Researchers whose work falls under the multidisciplinary umbrella of childhood studies are accustomed to thinking creatively. “The traces of childhood found in archives and special collections,” Karen Sánchez-Eppler notes, “may tend toward the ephemeral.” Sánchez-Eppler also acknowledges the difficulty of finding the child’s perspective in the archive, pointing out that “[r]ecords of childhood and records made by children have been housed in archives and library special collections all along, although they have usually been classified in a manner that tends to obscure rather than highlight their presence.” Childhood studies has much in common with certain areas of media history. For instance, many scholars of childhood and practitioners of media archaeology contest teleological models of history that conform to a kind of “developmental paradigm,” and researchers in both fields maintain similar orientations to the archive as a repository to be interrogated and reinterpreted for missed perspectives. During the research for my book on nineteenth-century optical toys, I became used to venturing into archival spaces that did not register immediate or obvious connections to cinema

2. Sánchez-Eppler, 221.

and media history. I spent a month at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts—an institution that endeavors to collect “everything printed in what was once British North America before the year 1877.” Yet their outstanding children’s literature collection includes several intricate movable and novelty toy books, which adapted pre-cinematic visual effects and gestured to experiences of spectacle and spectatorship that cinema would further institutionalize.

Optical toys appear in the collections of such institutions as the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood in London, and the Cotsen Children’s Library at Princeton University, where they are not typically or primarily regarded as objects of media history but for their relevance to the history of childhood. These objects’ inclusion across such varied collections demonstrates Sánchez-Eppler’s assertion that classificatory systems can conceal some associations just as much as they can illuminate others. Excavating the significance of optical toys as toys required archival encounters that sought these artifacts embedded within the visual and material worlds of childhood rather than within networks of meaning that prioritize the optical effects they produced (which have served as the primary basis for their link to the invention of cinema). Resituating these toys in this way opens up opportunities to view their functions as instruments of perceptual pedagogy, not as oppositional to the pleasure they afforded in play but as closely linked. If evidence of film and media’s longer history is distributed in such diverse archival contexts, interwoven with other narratives, to what other unexpected sources might we turn to trace histories that have remained under-considered? Moreover, can familiar texts in cinema history be reread to point us to previously overlooked forms of evidence?

A new research project on the history of toys that come “to life” brought me to accounts of the origins of stop-motion animation and to a passage in Albert E. Smith’s 1952 memoir, Two Reels and a Crank. Smith recalls making a film called The Humpty Dumpty Circus in 1897 or 1898—shortly after he and James Stuart Blackton founded Vitagraph studios: “Vitagraph made the first stop-motion picture in America, The Humpty Dumpty Circus. I used my little daughter’s set of toy wooden circus performers and animals, whose movable joints enabled us to place them in balanced positions. It was a tedious process inasmuch as movement could be achieved only by photographing separately each change of position.” The film is not extant and may never have been made at all. If the film had been made, Donald Crafton hypothesizes, it was

7 Albert E. Smith and Phil A. Koury, Two Reels and a Crank: From Nickelodeon to Picture Palaces (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), 51.
not until later, between 1902 and 1905. Smith’s claim to have made *The Humpty Dumpty Circus* in 1898 is not widely believed by animation historians (and indeed, it can be disproven). However, his statement also raises an intriguing link between early animation and children’s play culture. This unexplored connection suggests a striking historiographic oversight and is thus an example of the tendency in animation history to disavow the form’s associations with childhood (often through the declaration that animation is more than kids’ stuff). Smith’s recollection that his daughter’s playthings inspired an early animated film presupposes that certain animation techniques were made possible because of kids’ stuff. In addition to this association with triviality, toys—like other historical sources referred to in this dossier—are ephemeral, primarily meant to be used during a particular phase of life, then cast aside. Smith’s reference to his daughter’s toys points to an alternate archive by raising the question: “What toys?”

The Humpty Dumpty Circus playset was made by Philadelphia-based toymaker Albert Schoenhut beginning in 1903 (i.e., after the 1898 date in Smith’s memoir) and was a bestseller through the 1920s (Figure 2). The toy line included a wide range of posable figures, such as a ringmaster, clowns, a lion tamer, and acrobats, and a large menagerie of posable animals. Accessories, including a tent, circus ring, chairs, and ladders, helped to set the scene. Expansion sets included characters such as Max and Moritz and Teddy Roosevelt in Africa. Schoenhut’s toys do appear in several early animated titles: there is a brief cameo in Vitagraph’s own *The Haunted Hotel* (J. Stuart Blackton, 1907) as well as an extended sequence in Arthur Melbourne-Cooper’s *Dreams of Toyland* (1908). These cinematic appearances indicate that although Smith’s dating was inaccurate, the link he draws between Schoenhut’s toys and early animation is verifiable.

The connection between animation history and Schoenhut’s toys yields two related insights concerning possibilities for expanding media studies’ archive. First, as objects relevant to the history of cinema, toys point to collections and sources of knowledge that media historians may not have considered. Hallmarks of American toymaking, Schoenhut’s circus figures are held in museums and widely collected privately. There was an exquisite collection of circus figures at the Philadelphia History Museum, which closed for financial reasons in 2018, and an extensively illustrated forty-eight-page promotional pamphlet at the Library Company of Philadelphia, two institutions that mark the toys’ importance in relation to the city and its innovations. More extensive, intimate knowledge of the Schoenhut figures and their materiality circulates in private collecting communities. As Elana Levine’s contribution to this dossier demonstrates, the enthusiasm and in-depth knowledge of these communities can be of greater aid to researchers

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than encounters with similar sources in institutional contexts. Schoenhut’s circus figures are actively sold on auction sites such as eBay at price points ranging from under one hundred to thousands of US dollars (for larger lots or complete sets). The Schoenhut Collectors’ Club is an active organization that holds an annual convention, maintains a comprehensive identification guide to Schoenhut toys (including playthings such as musical instruments and dolls), and publishes a full-color quarterly magazine. I am not a collector myself, yet I may look to the collecting and conservation practices of collectors’ communities for in-depth insights about these objects. For instance, Schoenhut collector Jim Sneed offers “restringing” and “respringing” services to repair the internal armatures of rubber, metal, and string that hold the circus figures’ limbs together—labor that suggests a wealth of knowledge about the figures’ inner workings.¹¹

Such intimate familiarity with these toys’ material attributes—indeed, expertise in how these figures move—may hold vital implications for understanding the role of objects in film and animation history. Only in recent years have scholars begun to rethink the hierarchies that cast as peripheral media’s material cultures (such as licensed merchandise and action figures related to franchises such as Star Wars [George Lucas, 1977]).¹² Philipp Dominik Keidl, for instance, argues that action figures themselves might be better understood

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as forms of media. In contrast to narrative or thematic inspiration, the circus figures’ posability made them suitable for stop-motion production; their material qualities thus informed moving-image aesthetics and technique. The fan and collecting cultures that animate Schoenhut’s historical toy box may thus offer surprising material and conceptual perspectives to contemporary research in areas such as media industries and fandoms.

Second, a discovery that highlights the centrality of toys within early animation points to a new vein of material culture inquiry in film history research more broadly. Research on the Humpty Dumpty Circus sets is a distinct permutation of what Jonathan Gray calls “off-screen studies.” While Gray’s formulation emphasizes the pivotal role of film and television paratexts for promoting and making meaning with media franchises, Schoenhut’s circus figures suggest rich possibilities for researching materials not inspired by media but that have inspired media production. Regarded thus, Schoenhut’s circus figures function similarly to paratexts in that they “condition... passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiat[e] or determin[e] the trajectories among” text, audience, and industry. Yet the role of Schoenhut’s figures in early animation is difficult to classify: Are they characters? Are they props? In her critical investigation of one of the falcon statuettes featured in The Maltese Falcon (John Huston, 1941), Vivian Sobchack argues that the prop “partially constitutes what we call ‘film history’ [and] it also props up and supports an immaterial yet consequential structure of more general and labile cultural affects, meanings, and functions,” much like the role of Gray’s paratexts. Similarly, Paul Gansky traces the history of the oversized scissors prop used in a sequence in Spellbound (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945), contending that props can, among other things, aid in “a unique historical reconstruction of below-the-line cinematic” labor.

Extant Schoenhut circus figures are probably not the actual objects that have appeared onscreen—unlike the Maltese falcon statuette and Spellbound’s enormous scissors. Nor do they bear the singularity of other “paracinematic” objects, such as Colleen Moore’s Fairy Castle, which, as Amelie Hastie has demonstrated, serves as a key material component of Moore’s archive and legacy. It is unlikely that we can determine whether any extant Schoenhut figures actually appeared onscreen (in The Humpty Dumpty Circus or any other film). They are not Smith’s figures, but for all purposes, they are identical to those used in early animation. In this way, the circus toys reveal how material objects offer new forms of evidentiary utility in film history. In contrast to the scissors in Spellbound or one of the statuettes in The Maltese Falcon, existing

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14 Gray, Show Sold Separately, 4.
15 Gray, 23.
Schoenhut circus figures are a material inventory of potential actions. They do not necessarily disclose what any individual user did with them (although they could, for instance, in traces such as bite marks). Nevertheless, their physical affordances indicate all the possible ways that historical users may have manipulated them. Identifying onscreen objects beyond basic descriptive details can help researchers speculatively imagine not only the meanings with which the objects may have been invested (such as connections to childhood and play) but also how their associations and material attributes may have informed filmmaking aesthetics and techniques.

Schoenhut’s circus figures demonstrate that archives of media history can be found in unlikely places. In some instances, historical texts such as Albert E. Smith’s apocryphal story also offer clues about where to start looking. This particular case gestures to possibilities for opening up materialist inquiry beyond investigating singular or authentic objects to the study of the mundane, mass produced, or ephemeral. While toys such as pre-cinematic optical devices have historically appeared at the periphery of media history, their under-considered status as ludic objects points to new directions in historiographic work. The Humpty Dumpty Circus reaffirms the rich potentials of embracing considerations of play and playful objects as the practices and materials of media production. Intersections between media studies and related fields such as childhood studies can reveal shared critical commitments, novel methodological insights, and evidence that has been overlooked—or that can be looked at through fresh perspectives.

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