



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

What are you reading?

Bak, M. A. (2020). *Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 10, Issue 2

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.90466>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

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Optical devices and their domestic variants are housed in exhibition venues ranging from museums of cinema (such as the National Museum of Cinema in Turin) to toy museums (such as the *Spielzeugmuseum*¹ in Nuremberg). My visit to that German toy museum this summer, while spending a research stay at the International Children's Library in Munich, coincided with the reading of Meredith Bak's *Playful Visions*. Her book reveals how optical toys fundamentally impacted the evolution of material culture for children and offers fruitful ground for research beyond (pre)cinema studies. She argues for scholarly attention to children in media studies, as they 'became central figures around whom new media culture revolved' (Bak, 2020, p. 11).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children encountered optical toys in print, at home, and in the classroom. Bak's analysis exhibits the toys' particular pedagogical purpose of movement and interaction. Toy makers, educators, and publishers invited the child to physically engage with the toy, thereby changing children from 'mere' consumers, to 'interactors' (p. 13). The emphasis on movement was by no means new; Cicero already postulated in his 46BC *Orator ad Brutum* that a good public speaker ideally aims for three goals: *docere* (to teach), *delectare* (to delight) and *movere* (to move). Cicero drew from Aristotle to suggest that pleasure is a key to understanding and learning. By the late seventeenth century, the balancing of these goals came to dominate pedagogical thinking too.² While Cicero's *movere* pointed to emotional involvement of the listener or receiver, modern pedagogy stressed physical movement, framing learning as an active process.

As child-rearing, learning and consumer culture progressively intertwined, consumption of optical toys was presented as an instructive activity (Bak, 2020, p. 9). It was the middle class that took up rational recreation fervently, as 'new forms of seeing [...] were tied to the interests of a distinct racial and class position' (p. 90). Through optical play, middle-class parents were preparing their children to participate in media spectatorship. Optical literacy was thus a form of capital they invested in for their offspring. One of the many enriching elements of Bak's work, is that her historical research connects the concept of optical play to present-day anxieties or enthusiasm about children's handling of technology. She convincingly traces the roots of discussions that surround children's media today: '[t]he overlapping desires for both novelty and repetition that fuel the production and marketing of contemporary children's media were instilled and fostered during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', Bak claims (p. 20). Throughout the volume she refers to these contradictory desires surrounding toys. Her final chapter specifically evinces how these optical toys still determine and are copied in present-day science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) toys. Bak dedicates her conclusion to the 'oversized optics in the digital age' (p. 209). Whether in the form of a construction set by GoldieBlox, a chemistry kit by KiwiCo., or an optical mood lamp by STEAM Powered Girls, rational recreation is still firmly present in the twenty-first-century market. It aligns pedagogy and social aspirations with a capitalist view (already present in 1900), presenting pastimes as 'key to economic growth and opportunity' (p. 209). The minor difference is that rather than preparing children for media spectatorship, these toys are designed and bought to fill future coveted jobs in science, technology and engineering (p. 211).

In her prominent discussion of childhood, Bak shows how gender and diversity were built into American nineteenth- and twentieth-century media spectatorship. Several chapters speculatively reconstruct the optical play of differently classed, gendered and raced children

¹ <https://museums.nuernberg.de/toy-museum>

² Reid-Walsh, Jacqueline. *Interactive Books: Playful Media before Pop-Ups*. Routledge, 2018, pp. 19-20.

at home and at school. On the one hand deeply inscribed into the leisure culture of the middle-class, the thaumatrope and phenakistoscope alluded to repetitive and circular factory labour. But while working-class children were working big industrial machines, middle-class children were spinning optical toys in the parlour or at school. Those toys were, on the other hand, mostly meant for white boys. Both in the images on the toys and in the representation of the use of those toys, as Bak's case studies reveal, racial and gender inequities abounded. Still, transgressive and girl media spectatorship could have merited more attention in the volume.

Playful visions is essential reading for any cultural historian of childhood, and especially for my research on how popular children's comics magazines mobilized their readers. More precisely, I compare those sections of Mickey Magazine in Italy (*Topolino*) and France (*Le Journal de Mickey*) that demanded reader's media literacy, movement, social (inter)action and competition. Bak's work importantly warns against two possible pitfalls in such research: one, a teleological approach, and two, a neglect of the larger context in which material objects are embedded. When researching Mickey Magazines, I thus will frame them in their wider socio-historical, pedagogical context, and compare them to other objects available to children (of a similar class, race, generation, gender, and location). Optical toys, such as the phenakistoscope, described by Bak, also proliferated in 1930s magazines and such remediations worked together with the comics (fig. 1).



Figure 1 *Le Journal de Mickey*, 3 February 1935, p. 1 (left); *Topolino*, no. 85, 12 August 1934, p. 8 (right).

For the analysis of interactive sections such as these, I, like Meredith Bak, rely on archival knowledge and historical context to furnish documented, probable, and possible uses (p. 22). As my research is focused on recuperating the reading experiences of French and Italian children that are in many cases no longer alive, Bak's example supports me to infer about actual children reading, viewing and playing. The *Mickey Mouse* phenakistoscope series (fig. 2) choreographed children towards an embodied form of reading. The object was surely promoting consumption, character-loyalty and fandom but also encapsulated the child in a media environment that consisted of older visual toys and newer cinematic experiences. The phenakistoscope, as Bak contends (p. 111), different from linear cinema spectatorship, offered the child circular, repetitive and agentic vision.



Figure 2 *Topolino*, no. 85, 12 August 1934, p. 8 (left) and *Mickey, Molino*, no. 1, 9 March 1935, p. 3 (right).

To re-center the child in my comparative history of Mickey Magazine in Italy and France between the 1930s and 1960s, I hypothesize that the mass-produced, internationally available periodical was a vehicle for both globalization and localisation of childhood, influencing leisure time occupations and consumer behaviour. However, I will allow historical contextualization, archival research and, most importantly, actual reader response to nuance such claims.

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Eva Van de Wiele is *collaborateur scientifique* at Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium). Her project *Reading Mickey* wishes to re-center child readers in a comparative history of Mickey magazines in Italy and France between 1932 and 1968. She has co-edited and published *Sugar, Spice and the Not So Nice* (2023), an open-access book on girlhood in comics with Leuven University Press.