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5. Fears of the dark: children, young people and the cinema during the First World War
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Darkness was central to the discourse which surrounded children and the cinema during the

First World War when some adults viewed the cinema positively, as a safe refuge from war-

darkened winter streets, but others blamed the cinema's darkness for concealing sexual

immorality and enhancing children's susceptibility to demoralising film content. This chapter

examines how the equivocal nature of wartime darkness intensified many familiar adult fears

and anxieties yet also sanctioned children's autonomy and sense of community. It argues that

research emphases on children's agency should pay greater attention to power dynamics

between children and young people and to the peer and age distinctions which during wartime

reinforced yet also fractured the subversive freedoms experienced in the cinema's darkened

spaces.

Darkness was a key motif in how moral elites defined young people's relationship with the

cinema in the early decades of the twentieth century, when poorly lit auditoriums were perceived

as perilous moral and psychological spaces for children. Darkness's long history of associations

with evil and sin in western thought entrenched 'negative understandings of darkness' in modern

regulatory schemes and bourgeois values' and found expression in middle-class preoccupations

with the cinema's moral dangers.[1] Darkness did, however, have more ambivalent meanings

which this chapter suggests in exploring the intricacies of children's engagement with the cinema

during the First World War. It argues that the war made generational experiences more

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[1] Tim Edensor, 'The gloomy city: Rethinking the relationship between light and dark', *Urban Studies* 52 (2015), pp. 424, 435.

distinctive, triggering new tensions between children of different ages and transforming the

darkened cinema milieu into a volatile 'emotional frontier' where 'official behaviour norms'

encountered children's more subversive ones, albeit inflected by the power dynamics of peer

and generational relationships. [2] The chapter makes explicit the relationship between spatial

experiences and emotions and extends research which has argued that 'the experience and the

enjoyment of the social space' in the cinema 'were at least as important as the entertainment

projected on the screen'.[3] Its novel interpretation of the cinema's darkened liminality and

nuanced appraisal of children's autonomy and agency contributes to the new cinema history,

suggests new directions for the history of emotions and adds to the scholarly literature on

children's experiences in the First World War, which over the last two decades has grown to

become part of the broader and expanding history of childhood and youth.[4]

Wartime cinema

Cinema-going among young people had already become a dominant leisure activity in Britain

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[2] For extended discussion of 'emotional frontiers', see Stephanie Olsen (ed.), *Childhood, Youth and Emotions in Modern History: National, Colonial and Global Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[3] Luke McKernan, '"Only the screen was silent...": Memories of children's cinema-going in London before the First World War', *Film Studies* 10, (2007), p.1; Sarah J. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to Dead End* (London; New York: IB Tauris, 2005). For the relationship between architecture, spatial experiences and emotions, see Henry Francis Mallgrave, *Architecture and Embodiment: The Implications of the New Sciences and Humanities for Design* (London: Rooutledge, 2013).

[4] The new cinema history, which emerged in the 2000s, emphasises the social and cultural experiences of cinema-going over filmmakers and film texts. For examples, see Daniël Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds, *Cinema, Audiences and Modernity: New Perspectives on European Cinema History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012). Histories of the silent cinema in Britain include: Julie Brown and Annette Davison, eds, *The Sounds of the Silents in Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Trevor Griffiths, *The Cinema and Cinema-Going in Scotland, 1896-1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Kevin J. Donnell and Ann-Kristin Wallengren, eds, *Today's Sounds for Yesterday's Films: Making Music for Silent Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Lawrence Napper, *Silent Cinema: Before the Pictures Got Small* (New York: Wallflower, 2017). For an innovative example of how the contribution that the history of emotions is making to the history of childhood and youth, see Olsen, *Childhood, Youth and Emotions.*

before the First World War, especially in poor urban districts.[5] Attendance expanded even further during the war years, when it encompassed about 90 per cent of the elementary school population aged 8 – 14.[6] The cinema was described as 'the only organisation' to provide amusement for children *systematically*, and spending there outpaced that on other forms of entertainment.[7] Silent films had attracted moral censure before the war, but the 'abnormal excitement' and emotional volatility which accompanied the war helped crystallise government recognition of the implications of the cinema's hold over the popular imagination. The erosion of traditional disciplining structures and relationships in children's lives also heightened awareness of its 'profound influence upon the mental and moral outlook of millions of our young people'.[8] With 'wise guidance' the cinema might 'be a powerful influence for good', but if 'neglected' or left 'unchecked', its 'potentialities for evil' were 'manifold'.[9]

At a time when much of children's play in working-class communities took place outside in local streets, crofts and parks, the cinema's novelty was enhanced by the indoor nature of its entertainment. Other than school, the cinema was the largest interior space to bring together hundreds of children of all ages at the same time, its thrill enhanced by darkness, which was said to 'exaggerate the emotional effect' of films to a marked degree.[10] The war accentuated well-established cultural fears about young people's vulnerability to emotional manipulation, yet the cinema's social and cultural value remained equivocal, criticised yet valued by some as an agent

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[5] Luke McKernan, 'Diverting Time: London's cinemas and their audiences, 1906–1914', *The London Journal* 32, (2007), pp. 125-144. For early cinema audiences, also see Nicholas Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', in Karel Dibbets, Bert Hogenkamp, eds, *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995).

[6] *Cinema Commission of Enquiry, The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917), p. li.

[7] *Cinema Commission*, p. 6; Mark A. Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narratives from 1900 to 1945* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 20

[8] Ibid., p. xx1.

[9] Ibid., p. xxi.

[10] Ibid., p. lviii.

of modernity which challenged ways of seeing and understanding.[11] The war also reinforced more pragmatic appreciation of the benefits of cinema-going. From October 1915, regulations were introduced to reduce street and household lighting and advertising illumination in urban areas. These were applied inconsistently, with some places subject to a complete blackout and others relatively unaffected. Their impact was, however, considerable in urban areas like London, where 'streets were tunnels of blackness on moonless winter nights' and the hazards of reduced lighting inclined many to the opinion that the picture house was often 'a safer place than the streets'.[12] In the nineteenth century, the development of lighting on urban streets had been a means of controlling 'nocturnal public morality' and its reduction in some towns and cities during the war reinforced familiar fears of crime and transgressive activity, mapping onto the cinema's sexualising darkness, which was similarly fashioned by long-established associations with 'libidinal desires' and 'trangressive sexuality'. [13]

The moral preoccupations of moralists and religious reformers focused such sexual anxieties. The social purity movement had turned its attentions to the cinema after 1906, when rapid expansion highlighted its popularity among large working-class audiences, who were deemed especially susceptible to the dangers of darkness, as they sat intimately with strangers, watching morally unsuitable films.[14] This moral crusade against the cinema entered a second phase during the war when the dislocations of the adult world eroded behavioural boundaries and heightened perceptions of the cinema as 'a sexually polluted social space' in which

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[11] For the moral panics which surrounded young people's leisure, see John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

[12] Alan G.V. Simmonds, *Britain and World War One* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 163-4; *Cinema Commission*, p. 167.

[13] Tim Edensor, *From Light to Dark: Daylight, Illumination, and Gloom* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 82, 173.

[14] Dean Rapp, 'Sex in the cinema: war, moral panic, and the British film industry, 1906–1918', *Albion*, 34 (2002), p. 422.

'objectionable practices' took place under cover of darkness and threatened to corrupt 'large numbers of film-going children and adolescents'.[15] In the 1900s, adolescents had been defined as a 'youth problem' and the war aggravated this identity, giving rise to a moral panic about youth between 1915 and autumn 1917, which was inspired by mounting prosecutions for juvenile delinquency and unease about young people's sexual behaviour.[16] Middle-class concerns about children's moral vulnerability had grown in the nineteenth century, when attempts to regulate and direct their lives by institutional means included the establishment of a national educational system in the 1870s and the extension, from the 1880s, of adult control over young people's leisure through the organised youth movement. Working-class children, who were among the most frequent cinema-goers, fitted uneasily into these attempts to supervise their lives because they did not adhere to middle-class expectations of behaviour. The war only intensified concerns about their conduct. Parents employed for long hours on war work or away at the war front meant that home and leisure lives were less supervised, while schooling was often disrupted due to larger class sizes and the call-up of male teachers, replaced by women or older men called out of retirement. Youth organisations in urban areas, which might have offered alternative recreation and adult supervision as before the war, were badly affected by the closure of clubs due to the involvement of youth organisers and workers in military activities. [17] Communities were disrupted and family relationships disturbed by varying degrees of insecurity. More than 3 million people lost a close relative, son or brother. Over 340,000 children lost one or both parents. Many more lost a brother or close relative.[18] The 'secondary bereaved', who were

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[15] Rapp, 'Sex in the cinema', p. 424; *Cinema Commission*, p. lxxxvii.
[16] Rapp, 'Sex in the cinema', p 434.
[17] *Cinema Commission*, p. 96.
[18] Richard Van Emden and Steve Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front: An Oral History of Life in Britain During the First World War* (London: Headline 2003; Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2017), p. 100.

mourning cousins, uncles, sons-in-laws, workmates, friends or neighbours 'encompassed

virtually the entire population'.[19] People needed emotional distraction, which included the

cinema, and work and economic and social independence. For those in their teens, this included

earning adult wages in the war industries, a considerable boost to the self-determination of

adolescent boys, especially those whose fathers were conscripted, while many adolescent girls

found more opportunities to evade traditional domesticity in employment and greater autonomy

in leisure choices. Adolescent freedoms not only challenged adults but reinforced uneasiness

about the future of younger children that was accentuated by an apparent rise in juvenile

delinquency. This helped shape a potent discourse about the decline of adult authority, although

women in working-class communities had little time for such concerns, dealing as they had to

with the daily worries of wartime and the urgency of finding adequate childcare, which was often

resolved by sending children to the cinema.

The cinema's childminding function had been significant before the war, when many

young children attended second-house performances in the evening 'simply because their parents

do not like to leave them unattended at home'.[20] This childminding role became even more

important during the war when working mothers received little childcare support, yet the

temporary enrichment of war work enabled them to pay for their children to go to the cinema

more frequently.[21] 'Tired-out mothers working hard during the greater part of the day' were only

too glad to know that their children could go to 'an interesting entertainment such as the cinema'

and enjoy 'themselves out of the dangers and risks of the street', especially in the dark winter

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[19] Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg 1994; London: Bloomsbury 2014), p. 19.
[20] *Manchester Courier*, February 5, 1914, p. 10.
[21] *Cinema Commission*, pp. 41-2.

months, when there was little else to do. [22] The meanings of darkness were shaped afresh in

wartime by needs for warmth, intimacy and distraction. Mothers and children escaped cold

homes in the warm comfort and community of the cinema, where the 'little cares of the children'

and the 'bigger difficulties of their elders could be temporarily dispelled'. [23] Pragmatic

appreciation of its benefits meant working-class families viewed children's relationship with the

cinema benignly, much like Sunday School; a safe space which gave parents some rest and kept

children 'out of harms way'. [24] Many in the police also approved of the cinema's childminding

role, seeing it as helping to reduce the problem of street nuisance. The chief constables of

Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen all agreed that cinemas 'as a rule' had proved to be of benefit

to those who patronised them; 'an educative, morally healthy, and pleasure-giving

entertainment'. [25] Middle-class mothers similarly valued the cinema's utility as a baby-sitting

service, especially during the school holidays. One woman, who wrote to the *Daily Mail*

protesting 'as a mother against the majority of kinema films exhibited before audiences

consisting mostly of children', nevertheless managed to swallow her dislike of them, as she

admitted that the 'expense of travelling and food' meant the greater number of school children

would 'have to find amusement and recreation there in the afternoon. 'Mothers are glad to send

them to the kinema during the holidays. They know they are safe from the dangers of traffic in

the streets and are glad to get rid of them in this way during the long summer vacation. [26]

  If working-class parents and middle-class mothers continued to view the cinema as a safe

place for children, the war made the question of how to control young audiences more

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[22] Ibid., pp. xliv.
[23] *Evening Telegraph and Post*, 27 March 1917, p. 4.
[24] *Cinema Commission*, p. 189
[25] Ibid., p. xl.
[26] *Daily Mail*, 14 July 1916, p. 4.

problematic.[27] Labour shortages and the absence of many men 'trained in the delicate task of supervision' compromised the quality of cinema attendants.[28] The cultural and physical authority of male supervision which had helped hold young audiences in check before the war was often replaced by that of less-respected younger women and by the employment of casual and older staff, whose often lax supervision worsened problems which had already attracted concern in peacetime.[29] In 1916, for example, the press highlighted several cases of sexual molestation of children by adults in darkened cinemas, which intensified debates over the need for regulation. The London County Council (LCC) sought to take action in London cinemas by proposing that all adults should be excluded from seats set aside for unaccompanied children.[30] This faced objections, however, from the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, which claimed that it would prove too difficult to reserve special accommodation for children, because younger children used a range of strategies to slip into performances intended for older age groups. Evening showings in many authorities excluded those under 14 but younger children still managed to gain entry by the simple expedient of being 'smuggled in by strangers' to whom they gave their entrance fee.[31] In Liverpool, the principal of a local school found that of the pupils who attended evening performances in a single week in 1916, 40 per cent were smuggled in, to mix with older children and adults.[32] The industry argued that refusing adults entry would not only penalise those who had been asked by children to take them in but would also inflict hardship on many smaller halls which would have to turn adults away, despite still having many

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[27] *Cinema Commission*, p. 267.
[28] Ibid., p. xxix.
[29] Ibid., p. 91.
[30] The Cinematograph Act of 1909 gave county and borough councils the power to issue licenses and specify their own conditions, so problems in cinemas were treated differently, depending on their location. *Cinema Commission*, pp. 23-25.
[31] Ibid., p. 29.
[32] Ibid.

vacant seats.[33] The LCC backed down, accepting the Association's proposal that cinemas should employ an attendant with 'a distinguishing badge' whose sole duty was to look after children in the audience. It also regulated, at the suggestion of the Chief Commissioner to the Home Office, that the lights should go up after every picture, something to which many cinema proprietors objected because children left in the dark were thought less likely to be disruptive than when the cinema was flooded with light.[34]

The Association aimed to protect smaller cinemas which were squeezed by increased taxation and inability to expand as cinema employees were called up or turned to alternative, better-paid war-related employment. By 1918, between 700-800 cinemas out of a national total of 4,500 had closed, including many smaller halls.[35] Such pressures made the cinema industry sensitive to preserving its young audiences, which were a substantial and profitable part of the cinema business, and alert to the importance of displaying respectability and steering the conversation about the need for greater state control and censorship. Thus, mindful of calls for regulation, in late-November 1916, the Cinematograph Trade Council, on behalf of Britain's leading cinematograph organisations, approached the National Council of Public Morals (NCPM) to request an 'independent inquiry into the physical, social, moral, and educational influence of the cinema, with special reference to young people'.[36]

The NCPM agreed to the request against a momentous year in the war's history. Universal conscription, introduced on 25 May 2016, had been followed shortly after by two of the bloodiest battles of the First World War, the third Battle of Ypres (31 July - 10 November

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[33] Ibid., p. 25.
[34] Ibid., p. xxvi; McKernan, Luke, 'Diverting Time', p. 136.
[35] Jon Burrows, 'Penny pleasures II: indecency, anarchy and junk film in London's 'nickelodeons', 1906-1914', *Film History* 16 (2004), pp. 193-4.
[36] *Cinema Commission*, p. vii.

1917), commonly known as Passchendale, and the Battle of the Somme (1 July - 18 November 1916). As the bloody consequences of military action came closer to the home front, government doubts about the value of film in propaganda faded, exemplified by its support for the first feature length documentary to chronicle the war, *The Battle of the Somme*, based on frontline footage by Geoffrey Malins and J.B. McDowell.[37] The film was distributed to cinemas in autumn 1916 and shown to crowded houses, attracting 20 million admissions in its first six weeks, including many children.[38] Darkly graphic footage of dead and wounded British soldiers was criticized as disrespectful and some suggested that such films 'ought not to be seen by children at all'.[39] For others, the 'undoubted' educational value of 'official war pictures' was considered much more acceptable than the suggestive, 'coarsening' storylines of typical cinema fare.[40] Of 7,000 children canvassed about the 'moving pictures' they most preferred, more than 10 per cent selected war pictures, such as *The Battle of the Somme*, *The Battle of the Ancre* and naval scenes. The 'excellent' descriptions they gave of such films were thought to demonstrate the 'great benefit' they had derived from seeing 'the best kind of evidence of what was going on at the Western Front', enabling them to form 'a far more intelligent conception of the nature of warfare than would be possible by means of reading or class instruction'.[41] *The Battle of the Somme*'s popularity was important in showing the cinema as much more than a 'trivial diversion for the working-class', powerfully demonstrating the propaganda and educational value of moving images, and the advantages of exploiting their social potential.[42]

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[37] For British film propaganda, see Nicholas Reeves, 'Official British film propaganda', in Michael Paris, ed., *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
[38] Andrew Shaill, The Cinema and the *Origins of Literary Modernism* (London: Routledge), p. 178
[39] *The Common Cause*, 1 September 1916, p. 258.
[40] *Cinema Commission*, p. 345; George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002: London, Palgrave, 2015), p. 189.
[41] *Cinema Commission*, pp. lx-lxi.
[42] Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda*, p. 20; *Cinema Commission*, p. xxiv. For the significance of the Battle of the Some in the history of the cinema in Britain, see Emma Hanna, 'British cinema, regulation and the war

The rising toll of deaths and injuries on the war front, which attuned politicians, the judiciary and public commentators to future national reconstruction, also sensitised the NCPM's religious, educational and scientific leaders to the cinema's effects on young cinema audiences. Its *Cinema Commission of Inquiry*, conducted between 8 January and 9 July 1917, was the first major survey to examine the social impact of the cinema across the United Kingdom. Besides written submissions, 43 witnesses gave evidence, including representatives from the cinema industry, education workers, religious leaders and doctors. Several schoolboys and schoolgirls were also interviewed, and some were asked to write essays, although their answers played a small part in the report and largely conformed to adult expectations, which was hardly surprising, given the tendency to quiz them with closed questions.[43] The Commission's report, *The Cinema: Its Present Position and Future Possibilities*, published in October 1917, illustrated the cinema's importance to children as a space where social interactions and meanings were often more important than what happened on the screen. It addressed their collective identities and individual vulnerabilities, yet also neglected how the social and economic transformations which changed young people's lives during the war had added new tensions to cinema audiences now differentiated more clearly by age, gender and generation.

Age, gender and generation

The war brought greater adult responsibilities to many children, at home and in the workplace. Local authorities in some areas relaxed restrictions on hours of employment, allowing children to enter the workforce earlier than they would previously have done. 600,000 12 year-olds went to

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effort, 1914–1918', in Andrew Maunder, ed., *British Theatre and the Great War, 1914-1919: New Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[43] *Cinema Commission*, p. xxii.

work 'prematurely' as half-timers in the early years of the war, when their workplace experiences introduced them to older attitudes and expectations which spilled over into leisure activities and influenced how they regarded themselves and their relations with other children.[44] Different cohorts of the young in cinema audiences included half-timers, young workers in their teens, older and younger children who were still at school and children who had not yet started school, yet who were often taken unwillingly by older siblings, because harassed parents wanted to get them out of the way. One reluctant 'babysitter', who had his baby sister in tow, resorted to the impersonal pronoun to observe rather tellingly, how 'it is four and a half years old'.[45]

Young people in their teens who were employed full-time spent many more hours and longer continuous periods in work than before the war. Lengthier hours compressed the amount of time available for leisure activities, although higher earnings meant they could afford to spend more on the cinema during their limited leisure periods, rather than hanging around on the streets, which may have helped reduce juvenile delinquency in some areas. 35% of boys were engaged on war work, as labour shortages led wages in some occupations to grow by 40-50 per cent.[46] Boys aged fourteen to sixteen were 'getting men's wages' and factory employment increased among girls, often attracted by higher wages to jobs whose 'deadly monotony' created 'an enormous demand for definite recreation and pleasure in the evening', which frequently involved the cinema.[47] For adolescents even more than younger children, evening cinema visits were 'a time for trying to be someone' it was impossible to be during daytime. 'A time for

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[44] Gerard DeGroot, *Back in Blighty: The British at Home in World War One*, (London: Vintage Books, 2014), p. 220; Robb, *British Culture*, p. 196.
[45] *Cinema Commission*, p. 209.
[46] For how children were mobilised during the First World War and what the war meant to them, see Rosie Kennedy, *The Children's War: Britain, 1914-1918* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[47] *Cinema Commission*, p. 204; *Western Daily Press*, 14 October, 1916.

meeting people you should not, for doing things your parents told you not to do'.[48] Courting

couples, freer than before the war, gravitated to the darkest corners, where they were less likely

to be observed.[49] Younger children took possession of the cheapest seats, closest to the brilliantly

illuminated screen, where the film's flickering was most intense and whose luminous spectacle

illustrated the advancement of illumination synonymous with modernity and the modern city.[50]

The cinema's darkness intensified 'absorption in these shifting patterns of light on-screen',

reducing other sensory distractions, heightening experience and focusing children's minds in

ways which enhanced their visual memories and powers of recall and suggest the tacit skills and

learning many picked up informally outside school.[51] Dr. C.W. Kimmins, an educational

psychologist and Commission member, who asked children to write essays about the war, found

one of the 'the most striking' results to be the 'remarkable power' that older children had 'of

giving good accounts' of films they had only seen once'. [52] In one school, where about thirty

girls had promised their teacher in 1914 that they would not go to the cinema during the war,

those who kept the promise still managed to recall many details of films they had seen in

peacetime.[53] Children who frequented the pictures tended to have a wider 'fund of general

knowledge' than those who did not and the speed with which they picked up the thread of a

film's story and identified the various characters 'amazed' the occasional visitor, who often

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[48] Ilse van Liempt, Irina van Aalst, Tim Schwanen, 'Introduction: geographies of the urban night', *Urban Studies* 52 (2015), p. 408.
[49] *Cinema Commission*, pp. 29, 240.
[50] Ibid., p. lxxxvii.
[51] Edensor, *From light*, p.175.
[52] *Cinema Commission*, pp. lvi, 272, 275. Kimmins initiated a study of 6,701 children during the war. He was Chief Inspector of Schools for the LCC between 1904 and 1921, although his educational work has, until recently, been largely neglected. For an assessment of his studies on children's reactions to the First Word War in London, see Assaf Mond, '"It is at night-time that we notice most of the changes in our life caused by the war": war-time, zeppelins, and children's experience of the Great War in London', in Louis Halewood, Adam Luptak, Hanna Smyth, eds, *War Time: First World War Perspectives on Temporality* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 103-122.
[53] *Cinema Commission*, pp. 275-6.

missed point after point and confused one face with another.[54] The poor visual quality of many films, compounded by bad lighting, frequently criticised for harming children's eyesight, hardly helped.[55] Specialised labour shortages made it difficult to find staff to repair faulty projectors and the employment of young, inexperienced projectionists meant films were often out of focus.[56] 'Used and worn prints' aggravated the problem of a 'broken' and 'fragmented' 'mode of vision'.[57] Nonetheless, the 'flash-like and disjointed succession of movement characteristic of early silent cinema', far removed from children's everyday perceptions of reality, entranced and held their attention in ways which many educationists envied. Progressive teachers understood the cinema's success in enthralling and enthusing pupils and its capacity to illuminate knowledge and were sympathetic to its potential as an educational tool, so different from the dull rote learning to which school children were accustomed.[58] Children themselves suspected such enlightened intentions, declaring they would not pay to go to the cinema 'if they knew the films were to be mainly educational'.[59]

Age, gender and generation all inflected the meanings of cinema darkness during wartime. Girls' freedoms were more limited than those of boys and in many poor urban districts, the frequency with which girls could attend the cinema was curtailed by them having to take on more domestic tasks to support their mothers who were out at work.[60] In poorer parts of Manchester, where the number of working mothers increased during the war, older girls had less

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[54] Ibid., pp. lxvi – lxvii.
[55] Edensor, *From Light to Dark*, pp. 54.
[56] *Cinema Commission*, pp. lxxxvii-lxxxiii.
[57] Alastair Phillips, *City of Darkness, City of Light: Émigré Filmmakers in Paris, 1929-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 11; Stephen Gaunson, 'The 'Picture' habit: Bad decorum and delinquents at the Silent Cinema', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 14, (2017), pp. 610-11; *Cinema Commission*, pp. lxxxvii-lxxxiii.
[58] *Cinema Commission*, p. xl.
[59] Ibid., p. lviii.
[60] Ibid., pp. 189: 9.

time for leisure because they had to spend more time helping out at home. Girls who lived in slightly better-off areas outside central Manchester also attended the cinema less frequently than boys, because parents supervised their activities very closely and often mistrusted the cinema's reputation.[61] Boys' street freedoms, on the other hand, developed not only their spatial confidence but entrepreneurial activities which often trickled over into the cinema auditorium, where trading opportunities took place under cover of darkness. The later second house in the evening was especially profitable for selling papers and other wares.[62] Such entrepreneurial efforts supported metaphors of intrigue and conspiracy. The Exeter Head Teachers' Association described how boys 'plotted very cleverly to get money to attend the picture palaces and to treat one another'.[63] In Manchester, boys banded together every evening as a 'begging society' to get money to go to the pictures, hiding their boots and stockings and taking to the streets to beg. Their enterprise only came to an end when one of the society's members stole his mates' boots and stockings and pawned them.[64]

14 was an important age boundary in the cinema, which set older children apart from younger ones. Yet if young workers over 14 were less strongly identified with childhood, they still shared leisure settings with younger children and had power and influence over them. In Grimsby, towards the end of 1918, where an outbreak of influenza caused the authorities to bar from cinemas children under 14, whose schools had been closed due to the pandemic, the ban became another entrepreneurial opportunity, as young ones refused admittance returned with birth certificates to 'prove' that they were older than 14, having hired them for 1d from older

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[61] Ibid., p. 162.
[62] Ibid., p. xxxix.
[63] *Western Times*, 31 May 1916, p. 3.
[64] *Nottingham Evening Post*, 6 March 1917, p. 3.

children who passed them on to those waiting outside.[65]

The dimmed cinema surroundings which allowed children much unsupervised freedom brought the gendered power of youth relations to the fore. Older boys and girls were capable of befriending and bullying younger children and the changes in children's school and work lives which the war brought about possibly intensified boys' dominance of cinema space, where male energies had long driven the boisterous atmosphere. In London, a girl aged 14 described the Cable Street Cinema as 'a very noisy cinema' where 'very often the children were turned out', and where 'the grown-up boys also made a considerable noise and were very rowdy'.[66] Older boys bullied younger and quieter boys, and girls. Pulling girls' hair, 'rough play', throwing orange peel and snatching their hats off were common and horseplay easily degenerated into something worse.[67] Mrs Basil Henriques, who ran clubs for girls and boys in a very poor district of East London where local cinemas had 'very bad reputations, observed how she had seen boys behave in 'a very nasty manner towards the girls' and gave a specific instance of a 'gross act' she had herself observed.[68]

The cinema's darkened spatial layout, designed with adults in mind, presented sexual risks which the war may also have intensified. The promenade or standing room at the back of many cinema buildings was described as hazardous to children and cinema vestibules were also a 'danger point', especially for young girls.[69] The *Cinema Commission* urged 'strict supervision to prevent loitering and the possibility of children being accosted'.[70] Children filled seats at matinee performances, when many adults were at work, but these audiences were not adult free spaces,

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[65] *Daily Mail*, 11 December 1918, p. 3.
[66] *Cinema Commission*, pp. 243-4.
[67] Ibid., pp. 21.
[68] Ibid., pp. xxv, 240.
[69] Ibid., pp. xxv.
[70] Ibid., pp. lxxxix.

comprising parents with their children, children on their own, younger children, those in their teens, and solitary adults, including adult males, whose attendance may have been encouraged by the Entertainment Tax on cinemas and theatres, introduced in May 1916, which raised the price of admission and disproportionately affected the cheapest seats.[71] A halfpenny surcharge on tickets up to 2d 'dramatically' brought down cinema audiences, although a reworking of the tax, which 'had restricted adult attendance to particular times of the day', now allowed adult admission to children's matinees and possibly encouraged more adults to move to cheaper matinee performances.[72]

Paul Moody's study of London cinemas during the war, based on police reports and private correspondence, illustrates how often the indecency which took place under cover of darkness was ignored. Men were observed entering unsupervised toilets with young boys and organized child prostitution was known to take place in some cinemas, in some cases possibly instigated by older children.[73] Officials tended to equate indecency with 'acts of non-consensual and solicited sex', yet consensual acts, prostitution and child abuse were often conflated. Cinema staff were known to ignore sexual behaviour between adults which took place under cover of darkness. In some cases cinema attendants were themselves complicit in turning a blind eye to inappropriate sexual behaviour, taking money from men in return for sitting them among either boys or girls.[74]

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[71] John Spiers, '*Berwick Silents: How the Cinema Came to Town*' (2015) p. 11. (http://www.berwickfriends.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/BERWICK-CINEMA-text.pdf, accessed 8 February 2019).

[72] McKernan, 'Diverting time, p. 136; Paul Moody, '"Improper practices" in Great War British cinemas', in Michael Hammond, Michael Williams, eds, *British Silent Cinema and the Great War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 52.

[73] Moody, '"Improper practices"', p. 54.

[74] See Alex Rock, 'The "khaki fever" moral panic: women's patrols and the policing of cinemas in London, 1913–19', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 12 (2014), pp. 57-72; Moody, '"Improper practices"', pp. 54-5.

Large numbers of soldiers stationed in garrison towns and London changed the dynamic of sexual relations and fuelled moral concerns about the behaviour of working-class young women. [75] The phenomenon known as 'khaki fever' which broke out across Britain in the early years of the war, encapsulated the excitement that soldiers in uniform provoked among working-class girls in their teens.[76] Many aged between 14 and 17 hung around cinemas, tea shops and cafés in London's West End, known meeting places for soldiers.   Cinema proprietors, attuned to the broader influences which were changing popular entertainment in urban areas, confronted accusations that they fostered immorality by emphasising the difficulties of monitoring who attended. The 'abnormally darkened conditions of the vestibules of cinemas in the early evening' were, for example, said to make it 'exceedingly difficult to detect the character of women seeking admission'.[77] In London, where prostitution near cinemas was described as a considerable problem, the industry displaced moral concerns onto women refugees from France and Belgium.[78] Sexual activity between courting couples was similarly minimised because young people in their teens and early twenties were such an important part of evening audiences, which cinema proprietors were keen not to lose. The Cinematograph Exhibitor's Association (CEA), by playing down suggestions of indecency in cinemas, influenced the Committee's conclusion that child molestation in cinemas was exaggerated.[79] Children's vulnerability remained veiled by the

[75] *Cinema Commission*, p. vii.
[76] Ibid.; Angela Woollacott, 'Khaki fever and its control: gender, class, age and sexual morality on the British homefront in the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29 (1994), pp. 325-347.
[77] *Cinema Commission*, p. 84.
[78] Ibid. The attempt to 'control and manage' the sexual behaviour working-class girls and young women was assumed by middle-class women in women patrols, touring streets, parks, cinemas, dance halls and music halls in the evening, and approaching girls and young women seen as at risk, enjoying the novel freedoms of darkness that those they pursued also experienced. Woollacott, 'Khaki fever', p. 336. For different types of women patrols and attempts to police female sexual behaviour, see Viviene Cree, '"Khaki Fever" during the First World War: a historical case study of social work's approach towards young women, sex and moral danger', *British Journal of Social Work* 46 (2015), pp. 1839-1854.
[79] For juvenile prostitution and child sex abuse, see: Adrian Bingham, Lucy Delap, Louise Jackson, and Louise Settle, 'Historical child sexual abuse in England and Wales: the role of historians', *History of Education* 45 (2016), pp. 411-429; Alyson Brown and David Barrett, *Knowledge of Evil. Child Prostitution and Child Sexual Abuse in*

difficulty of proving allegations against sexual predators, as had also been the case before the

war.[80] Children were fearful of divulging that something had happened to them, may not have

known how to describe the abuse, or were groomed by receiving some kind of reward, in the

form of sweets or payment for a seat. Working-class children had a reputation for precocity and

well-established tropes of working-class girls sexual promiscuity informed female fears of

publicity and how their accusations would be treated. Sir Robert Wallace, who chaired the

County of London Sessions, pointed out to the Commission that many cases never ever came to

trial simply because the girls or women who were 'the object of the assault' shrank from having

their names 'connected in any way with a thing of that kind'.[81] Prosecution itself was

problematic. The age of consent had been raised in 1885 from 13 to 16. Sex with girls under 13

was a serious felony, but sexual intercourse with girls over 13 and under 16 was a less serious

misdemeanour. Lack of corroboration meant men could often get off with a defence that the girl

had consented because the her evidence was regarded as unreliable: too 'knowing', 'coached',

or 'conniving'.[82] In the relatively few cases that were successfully prosecuted, offenders were

often treated leniently with a light sentence.[83]

Peer-on-peer abuse and adult molestation of girls and boys were clearly problems in

cinemas, although their prevalence is difficult to gauge. Evidence was often distorted by tensions

between moral outrage and local authority pragmatism, as had been the case before the war,

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Twentieth Century England (Cullompton: Willan, 2002); M. Lee, R. O'Brien, *The Game's Up: Redefining Child Prostitution* (London: The Children's Society, 1995); B. Littlewood and L. Mahood, 'Prostitutes, magadalenes and wayward girls: dangerous sexualities of working class women in Victorian Scotland', *Gender and History* 3 (Summer 1991), pp. 160-75.
[80] Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures II', p. 186.
[81] *Cinema Commission*, p. 151.
[82] Louise Jackson, 'The child's word in court: cases of sexual abuse in London, 1870-1914, in Margaret L. Arnot , Cornelie Usborne, eds, *Gender and Crime in Modern Europe* (London: UCL Press, 1999, pp. 223, 226); Moody, '"Improper practices"', pp. 52, 57.
[83] Moody, '"Improper practices"', p. 52.

when LCC inspectors dismissed allegations by clergymen who ran youth clubs near penny cinemas that, when the lights went out, young people in their teens were in the habit of exposing themselves to each other 'with intent to excite each others' passions to acts indecency'.[84] The anxiety some children may have experienced about inappropriate advances under cover of darkness is also impossible to ascertain, other than anecdotally. Perhaps those who went regularly to the cinema were inured to inappropriate behavior and learnt to deal with it. What is clear is the rather sanguine way in which adults often regarded such experiences. Mrs. Henriques, for example, observed how she had seen in one cinema 'a man trying to behave objectionably to a girl of about 11 years of age'. The girl had moved away, but Henriques does not appear not to have tried to intervene in any way, a lack of action possibly symptomatic of how child welfare considerations were diluted by the assumptions of corruption and immorality that surrounded working-class girls. Innocence, as Louise Jackson has pointed out, was expected of girls, who were stigmatised by any suggestion of sexual knowledge.[85]

The cinema darkness which concealed children's activities and vulnerabilities made audiences of children not only difficult to police, but challenging in terms of health and safety.[86] Cecil Leeson, Secretary of the Howard Association, described working-class boys in the cinema as 'bundles of energy, suppressed during the few hours confinement at school, now in reaction, spoiling for something to vent themselves upon, and with no-one to say them nay – this is the condition of these lads'.[87] Mrs Henriques observed how the children in one cinema were so excited that she was 'certain that had any panic happened, it would have been absolutely

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[84] Burrows, 'Penny Pleasures II', p. 193.
[85] Jackson, 'The child's word in court', p. 223.
[86] *Cinema Commission*, p. 189.
[87] Ibid., p. 188.

impossible to control them'.[88] The unpredictability of war which unnerved the general

population also made impressionable children jumpy. They were, Mrs. Henriques suggested,

especially susceptible to sudden frights, worsened by lack of adequate adult supervision and the

practice of squeezing children together on tip-up seats with no arms intended for adults, which

made audiences larger and more vulnerable than they should have been.[89]

Sinister sounds in darkness

Fire had been considered a serious problem in cinemas before the war, because of inadequate fire

safety procedures and the flammability of cellulose nitrate film. [90] Cinemas were thought to be

safer after the introduction of fire regulations under the Cinematograph Act of 1909, the first

legislation to focus specifically on the cinema.[91] Nonetheless, several examples of children's

panicked responses to false alarms suggest how the edgy wartime atmosphere aggravated fears

of fire and explosions due to bombing raids. German zeppelins attacked towns on the east coast

in January 1915 and raids occurred across Britain throughout 1915 and 1916.[92] The first bombs

fell on London on 31st May 1915, injuring 60 and killing 28, including two young sisters, a

rising toll of child deaths which led British propaganda to describe zeppelins as 'baby-killers'.[93]

Zeppelins, able to cut their engines and drift silently in darkness on moonless nights, were

difficult to anticipate. Warning signals were haphazard and in 1916, a report to the home

secretary stated that 'chief constables where raids had taken place were '"strongly against

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[88] Ibid., p. 240.
[89] Ibid., p. 168.
[90] *Cinema Commission*, pp. 21-2. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship*, pp. 21-2, 23, 25.
[91] *Cinema Commission*, pp. 23-25.
[92] Gary S. Messinger, *British propaganda and the State in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 79.
[93] See Thomas Fegan, *The 'Baby Killers': German Air Raids on Britain in the First World War* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2002. Reprinted by Pen and Sword Books: Barnsley, 2012).

giving public warnings"', because their eerie novelty encouraged crowds to assemble '"in the open to watch for the Zepps; factories, theatres cinemas, etc. are emptied into the street at the critical moment, and large numbers collect at railway stations and tramway termini on their way home"'.[94] Anti-aircraft defenses gradually became more effective, but Zeppelin raids continued into 1918 and Gotha bombers, able to bomb in broad daylight, were used in large-scale attacks across 1917-18, causing many more casualties, notably in London in June 1917, when 432 were injured and 162 died, including 18 very young children at an infants school in Poplar.[95] Attacks caused fewer civilian deaths than during the Second World War and there was no attempt to close cinemas against aerial attack, as happened at the tart of the Second World War. The German aerial campaign, designed to cause terror and break civilian morale was, however, an unprecedented assault on civilian life, which brought children into the combat zone and left people ill-prepared to protect themselves against random attacks. Aerial bombardment was an important psychological weapon, a source of dread whose immense 'symbolic weight' contributed an sinister undertow to many sudden sounds.[96] Children were not immune. In April 1917, a cheap Saturday afternoon matinee at the Electric Palace Cinema in Deptford was nearly over, when what 11 year-old Richard Henry Ryan described as a bang that sounded like a bomb came from above the auditorium, possibly made by stones thrown into an electric fan chamber in the roof. With few adults present, about 1,000 terrified children 'scrambled over the forms and

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[94] 'Public Warnings of Air Raid,' [16 Mar. 1916], TNA HO 45/11194, quoted in Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[95] For personal accounts of the blast, see Andrew P. Hyde. *The First Blitz: The German Bomber Campaign Against Britain in the First World War* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2002. Reprinted by Casemate Publishers, Barnsley, 2012), pp. 134-142. See also, Jerry White, *Zeppelin Nights: London in the First World War* (London: Vintage Digital, 2014).

[96] Lucy Noakes and Susan R. Grayzel, 'Defending the Home (land): Gendering Civil Defence from the First World War to the "War on Terror"', in Ana Carden-Coyne, ed. *Gender and Conflict since 1914: Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p, 57.

swarmed for the door, shouting "fire!"'. [97] They swirled into Deptford High Street, where

crowds pressing forward into the entrance to find out what was happening came up against a

'general stampede' of children trying to escape. 'Women and men were shrieking for their

children and tried to force their way in. Many were knocked down and trampled in the melee of a

frantic rush for the doors. Two little girls suffocated, two boys were crushed to death and ten to

12 other children were injured.[98] In February 1918, another cry of fire caused similar havoc at a

matinee attended by nearly 1,500 children at Princes Hall Kinema, Stoke-on-Trent, where

children were knocked down in a rush for the doors and four were taken to hospital with shock

and bruises.[99] Another panic of children dashing for the exits took place in September 1918 at a

Saturday afternoon matinee at a Picture House in Birmingham, where an electric light bulb broke

at the same time as a thunderstorm was 'raging' overhead. In this case, eleven children were

taken to hospital, including a three-year old with a fractured skull.[100]

Conclusion

Common fears in childhood, which include darkness and loud noises, made young children

especially suggestible to sudden alarming sounds and calls, whose effects were magnified in the

cinema's darkened surroundings.[101] Darkness 'assaulted the senses', individually and

collectively, focusing attention and emotions onto 'screens of flickering light' whose bright

modernity contested the dark technology of a war which seemed to be moving the world away

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[97] *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1917. The cinema's official audience was 726, but over 1,000 were in attendance due to the practice of sitting two children to a seat; *Evening Telegraph and Post*, 1 May 1917, p. 3.
[98] *Western Gazette*, 4 May 1917, p. 8.
[99] *Daily Mail*, February 4, 1918, p. 5.
[100] *Derby Daily Telegraph*, September 9, 1918, p.2.
[101] Eric J. Mash and Russell A. Barkley, eds. *Child Psychopathology* (New York; London: Guilford Publications, 2014), p. 348.

from light into darkness.[102] Stereotypes of the urban poor as the dark 'other' shaped negative perceptions of the working-class children who gathered in darkened auditoriums to embrace the cinema's futuristic intensity, just as supporters of the moral purity movement impugned the sinister novelty of its darkness.[103]

While greater concern for the welfare of children in the Edwardian years and during the war did encourage closer attention to the sexual molestation of children, the introduction of women patrols to police cinema rows with torches was largely ineffectual.[104] The sexualised reputation of children contested the 'cult of innocence', which popular propaganda images of the child perpetuated, and remained a factor in the failure to deal adequately with their sexual safety. The cinema's role in maintaining wartime morale over-rode concern for more effective procedures to protect children. In a world in which everyday life was often dark and gloomy, entertainment was considered a necessary distraction for adults and children. 'For a few hours at the picture house at the corner they can find breathing space, warmth, music (the more music the better), and the pictures where they can have a real laugh, a cheer and sometimes a shout. Who can measure the effect on their spirits and body?'.[105] John Massey, a Court Missionary and Probation Officer, found it difficult 'to imagine the district of Hoxton or Whitechapel during this war, with the dark nights, what it would have been like without the picture palaces to brighten up

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[102] Jennifer M. Bean, Anupama P. Kapse, Laura Evelyn Horak, eds, *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 171. On the eve of war being declared on Germany, Sir Edward Grey and his friend John Spender, editor the *Westminster Gazette* were standing at a window in the Foreign Office, looking out into the sunset across St. James's Park, when Grey uttered his famed phrase, 'The lamps are going out all over Europe and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime'. Spender suggest the thought was suggested by 'the appearance of the first lights along the Mall'. Cited in J.A. Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics, Vol. 11* (London: Cassell and Company, 1927), pp. 14-15.
[103] See Peter John Keating, ed., *Into Unknown England, 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976).
[104] Rapp, 'Sex in the cinema', pp. 441-1. For the cinema as a novel social space which stimulated fears of modernity, see Alex Rock, 'The 'khaki fever' moral panic: women's patrols and the policing of cinemas in London, 1913–19', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 12 (2014), pp. 57-72.
[105] *Cinema Commission*, p. 219.

the children's lives'.[106] Massey understood the cinema's role in enabling younger and older

children to escape the physical and metaphorical darkness of war and their poor living

conditions. Darkened cinema surroundings sanctioned the agency of children, who colonised,

contested and domesticated its darkness with the buzz of conversation, crying, calling out of sub-

titles, noisy eating, and scuffles.[107] The subversive freedoms and 'solidarity' of these darkened

spaces were, however, an ambiguous and uneven form of empowerment, whose meanings were

inflected not only by the power dynamics of age, gender, and sibling relationships but by the

small 'differences in sameness' which war intensified.[108] Darkness was an important cultural

metaphor in wartime, but its meanings were equivocal and the sheer pleasure of cinema

entertainment contested the fears and gloom of uncertainty. Stephanie Olsen has highlighted the

need for work which increases knowledge not only of children's emotional experiences but also

of how these differ from 'other young people of different ages'.[109] The complex nature of

relations between older and younger children are well-illustrated in the wartime cinema which as

suggested, was an 'emotional frontier' where agency was less a simplistic juxtaposition of 'adult

actions and perspectives against those of children and youth' and more a messy '"In between" of

nuanced and negotiated exchanges between and among children'. [110] For the children examined

here, the cinema during the First World War was a space of heightened 'emotional encounter'

whose excitement and anxieties, entangled in the complex and contradictory interactions of

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[106] Ibid., p. 220.
[107] For children's fear of darkness, see Neville King, Thomas H. Ollendick, Bruce J. Tonge, 'Children's nighttime fears', *Clinical Psychology Review* 17 (1997), pp. 431-443.
[108] Julian Hanich, 'Laughter and collective awareness: The cinema auditorium as public space', *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 3 (2014), pp. 47, 48, 52; McKernan, Diverting Time', p. 136
[109] Stephanie Olsen, 'The history of childhood and the emotional turn', *History Compass* 15 (2017), p. 7.
[110] Mona Gleason, 'Avoiding the agency trap: caveats for historians of children, youth and education', *History of Education* 45 (2016), p. 448.

darkness, suggest tensions which complicate understanding of their agency and of their lives in wartime.