all sorts of historical research. We understand media archaeology as a specific method of rethinking the temporality, materiality and potentiality of media. We also think of media archaeology as a form of creative (or conceptual) hacking, of circuit bending the false image of linear history and of creating disturbance in prevailing preconceptions (STRAUVEN, 2013, 2015). Therefore, we are adopting Siegfried Zielinski's (1996) definition of media archaeology as activity or *Tätigkeit*, which he borrows from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Media archaeology, for Zielinski (1996), is something that you do or execute. Likewise, we propose studying children's domestic media practices as media-archaeological activities. In their play, children often "imagine" media applications by actually applying them, and, by doing so, they offer an alternative, playful use for existing media devices.² Their imagination is more than just a fantasy or mental fabrication; it is instead a concrete practice. Children are not merely undergoing the impact of media in their daily life, but becoming creative media practitioners who, as true media archaeologists, engage with the different temporal and historical layers of media (past, present, future) and the possibility of rethinking media history in a plurality of possible genealogies.

The focus of the present article lies on today's preschoolers and first graders who are making their own digital films with small photo-cameras, smartphones and tablets, that is, the new "toys" of their parents that they appropriate very quickly. For these young filmmakers, filming is a form of play. The play is a combined act of filming and watching, that is, of making a film and watching the very same film at the very same time on the embedded LCD screen of the photo-camera or the screen display of the smartphone. As mentioned above, once the film has been recorded, the child generally loses interest in it. While they like to watch, over and over again, clips taken by parents or relatives in which they appear as protagonist, children rarely watch their own self-made films.

One could say that the child is cleverly overruling today's digital camera recording process. Especially the cameras of the first-generation smartphones, whose tiny lenses were "basically crap," largely relying on algorithms that "clean the picture from the noise," or better that "define the picture from within the noise" (STEYERL) by scanning previously taken pictures stored on the phone and trying to match faces and shapes. Only very little of what hits the lens goes to the recorded file. However, young filmmakers seem less

² Our interest in children's digital filmmaking is part of a larger ongoing research project that also looks into hand-made media devices (SCHNEIDER; STRAUVEN, forthcoming). As for our "classical" references to children's play, see HUIZINGA, 1985; CAILLOIS, 1967; BATESON, 1972; SCHWARTZMANN, 1978; SUTTON-SMITH, 1997. A good overview from a contemporary games studies perspective can be found in JUL, 2003.

interested in the recorded file than in the recording itself. They engage in real time with what they see on the embedded screen, while they are filming it. In other words, they somehow mess up the "logic" of the digital recording process, because they still "need" 100% of what hits the lens for their playful filming experience (before the actual recording is taking place, that is, before the filmed data is transferred to a digital file). This is a very subtle way of playing with the temporality of the digital media, which is one of the central issues in today's media-archaeological research.

When we study children's digital film productions, we have to be careful not to turn them into "proper" films, that is, films to be watched. The "orphaned film" somehow requires a different look, which is more focused on the process of making. Or, to put it in media-archaeological terms: working with this type of film helps us to reflect on the issue of different temporalities, or the temporal gap that exists between watching the real-time engaging with the recording process and watching the playback of what has been recorded. Even if we are re-imposing the "old-fashioned" way of watching films, this is part of the research process as a form of hacking. It is a reflection on our own film studies perspective. Working with this material also forces us to think of film studies as part of media studies, or to study the orphaned films with the eyes of media scholars rather than as "traditional" film scholars. Digital filmmaking not only implies other parameters (i.e., restrictions and potentialities) than analog filmmaking, but it also penetrates the fields of telecommunication for its common use of the smartphone, of computer sciences for its algorithm-based recording process, of web studies for its diffusion via social media platforms. Furthermore, as media history scholars, we also like to intervene in the ongoing media literacy debate, by going beyond its educational scope as well as its typical bad vs. good argumentation.³

From Anxiety to Progress Pedagogy: Ruskin, Ricci, Töpffer and beyond

As film and media historians, we know about the anxieties, fears and even phobias that new media devices and practices have evoked in pedagogical discourses in the last centuries.⁴ First, books were considered dangerous for children's souls, then, movies, television, videogames, computers and, now, handheld devices provoke fear among parents, educators and politicians. Such a media-risk approach has proven to be rather

³ Critical discussions of the media literacy debate can be found, for instance, in BUCKINGHAM, 2003; HEDIGER, 2013.

⁴ The return of anxieties and hopes that new media bring about is one of the topoi pointed out by Huhtamo (1996) in his media-archaeological quest.

unilateral, not taking into account how those “bad” media can, for instance, stimulate the child’s imagination or help develop certain (technical or motoric) skills. Instead of wondering what kind of digital competences (or film techniques, for that matter) children should develop, we would rather locate our research within a genealogy of studies that focus on children’s creative play as a way of world-making and on children’s art, in particular the rich tradition of studies on children’s drawings.

In 1857, English art historian John Ruskin (1857, p. ix) wrote the following lines:

I do not think it advisable to engage a child in any but the most voluntary practice of art. If it has talent for drawing, it will be continually scrawling on what paper it can get; and should be allowed to scrawl at its own free will, due praise being given for every appearance of care, of truth in its efforts. It should be allowed to amuse itself with cheap colours almost as soon as it has sense enough to wish for them.

In this quote, taken from *The Elements of Drawing*, Ruskin captures very well the various aspects we have identified in the children’s digital film production: it is a voluntary practice, a form of amusement, with tools that are cheap and within reach. So, why not applying the commutation test and rephrasing the quote as follows:

We do not think it advisable to engage today’s children in any but the most voluntary practice of filmmaking. If they have talent for filmmaking, they will be continually filming with whatever camera they can get; and should be allowed to film at their own free will. They should be allowed to amuse themselves with cheap equipment almost as soon as they have enough sense to wish for it.

By this simple operation of substituting “drawing” with “filmmaking,” one realizes how provocative this sounds – even in 2021. But instead of asking why and to what extent filmmaking is not considered as much an artistic practice as, for instance, sculpting and painting, this little exercise of thought hints at a possible future of rethinking media literacy from a different perspective.

As educationalist Jürgen Oelkers (2009) has shown, it was the growing interest in children’s creativity – as practiced in drawings – that paved the way for the so-called progressive education movement. Thus, if the media literacy debate wants to evolve into a more progressive undertaking, it may need to pay more attention to children’s creative interaction with media. For the study of children’s spontaneously made films, it is useful to look into the history of the studies of children’s art, especially for understanding how these studies emancipated and started to focus on the inherent qualities of the child’s artistic

practice. As art historian Jo Alice Leeds (1989, p. 93) has pointed out in "History of Attitudes toward Children's Art":

Not until the nineteenth century was the spontaneous drawings of young children thought worthy of adult study and comment, and not until the early twentieth century did radical changes in aesthetic standards allow child art to be appreciated on its own aesthetic terms.

In her overview of early and original thinkers regarding children's drawings, Leeds mentions the Italian Corrado Ricci and the Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer. Ricci is the author of *L'arte dei bambini* (The Art of Children, 1887), which can be considered as truly pioneering: it is the first systematic study of children's art, based on a large corpus, and it is also one of the very first attempts to really engage with children's art for its own sake, from the standpoint of the child's logic. Leeds (1989, p. 97) observes that Ricci "showed a deep empathy with children's work, and he wisely refrained from passing aesthetic judgment on it." Unlike others before him, "who merely noted children's drawing mistakes from the point of view of visual realism, he offered insight into the actual forms of logic from which child art is constructed" (LEEDS, 1989, p. 98). In other words, Ricci did not study the children's drawings from the "visual logic of adults," but as drawings made by children, according to their own logic – precisely like we propose doing with the children's films. Despite the title of his book, Ricci claims that children are not driven by the desire to render their subjects artistically. They are less concerned with optics than with the wholeness (or completeness) of their subjects, which often results in mixed or combined perspectives: think of houses with three walls or faces in profile with two eyes (RICCI, 1887, p. 11).

Different from Ricci's approach, Töpffer is considering children as natural-born artists. According to the Swiss cartoonist, the untutored child is more an artist than the apprentice painter, because the former is not yet bound by conventional skills and, therefore, much more free in his expression. Töpffer recognized the vital intention in children's scribbling. In one of his 1830s essays on the so-called *petits bonshommes* (little doodle men), which are rapidly sketched rudimentary figures typical for comics and cartoons, he made a comparison with human figures drawn by children. According to Töpffer (1858, p. 261), children draw their object "not as a representation of itself envisaged as beautiful, but as a sign of an intention, of a caprice, of an elementary beauty that may be rough and crude indeed but which issues at last absolutely and exclusively from the power of thought." Töpffer (1858) opposes the human figures doodled by kids to the little doodle men drawn with the intention of imitation. Or, putting it differently, he suggests understanding the act of doodling as an intention of thought, which is "infinitely

more pronounced and successful” and even reveals “the first or the real birth of art” – art as free, creative conception.

Both Ricci’s idea of the logical mistake and Töpffer’s notion of thoughtful intention inform our discussion of the orphaned films, which we propose reading from the viewpoint of the child’s logic. Filming is, of course, a different practice than drawing, with its own limitations and potentialities, and its own histories, both as professional *métier* and as amateur activity. To point out the continuity, as well as some significant discontinuities, with the pre-digital home movie tradition, we will start our discussion of home movies made by children with an example that takes us back to the early 1950s. In the next sections of the present article, we describe a group of orphaned films, made by young children between 5 and 8 years old. Ethical issues that are recurrently discussed in the context of home movie research and archiving also apply to the material we are researching: how to credit these young filmmakers, how to give them an identity without jeopardizing their privacy? But also, more importantly, how to respect their original intention, often limited to the context of play, as already suggested above?

Inside Children’s Orphaned Films

1. *Making Remakes*

In the early 1950s, at the Belgian coast, in Knokke-le-Zoute, some friends and relatives went for a Sunday afternoon stroll on the sea promenade. They had rented a pair of those famous pedal cars, or *cuisse-tax* (taxis powered by thighs), as they call them in Belgium. Mr. S., an architect and amateur magician, had brought his Bell & Howell 8mm camera with him. On this particular afternoon, he filmed his son F. and a cousin, each on their own *cuisse-tax*. Then, something rather unexpected happened: Mr. S. handed over his precious camera to his 10-year old son and allowed him to shoot a short fragment. The reason behind this initiation into (amateur) filmmaking might have been less motivated by the desire to turn his son into a filmmaker than by an urge to get on the *cuisse-tax* himself and become the “star” of a few seconds of film.⁵ Then another unexpected event happened: at the beginning of the take, it seems the son tries to imitate the father’s take. But, suddenly, he pans away in order to catch sight of a much faster *cuisse-tax* that takes over his father on the left of the screen. Next, the son pans back to his father. It is a rather quick movement, almost unnoticeable, yet very powerful. One could say that the young

⁵ About the trope of self-inscription of home-movie makers, see SCHNEIDER, 2004.

filmmaker makes a "mistake" by not holding the camera fixed on his subject, or his protagonist, by moving it too quickly. It is exactly in its roughness that lies the "power of thought," as Töpffer (1858) would argue.

With a total running time of about 1 minute, this 8mm home movie consists of two separate takes, one taken by the father and one taken by the son. Between the two takes, the camera is handed over from adult to child. One could call the second take a remake, since the son tries to re-shoot the same scene from the same camera position as his father did in the first part. Yet the remake is "disturbed" by the spontaneous and quick panning of the camera. The intuition of the son is to follow with the camera what he considers the most interesting action to shoot: the fast boy surpassing Mr. S. For an instant, the young filmmaker has realized the potentiality of filmmaking – to look for action, movement, surprise and attraction. On the other hand, it is almost a school example of motivated camera movement according to Hollywood filmmaking.

More than 60 years later, in the very same city at the Belgian coast, a 5-year-old girl, named L., is shooting a digital film and again the issue of remake becomes pertinent. This time the location is not the sea promenade but the holiday apartment of the girl's family. As a matter of fact, L. is the granddaughter of F., the boy of our previous example. At the age of three, she "inherited" her mother's old yet still fully functional photo-camera, a Canon Digital IXUS 80. In the beginning, L. would mainly take still pictures, occasionally also "selfies," for which she needed to turn around the camera and point the lens towards her. In the summer of 2013, she started shooting little films. The Canon camera has on its rear panel a sliding mode switch that permits very easily to go from still photography to video recording (and playback mode). This specific IXUS model still comes with a viewfinder. However, the child operating such an "obsolete" device prefers to look at the embedded LCD screen while filming – not only because this is how they see adults doing it, but also because it allows watching the recording process, for experiencing the filming as filming, and at the same time for exploring the world around them with new (digital) eyes.

The film L. makes in the holiday apartment is a good example of this double dimension of experience and exploration. Yet there is more at stake: while she is filming, L. is actually explaining to her friend E. how to shoot a film. At the beginning of the film, we hear L. saying that if you see the red dot, "then you are filming." Film scholar Karl Sierek (1995) once described the home movie as a kind of prolongation of the gaze of the filmmaker. L.'s film, which lasts 34 seconds, could be described in those same terms. By means of the camera, she rediscovers the space of the apartment: she shows it to the

camera, by walking and dancing from one room to the next, and at the same time she shows her friend around, demonstrating how to make a film. There is a certain rhythm and pace resonated in the improvised real-time soundtrack and, for a brief moment, L. is visible in the mirror of one of the bedrooms. It is a glimpse of her reflection, captured by the camera.

After being instructed about filmmaking by her friend, the 5-year-old E. makes her own film, which starts off with the same framing as the "original" and lasts one second less. The remake has a clear beginning and a clear ending. Off-screen we hear L., this time in the role of an assistant director, saying: "Now you are filming"; and at the end she asks: "Is it turned off, is it turned off?" E. answers: "It is finished." While L. was clearly rediscovering (or re-experiencing) the spatial dimension of the apartment when shooting her film, E. is less concerned with the space itself. This might be due to the fact that the apartment does not have much emotional meaning for her. She is just a visitor – those rooms are not hers. She is not filming the apartment but an imaginative script, by closely following the instructions of her assistant director, producer and friend. Her film is more about the joint experience of a friendship and the joint playful act of filmmaking. In other words, the act of filming becomes an act of friendship, of playfulness, of shared experience among kids. At the same time, with their play, they negotiate their understanding of what they consider to be "a film" and how to make one.

Compared to our first example of the early 1950s, which also consisted in some kind of shared experience, albeit intergenerational and less playful, there are several "technological" differences to be pointed out. First of all, we are dealing with a rather inexpensive and common camera, nothing precious like a Bell & Howell. Furthermore, this new digital equipment is no longer (only) in the hands of the *pater familias* but belongs to (or is "inherited" from) the mother. Indeed, the role of the mother in this new child's play would need further attention. In more technical terms, filming with inexpensive digital cameras do not (or not easily) allow for in-camera editing. In fact, L.'s "original" and E.'s "remake" are saved as two separate files. This is the case with all the orphaned films made by today's children: every film consists of one single take, saved as an individual file. Maybe we should not consider the films as films, but rather as takes – also because children tend to shoot specific moments, or actions, over and over again, as if it were indeed different takes to choose from. But here we are again thinking in old-fashioned, traditional film historical terms. Another obvious difference with the 1950s is, of course, the addition of color and sound.

The girls' joint act of filming did not end here. After her first exercise as film director, E. made a second remake which lasts almost three times longer than L.'s original: 1 min. 22 sec. The shared experience of filming is again underscored by the soundtrack. This time, however, L.'s instructions become more insisting, even a bit obnoxious. The soundtrack starts as follows:

*L.: "Keep straight! Keep straight all the time, okay? You need to keep it straight. Keep straight, keep straight."
E.: "But I keep it straight!"
L.: "Are you going to film me as well?"*

And, then, more towards the end:

*L.: "Is it now finished? Is it finished? Yes? Is it finished?"
E.: "No!"
L.: "Is it never finished? Is it finished?"
E.: "No, I still need..."
L.: "Are you going outside? Are you going to film outside? Are you going to film outside here?" [She is pointing outside the window, which is the only window of the apartment with a partial view of the sea.]
E.: "Yes."
L.: "Good, good... Is it stopped? Shall I ... stop it?"
E.: "No not yet."
[Adult intervention, L.'s mother: "Soon you won't have enough memory on the card. You rather stop now."]
E.: "It's ready."*

In this second remake, the respective mothers make a brief appearance as improvised or accidental "extras," one is busy with her smartphone, while the other is reading a paper on the couch. With exception of the end, they do not intervene.

Conceptually, two interesting issues are at stake here: the remake as repetition and the principle of the rule-based game. Whereas E.'s first video would qualify as a filmic remake in a very strict or literal sense insofar that it not only copies the framing of the original, but it even has a nearly identical running time, her second one is closer to an adaptation. It differs from L.'s initial video not only in length but also and especially in terms of *mise-en-scène*: E. decides to focus on details, like a hand-made paper flower, and she is also rather determined to make a short video portrait of the two mothers. Most importantly, she does not permit L. to take over full control. In terms of playing, one could describe the first apartment-remake as an imitation that was made within the framework of a competition between the two filming girls, while the second one is rather structured by their negotiation or renegotiation of rules. Here Roger Caillois's (1967) distinction between free play (*paidia*) and rule-based game (*ludus*) becomes problematic, as it does

not allow for taking into account the role of rules in the child's (free) play. Yet E.'s second remake clearly hints to the very common practice of ad-hoc games with negotiable (or non-negotiable) rules. Young children tend to establish very specific rules in their play or self-invented games (in particular, the pretend play: I am the princess, you are the prince, I do this and you do that, etc.). Often, they even come up with some basic scripting of their playing experience beforehand. This is exactly what happens in L. and E.'s shared filming experience. Different to codified rules, their rules are moldable. As noted by child psychologist Singer (2013, p. 175):

With young children the rules and the structure of play are still simple and loose, and they can easily be changed during the course of the play. The play of young children often has the character of a repeated series of actions. [...] Through repetition and variations on series of actions, young children together with [...] other children "co-construct" a shared play-reality.

According to Singer, we can describe the child's remake as a form of repetition, which applies well to the above case of the two filming girls, who most probably did not know the concept of a remake at that age. Their play was more about showing, teaching, sharing and repeating something. The remake as repetition can be connected to the practice of children endlessly repeating their games as a form of pleasure.⁶

Besides the pleasure of repetition and the negotiation of rules, the above-discussed remakes are also good illustrations of children intuitively playing with media: the play of filming transforming itself into the play of making a remake. This intuitive exploration of the potentialities and temporalities of media is the core argument in our next group of film practices.

2. *Playing with Media*

The next film in our analysis is made with a smartphone, which has become the most common (film) camera among the youngest generation. In most cases, the owner of the repurposed phone is not the child, but his or her parent or caregiver. Even if, in such cases, the child is expected to ask permission, films are often made without the parent noticing it and only discovered during a backup of the phone. The 6-year-old N. made a seemingly simple recording of a new toy, a low-tech gadget, that she obtained for free

⁶ Repetition here needs to be understood beyond the repetition compulsion described as a reaction to trauma, exemplified by the Fort-da-Spiel as discussed by Sigmund Freud.

with a children's magazine. The gadget is supposed to mimic a kind of electronic optical toy, each of its buttons combining a minimal light show with an equally minimal melody. Yet it remains rather opaque in terms of operability. Nevertheless, the girl found a way to turn it into something playful: by placing it on top of a closed laptop and filming it from above with a slightly shaking camera, she makes the toy move, as it were, without physically touching it. Another important aspect is that, while filming, she hums along. This somehow reinforces the illusion of the movement. We could say that the girl animates the toy by filming it, and that her film, which only lasts 17 seconds, is becoming a form of "animation." In short, the meaningless object has become a toy for her imagination, which resonates with the child's practice of "imagined" media as we briefly discussed in our introduction.

Another tendency that we have noticed is that children make video recordings of moving images as they appear on all kinds of screens in their home, from the TV set to the computer monitor. In other words, they are filming screens on which films (such as their favorite cartoon or TV program) are being displayed. Those videos resonate with the phenomenon of the "Let's Play videos," which have become a popular YouTube genre (GLAS, 2015). Like in the case of the remake, we do not claim that the filming children are consciously referring to those media formats. Yet, by analogy, we propose to call children's screen recordings of what they are watching as "Let's Watch videos." As their commodified twin, the Let's Watch videos can be understood as meta-media videos. Often, it becomes also an exercise of good framing, of holding the camera/smartphone straight and trying to show the entire computer screen or TV set within the frame. Moreover, a double viewing mode is at stake: the filming child is watching the cartoon on the small screen of the recording device, which is recording the actual cartoon being displayed/broadcast on the bigger screen – which could again be seen as a creative play or interaction with different temporalities of the media.

Another peculiar example of meta-media play is the recording of short videos during an app-based game, the Fold Man. The Fold Man app is a digital version of the Surrealist game *Cadavre exquis* (*Exquisite corpse*) which dates back to a drawing version of the parlor game *Consequences*. Taking turns, players draw a part of a body on a sheet of paper, fold it to conceal the drawing, and then pass it to the next player for a further contribution. In the app-version, at the end of a drawing round, you have to wait through a countdown of a few seconds until the final result is revealed on the screen. The final drawing of a Fold Man round always gets stored in the picture album. As an additional feature, the app also offers the possibility to record the waiting process with the front-facing camera of the device via an extra button on the interface. By using this extra option,

a short video is recorded during the countdown. Most of the time, there is not much to be seen in those videos as the players are often out of frame, sometimes showing parts of their face or hair, but most often you just see the ceiling of the room as the smartphone or tablet is on a table or one of the players' lap. The recorded meta-media countdown, or "Let's Wait video" as one could call them, bears a media-archaeological resemblance to the 1970s Polaroid waiting time, that is, the common waiting for the proper development of the classical, analog Polaroid photograph. However, as the action takes place in the off-space of the image, the main interest lies on the soundtrack capturing reactions about the final result, such as laughter or cries of astonishment or disappointment. It is in these acoustic traces that the Polaroid-moment becomes most palpable.

3. "Singies"

As already exemplified by the previous cases, the soundtrack is an essential dimension in the film practices of today's children. We have noticed that many kids tend to sing along while they are filming. Instead of commenting what they are filming, they use their voice as some form of musical accompaniment. This ranges from soft humming and random la-la-la to newly created, improvised songs. Like the filming, the singing is an act of play, or rather it completes the act of playful and individual filming. This is at stake when the 6-year-old M. makes a selfie video, for which she uses a special toy camera, the Kidizoom by Vtech. This device has on its top a lens that can be physically moved and turned around, from back-facing camera ("normal camera") to front-facing camera ("selfie-camera"). When M. is filming herself, she sings along. Off-screen, we hear one of her younger sisters asking: "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?!" She is clearly annoyed that her bigger sister is so absorbed by her combined act of filming and singing – an instance of non-shared experience.

We would like to mention two other examples of filmed songs, or "singies," where the song is at the center of the creative act. One is a rap song, improvised and filmed by the 6-year-old N., who also filmed the low-tech gadget. This time, she is filming one of her teddy bears, a little wolf, called Nora. While filming in a quite similar way, from above and somewhat shakily, she now sings as a true rapper: "Nora, she is mega nice, mega mega, mega nice [...] On the phone of mommy, mega, mega nice, mega, mega nice." (Length: 14 seconds). The second example, made by another girl at the age of 5, is inspired by and based on the lyrics of a popular age-old Italian song, entitled "Girotondo." The song is actually a playground singing game, very similar to "Ring a Ring o' Roses." It consists of

dancing in a circle while holding hands and falling down on the ground at the end of the song, which goes like:

Giro giro tondo (Turn, turn around)
Casca il mondo (The world is falling down)
Casca la terra (The earth is falling down)
Tutti giù per terra! (Everybody's sitting down!)

In her filmed version (with a total running time of 29 seconds), the girl is literally dancing with the camera. She adapts the lyrics of the original song for her own purpose, referring, for instance, to the act of filmmaking ("everything, everyone, is falling down, in the little film") and to her grandmother who appears in the film, taken from the typical low-angle child perspective.

Children's songs as playground games have a long tradition as objects of study in the field of children's folklore, or *childlore* as it is also sometimes called (OPIE, 1959; MARSH, 2008). In today's digital age, children are still playing playground games, an experience that is reflected by their individually created films or other "media texts." In an article on playground games and rhymes in the new media age, Jackie Marsh writes about this mixing of practices:

Many children in developed societies are consumers and producers, from a very young age, of a range of media texts that involve a variety of playful and creative practices [...]. The "mediascapes" (Appadurai 1996) of today digital cultures seep into all aspects of children's lives, including playground activities (MARSH, 2012, p. 509).

One could also say that the above "singies" are not just mixing existing media practices, but that they are instead hacking them: the girls are hacking into pop-culture (rap) and folklore (nursery rhyme) by repurposing songs, adapting them for their own purpose, that is no longer a street music genre or a traditional playground game, but a soundtrack for their intimate filming. This brings us to another curious aspect of children's digital film practices: hacking by playing.

4. *Hacking and Formats*

Our next protagonist, the 5-year-old boy T., also often sings along his filming, for which he always uses the front-facing camera (or selfie mode) of the iPhone. Instead, when he is taking still images, he uses the "normal" camera. It seems that he connects the *still*

image with the clicking sound of taking a picture and the *moving* image with the movement feedback mirrored by the display. Yet, there is more at stake: he also uses the front-facing camera for shooting non-selfie videos. Or, putting it differently: he hacks the selfie mode for making non-selfies. In one of his films, he is, for instance, walking and humming in the apartment, holding the vertically oriented iPhone rather low and, thus, making ceiling shots, trying to capture – by means of the front-facing camera – his little sister who is running away in front of him. The film, which lasts 37 seconds, is quite “chaotic” and has an experimental touch. This is, of course, due to the cumbersome action of making a non-selfie with the selfie-camera. We can only try to appreciate the effect of this kind of filming if we surrender ourselves to the “illogical,” yet very consistent, style developed by the little boy.

Our last film is made by an 8-year-old boy, named N., who used his mother’s iPhone to film an ingenious construction he made with Kapla blocks. He is not just documenting the construction, but actually trying to capture the action of a toy train running through it. The young filmmaker encountered a little problem that forced him to deviate from his imagined script. Because, suddenly, he had to use both hands: one to manipulate the camera and one to fix the action, since the little train derailed. The film still has a beginning and an end, as the boy had supposedly planned, but the action in between is obfuscated. We can hardly manage to see anything, if not the non-action. Yet it is precisely this little “accident” that makes the 42-second-long film interesting, for the concentration (and frustration) of the silent filmmaker can be felt. The accident becomes the new unexpected attraction, somehow similar to the unplanned panning in the very first film we discussed.

Like T., N. is using the vertical framing mode. Probably he did not choose this type of framing in function of the film’s object, which might have been easier to capture in a “traditional” horizontal framing. Most likely, N. chose the vertical format because it has become the new default mode of filming with a smartphone. Many smartphone films, also those made by adults, are vertical films. In this sense, children are contributing to the reinvention, or reemergence, of vertical cinema.⁷ The question, however, remains if it will persist as a cinematic mode. The same can be said about cell phone cinema in general. So-called pocket film festivals, dedicated to this new compact form of filmmaking, do not seem to last very long; after a couple of editions, they disappear, destined for oblivion.⁸ This is precisely the reason why we believe more attention should be given to children’s

⁷ See for instance the special shorts screening of “vertical cinema” at the 2014 International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR): <https://www.iffrr.com/en/Combinedprogrammes/shorts-special-vertical-cinema-2014/>.

⁸ A good example is the French Festival Pocket Films that was launched in Paris in 2005 and that had its last edition in 2010. See their non-updated website: <http://www.festivalpocketfilms.fr/>.

spontaneous and creative filming practice. Because by turning the act of filming into a play, they somehow resist any form of obsolescence.

Conclusion: Potentialities of Small Formats

Instead of offering a typology of films, this article aimed at an ideal-typical grouping of children's various digital film practices that belong – as it has hopefully become clear – to different (media) genealogies, such as drawing, animation, folk and pop songs, dance and portrait painting. Ideal types in a Weberian sense do stress certain elements that are common to most cases of the given phenomena, but are not meant to correspond to all characteristics of a particular case of a phenomenon. The number of the groups is also not exhaustive. In fact, one important practice that we have not addressed here as such is the children's selfie video (SCHNEIDER; STRAUVEN, 2018). This practice perfectly shows how different aspects can be combined in one and the same film, and should therefore not be considered separately. Firstly, the kid selfie (like the adult selfie) is often part of a series of selfies, revealing itself, thus, as a serial practice of repetitions or remakes; secondly, the kid selfie in particular is also clearly a playful interaction with the concept of selfie as a new media practice; thirdly, in many selfie videos, the young filmmakers are singing (instead of merely posing) in front of their mirrored selves; and, lastly, the vertical format is often chosen over the horizontal one.

With their digital filming practices, today's children are intuitively exploring potentialities and temporalities of media. Even if they often "orphan" their films right after the filming process, they are resisting, with their filming, the obsolescence of today's mobile media devices. It is a cinematic orphanhood that calls for attention. The children's films help us reflect on our own film studies perspective, since they raise important media-theoretical and media-historical questions: How to conceptualize our object of knowledge? How to engage with the multiplicity of genealogies of any given media practice? How to relate, connect, disrupt text and context, production and reception? So far film scholars have paid little attention to digital films made by children. If there is research done, it is mainly concerned with films made in an adult-controlled setting, where teachers or parents help children make better films. But what does that mean, "better films"? For whom and why so?

By discussing a group of digital films by children, we hope to have offered some insights not only into the manifold layers of an increasingly mundane time-based media practice of young children. What once was the realm of filming fathers – the production of

moving image memories of private lives on small gauge and later diverse amateur video formats – is nowadays being challenged by our filming daughters and sons. Their “orphaned films,” if saved from oblivion, will not only leave traces of their childhood but also of (past) media cultures and practices.

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