

Lisa M. Rabin

The Normals, the Questionables, and the Delinquents

East Harlem Youth and the Movies, 1931–1934

In the working-class, largely Italian and Puerto Rican neighborhood of East Harlem, New York City, the best attended films of the late 1920s and early 1930s included *UNDERWORLD* (1927), *ALIAS JIMMY VALENTINE* (1928), *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT*, (1930), *CIMARRON*, *LITTLE CAESAR*, *SKIPPY*, *UP FOR MURDER* (all 1931), and *TAXI!* (1932).¹⁾ East Harlem teenagers were among the most avid consumers of these films and others like them screened at East Harlem's 16 movie theaters.²⁾ Sometimes they skipped school or flouted their parents' disapproval to see them, and sometimes they acted them out on city streets, often causing adults to worry about the effects the movies might have been having on their upbringing. One East Harlem parent, for example, testified that "in the moving pictures they learn all bad things".³⁾ Similarly, New York City police commissioner William Mulrooney asserted that the city's second-generation immigrant youth "learned twisted things from the movies".⁴⁾

At this time, the anxieties that parents and the police harbored about working-class immigrant teenagers and the movies were not limited to New York City. They were spread throughout the nation, and were entrenched in larger discourses connecting movies to delinquency. As film historians have pointed out, sociological interest in the urban immigrant child and his/her relationship to movies and other forms of commercialized leisure

- 1) Paul Cressey, 'The community — a social setting for the motion picture' (unpublished manuscript, 1932), Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Motion Picture Research Council, 162, reprinted in Garth Jowett, Ian Jarvie, and Kathleen Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 72. Further citations of Cressey's document in this essay are all from the original manuscript.
- 2) Frederic Thrasher, 'Final report on the Jefferson Park branch of the Boys' Club of New York', 1935, The Bureau of Social Hygiene Project and Research Files (1911–1940), a Collection of the Rockefeller Archive Center of the Rockefeller University, North Tarrytown, New York, Series 3.3, Boxes 11, 12, and 13, p. 232.
- 3) 'Interview by Boys' Club study staff member with resident of East Harlem', quoted in Thrasher, 'Final Report', p. 303.
- 4) S.J. Woolf, 'Mulrooney talks of youth and crime: the police commissioner says the number of youngsters in the line-up shows the city to be in a bad way', *New York Times*, 15 March 1931, p. 83.

intensified in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁾ This close scrutiny of working-class youth was conditioned by the Progressive-Era truism that mass culture — and particularly movie-going and film consumption — was in competition with settlement houses, social service agencies, and public schools in their socialization of youth.⁶⁾ Such a position posited that movies offered too much of an unregulated environment, which threatened to foster antisocial behaviors such as violence, sexual wantonness, and criminality.⁷⁾

East Harlem teenagers lived in what sociologists deemed an “interstitial” neighborhood — “a kind of urban frontier,”⁸⁾ where the lack of an infrastructure was thought to make these young people particularly vulnerable to the influences of mass culture. As such, they would become the subjects of three sociological studies on the subject of movies and youth, all of which were conducted in the neighborhood in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The first of these studies was the New York University Motion Picture Study (MPS), which the sociologist Paul Cressey conducted on the movie-going activities of 2400 teenage boys, and which was originally expected to become a part of the Payne Fund Studies (PFS).⁹⁾ Meanwhile, 640 teenage girls from East Harlem participated in a study on female youth leisure activities undertaken by the Columbia University educational sociology student Dorothy Reed.¹⁰⁾ In a third study, the National Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) surveyed 1,045 East Harlem girls on their movie-going habits and other leisure activities.¹¹⁾ These studies generated a wealth of documentation, including Reed’s dissertation, the YWCA

5) Lea Jacobs, ‘Reformers and spectators: the film education movement in the thirties,’ *Camera Obscura* 22 (1990), pp. 29–49; Richard deCordova, ‘Ethnography and exhibition: the child audience, the Hays Office and Saturday matinees,’ *Camera Obscura* 23 (1990), pp. 90–107; Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*, pp. 24–29; Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 335–338; Lee Grieveson, ‘Cinema studies and the conduct of conduct,’ in Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson (eds), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 3–37; Mark Lynn Anderson, ‘Taking Liberties,’ in Wasson and Grieveson (eds), *Inventing Film Studies*, pp. 38–65; Mark Lynn Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols: Hollywood and the Human Sciences in 1920s America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 12, 68–69, 171–174.

6) Sarah Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence* (Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp. 77–102.

7) Polan, *Scenes*, pp. 335–338; Grieveson, ‘Cinema studies,’ p. 22; Anderson, ‘Taking liberties,’ pp. 38–65; Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 171–174.

8) Frederic Thrasher, *The gang: a study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), p. 22; Cressey, ‘The community,’ p. 62; Anderson, ‘Taking Liberties,’ pp. 41–42.

9) The Payne Fund Studies was a series of twelve social science projects researching the effects of the movies on children that were conducted across the country from 1929–1932. The series was underwritten by the private foundation The Payne Fund, and was overseen by W.W. Charters at Ohio State University. Well-known academics including educationalist Edgar Dale, sociologist Herbert Blumer, and the psychologists Frank Shuttleworth and Mark May directed other projects in the series. The projects covered a range of movie influences on children including knowledge acquisition, social attitudes, sleep, and behavior. Cressey used the MPS as material for his dissertation ‘The Social Role of Motion Pictures in an Interstitial Area’ at NYU, but he never completed the East Harlem project for the Payne Fund and apparently never submitted his dissertation. Meanwhile, MacMillan published nine volumes and a summary of the Studies between 1933 and 1935. For an overview of the series and its historical significance for mass media studies see Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children*, 30, 17–124.

10) Dorothy Reed, ‘Leisure time of girls in a “Little Italy”’ (Dissertation: Columbia University, 1932).

11) ‘Report of the East Harlem Study, submitted by the Industrial Secretary of the City of New York Y.W.C.A., December 1928, YWCA of the USA Records, 1876–1970, Microform reel #196, ‘Local associations in New York City,’ call #689.

national records, and the manuscript collection of Leonard Covello, who was the principal at the Benjamin Franklin High School that was attended by many of Cressey's male subjects.

A close analysis of these studies reveals richly textured testimonies that the East Harlem teenagers provided on their movie-going activities, as well as on their engagement with films and film-related phenomena like stars.¹²⁾ Existing scholarship on both the MPS and similar studies conducted at this time has tended to focus on the sociologists' discursive construction of the teenagemoviegoer and its imbrications within larger structures of power and knowledge.¹³⁾ My research indicates that the documents produced on East Harlem youth also offer an opportunity to historicize youth film reception. Accordingly, this essay offers a case study of teenage film audiences in the working-class immigrant community of East Harlem in the late 1920s and early 1930s. I situate my work within an expanding historiography of film audiences that approaches reception as a form of social history, and which in so doing considers movie-going and film culture to represent a significant way in which individuals and groups perform and craft social identities. To date, scholars have tended to centralize the film text when researching historical audiences. However, as Richard Maltby has pointed out, such an approach risks using individual movies "as proxies for the missing historical audience".¹⁴⁾

Alternate approaches, such as that employed here, ground their analysis on examinations of both primary and secondary sources.¹⁵⁾ This essay therefore draws upon documents related to the three East Harlem studies, upon newspapers and academic journals, and makes use of secondary sources on US immigrant history in order to analyze the social role that cinema played in the lives of East Harlem youth. Because it focuses on the historical specificity of East Harlem teenagers, the essay also contributes to understandings of the valence of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and/or intergroup relations in the historical formation of youth identity.¹⁶⁾ In particular, it develops current understandings of

12) I am grateful to Dana Polan for providing me with this insight.

13) I am grateful to Christina Petersen and Laura Isabel Serna for helping me with this insight. See for example deCordova, 'Ethnography'; Jacobs, 'Reformers'; Sharon Lowery and Melvin Lawrence Defleur, *Milestones in Mass Communications Research* (New York: Longman, 1994), pp. 31–54; Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children*; Polan, *Scenes of instruction*, pp. 335–338; William J. Buxton, 'From park to Cressey: Chicago sociology's engagement with mass culture', in David W. Park and Jeff Pooley (eds), *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 345–362; Grieveson, 'Cinema studies'; Anderson, 'Taking liberties'; Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 12, 68–69, 171–174; Christina Petersen, 'The crowd mind: the archival legacy of the Payne Fund Studies' *Mediascape* 2013 (Winter). *Movies and Conduct* (1933), <http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_CrowdMind.html> [accessed 18 November 2014].

14) Richard Maltby, 'New cinema histories', in Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers (eds), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), p. 12.

15) For useful overviews of this approach see Philippe Meers and Daniel Biltereyst, 'Film audiences in perspective: the social practices of film going', in Helena Bilandzic, Geoffroy Patriarche, and Paul J. Taudt (eds), *The Social Use of Media: Cultural and Social Scientific Perspectives on Audience Research* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), pp. 120–140; Maltby, 'New cinema histories', pp. 3–40; Eric Smoodin, 'Introduction: the history of film history', in Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (eds), *Looking Past the Screen* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1–34.

16) As Andrew Diamond points out, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies projects on "youth subcultures" were seminal to the development of this field. See for example Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds),

the roles that the mass media played in the emergent youth cultures of the early twentieth century.¹⁷⁾ I show that cinema played an important role in East Harlem teenagers' psychological development, serving as a springboard from which teenagers could "try on" or "play with" new subjectivities. We know from developmental psychologists and anthropologists that fictional worlds are used throughout life to cope with increased complexity, and to imagine alternative outcomes. With these points in mind, this essay considers how the psychological investments of East Harlem youth in late 1920's and early 1930's cinema are situated both historically and culturally.

The East Harlem Studies

In 1929, the year in which the MPS began, East Harlem was bounded by 98th and 99th streets on the south, 126th Street and the Harlem River on the north, Fifth Avenue on the West and the Harlem and East Rivers on the east. Twenty blocks in length and six avenues wide, this urban neighborhood, which is now known as Spanish Harlem and populated mostly by Latin@s, was then mainly home to Italian immigrants and their children. In the 1920s and 1930s, up to 90,000 Italian immigrants lived there, constituting the largest Italian American area of the day.¹⁸⁾ A smaller although not insignificant number of Puerto Rican immigrants also lived in the western area of the neighborhood. By the 1940s, they had superseded Italians as the largest ethnic enclave in this part of the city.¹⁹⁾ According to a 1930 survey conducted by the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau, small numbers of African Americans, Jews, Germans, Finns, Scandinavians, and Slavs were also resident in the area.²⁰⁾

Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Postwar Britain (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1976); Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979). Andrew Diamond, *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths and the Everyday Struggle for Empowerment in the Multiracial City, 1908–1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 5, 316 n. 12. I am indebted in particular to US histories of working-class youth culture, including Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1978); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Ruth Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Grace Palladino, *Teenagers* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); Joel Austin and Michael Willard (eds) *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York UP, 1998); Randy McBee, *Dance Hall Days: Intimacy and Leisure Among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence*; Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Mark Wild, 'So many children at once and so many kinds: the world of center city children', in *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 94–120; Diamond, *Mean Street*.

17) See Kett, *Rites of Passage*, Palladino, *Teenagers*; Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence*; Chinn, Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*; Wild, 'So many children'.

18) Simone Cinotto, 'Leonard Covello, the Covello papers, and the history of eating habits among Italian immigrants in New York', *Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 2 (2002), p. 1.

19) Virginia Sánchez Korroll, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 58–62; Richard T. Schaefer, *Encyclopedia of Race and Ethnicity, Volume I* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage, 2008), pp. 429–430.

20) Casa Italiana Educational Bureau, 'East Harlem population by nationality, nativity, and color — 1930',



Figure 1. Youth at the New Progress Theatre, 1892 Third Avenue (106th Street), East Harlem

In the 1930s, East Harlem was one of the poorest areas of New York City. Apartments were cramped, often lacking central heating and baths, and public spaces were few and far between.²¹⁾ East Harlem's lack of a significant economic infrastructure resulted in eighty percent of neighborhood workers commuting.²²⁾ The Great Depression hit this community particularly hard. In 1930 and 1931, 45 percent of adults were out of work, and 28 percent of residents had relief jobs.²³⁾ Many East Harlem youths were, however, employed. Around 28 percent of the girls interviewed in Reed's study held jobs, with almost 11 percent of these positions part-time jobs the girls worked after school.²⁴⁾ A study conducted by sociologist Frederic Thrasher and a team of NYU sociologists revealed that of the 96 percent of boys who were in work, almost twenty five percent held full-time positions.²⁵⁾

To address a lack of public space for play, and to encourage "wholesome" activities among the neighborhood's male youths, the Boys' Club established a Jefferson Park Branch in East Harlem in 1927. Consequently, between 1928 and 1934, Thrasher and his collaborators, who were funded by the Rockefeller Foundation's Bureau of Social Hygiene, conducted a major study of the Boys' Club's role in preventing delinquency.²⁶⁾ After researching the behavior of 11,190 7–18 year-old boys, as well as some young men enrolled at the club, Thrasher concluded that the organization did not prevent crime. Boys' Club mem-

CP Box 6, Folder 7, and Box 77, Folder 5, cited in Michael Johanek and John Puckett, *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School: Education as if Citizenship Mattered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), p. 67.

21) Gerald Meyer, 'Italian Harlem: America's largest and most Italian little Italy'. <http://www.vitomarcantonio.com/eh_italian_east_harlem.html#> [accessed 14 November 2014].

22) Ibid.

23) Ibid.

24) Reed, *Leisure Time of Girls*, p. 30.

25) Thrasher, 'Final report', p. 881.

26) Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*, pp. 3, 130–131.

bership was in fact correlated with increased levels of delinquency; members participated in extralegal activities at a significantly higher rate than the area's non-members.²⁷⁾ Underwritten by the Payne Fund and charged with studying the effects of movie-going on East Harlem Boys Club members, the MPS emerged out of Thrasher's Boys' Club project. As noted above, the MPS had originally been projected as one of twelve monographs that would comprise what are now known as the Payne Fund Studies. Paul Cressey was principal researcher of the MPS. From 1931 to 1934, he and his team surveyed 2,400 East Harlem teenagers on their movie-going habits.²⁸⁾ Cressey did not share the strident views on causal relations between movies and youth delinquency held by his former colleagues at the University of Chicago and other PFS researchers such as Herbert Blumer and Philip Hauser. Nevertheless, much like Thrasher and their mutual mentor sociologist Robert Park, Cressey still believed mass culture played a profound and poorly understood role in the moral education of American immigrants, and, as a consequence, he felt this relationship should be carefully examined and ultimately regulated.²⁹⁾

Cressey's research revealed that East Harlem boys aged 12 to 16 attended movie screenings at an average rate of 83.4 times annually or 1.6 times per week. Cressey pointed out that the minimum of 166.8 hours per year these youths spent in theaters was about the same as they spent in school.³⁰⁾ These data supported Cressey's belief that movies were in direct competition with American schools and other institutions for the hearts and minds of immigrant youth. In 1933, Cressey lamented to the Ohio State University Professor of Education and PFS research director W.W. Charters that

[c]ertainly it is true that if we were to name the most influential teachers of youth today we would be forced to include, among others: James Cagney, Robert Montgomery, Norma Shearer, William Powell, Joan Crawford and Edward G. Robinson — to mention only a few of the contemporary cinema educators of this new era.³¹⁾

By studying how forms of unregulated mass culture served the working-class youth, Cressey hoped to provide leverage for those elites planning to initiate more wholesome and closely regulated forms of education and recreation, including the development of movie curricula at public schools and a series of screenings at immigrant youth agencies.³²⁾ Because Cressey conceptualized his study of movie influence within what he and Thrasher termed the "total situation" — or the range of social forces shaping the world of

27) Thrasher, 'Final report', pp. 1185–1186, 1187–1191. Although it was submitted to the Bureau of Social Hygiene in 1935, Thrasher's report was not complete (Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*, p. 131).

28) For a detailed history of the MPS see Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*.

29) Thrasher, *The Gang*, 22; Cressey, 'The community', p. 62; Anderson, 'Taking liberties', pp. 141–142.

30) Paul Cressey, 'The motion picture as informal education', *Journal of Educational Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 8 (1934), p. 504.

31) Cressey, letter to W.W. Charters, 05 May 1933, W. W. Charters Papers, Special Collections, Ohio State University Libraries. Cressey file.

32) Cressey, 'The community', pp. 1–64; Cressey, 'The motion picture'. For an analysis of Thrasher's and Cressey's roles in the sociologically-trained "media expert" in American society see Anderson, 'Taking liberties'.

East Harlem boys and possibly contributing to asocial behaviors — Cressey's methods encompassed twenty different approaches. These included movie "life histories" of his subjects, face-to-face interviews, and "special investigations" conducted by anonymous researchers who secretly followed boys in their movie-going activities.³³⁾

Meanwhile, Columbia University doctoral researcher Dorothy Reed yielded key data on the movie-going activities of teenage girls during this period by examining the recreational interests of East Harlem girls aged around 15 years.³⁴⁾ Almost all of Reed's 640 interviewees went to the movies twice a week, and nearly 30 percent of them went more than once a week; frequent movie-goers were quoted as saying "they went as often 'as we got took,' or 'whenever we can get money'".³⁵⁾ Around 93 percent of the girls whom Reed studied preferred movies to other leisure activities, including going down to the front step of one's apartment building, where girls would occasionally be allowed to watch — although not participate in — the world going by.³⁶⁾ Meanwhile, nearly one third of the interviewees in a 1927 YWCA study of East Harlem girls' leisure activities reported movies were second only to family among their "major interests".³⁷⁾

The testimonies of East Harlem youths clearly stood at odds with the sociologists' assumptions. Although Reed sought to establish a link between commercialized leisure and delinquency, her study failed to establish a correlation between movie-going and antisocial behavior. Indeed, girls from all the three groups studied by Reed (whom she termed "normal," "questionable," and "delinquent") reported similar patterns. Conversely, female youths in East Harlem used the movies for what adult elites would have endorsed at this time as positive forms of socialization: being with friends in safe outdoor locations, achieving a measure of independence thanks to expendable income, escaping boredom and cramped spaces, and reflective thought. Cressey's MPS meanwhile provided scant evidence that movies were even partially linked to emergent criminal behavior among teens, and the nominal data that was produced — such as boys' appropriation of crime techniques that had been shown in gangster films — could not be unraveled from broader discourses that may already have convinced teenagers that movies fostered "twisted ideas". One young male MPS subject speculated that he was being interviewed "[s]o you can put me in the papers, eh?".³⁸⁾ Instead, the teenage boys who participated in the MPS revealed that they had gained many positive things from the movies, including a sense of independence, increased self-confidence and self-worth, and inspiration for self-invention. These experiences were either a product of the performative roles that they cultivated during courting rituals, or of their negotiating of social ranking in the urban environment.

33) Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*, p. 126. On the aegis of this holistic method in the Chicago School of Sociology see Anderson, 'Taking liberties', pp. 47–50. The multiple approaches in the MPS are described by Cressey with co-authors Philip M. Hauser, Edgar Dale, and Charles C. Peters in 'The motion picture experience as modified by social background and personality', *Journal of Educational Sociology*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1932), pp. 240–243.

34) The YWCA study included no ethnographic data from teenagers themselves.

35) Reed, *Leisure Time of Girls*, p. 47.

36) *Ibid.*, p. 44.

37) YWCA, 'Report', Chart IV.

38) Cressey, 'The community', p. 127. For this insight, I am grateful to Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*, pp. 68, 91; Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 171–174.

Close analysis of such documents reveals that developmental processes for these working-class youngsters overlapped with cinema culture, and that their reception of films was rooted in their social worlds.

Movies as the Material of Daydreaming and Subjectivity

One of the most fruitful debates in Screen Studies concerns the supposedly “immersive” effects that audiovisual media exert upon audiences.³⁹⁾ Although the East Harlem documents do not record testimonies acquired from subjects during film consumption, it is persuasive that a sense of mental reverie and “transport” repeatedly accompanied the teenagers’ subsequent discussions of film. Their testimony often bore witness to the extent to which film appeared in their daydreaming and imaginative role-play. The small amount of available ethnographic evidence that emerged from Reed’s East Harlem study of teenage girls, suggests that romances — her subjects’ preferred genre of film — offered a world of escape that provided some relief from experiences of deprivation, as well as from boredom, and from the sense of claustrophobia endured in the cramped spaces common to East Harlem life in the 1930s.⁴⁰⁾ Statements of this sort included: “I like to see the swells and forget we’re poor”, “I like to see people love each other and be happy”, “I like to be diverted and forget”, “[w]e don’t get no chance to live that way and you can pretend when you see the pictures that it’s you”, and “[t]he movies takes you away from home where there ain’t nuthin’ to do but sit”.⁴¹⁾

The capacity of movie-going and movie-watching to provide a measure of independence — which is clearly evident from these respondents’ anecdotes — seems to be an experience that was distinct to the young female members of East Harlem’s immigrant working-class community; a community in which parents were especially conservative when it came to raising their female offspring. In the YWCA study, researchers found that of the 758 employed youths surveyed, which included young women up to the age of 25, only 60 girls and women did not require their parents’ permission to leave the family home, thereby highlighting the close control that Italian immigrant families in East Harlem sought to exert over female children.⁴²⁾ Robert Orsi’s examination of the history and culture of East Harlem reveals that family and community strictures were overwhelmingly focused on containing and delimiting young girls’ sexuality, by making the “upbringing of female children in East Harlem ... exceedingly strict and fraught with anxiety and dread”.⁴³⁾ In

39) For a partial overview of the debate, see Laura Rascaroli, ‘Like a dream. A critical history of the Oneiric metaphor in film theory’, *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* (Fall 2002). <<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=141>> [accessed 18 November 2014]; Philip Sandifer, ‘Out of the screen and into the theater: 3-D film as demo’, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 50, no. 3 (2011), pp. 66–78.

40) Reed, *Leisure Time of Girls*, p. 47.

41) *Ibid.*, p. 48. Reed’s transcripts, like those of the MPS, demonstrate the researchers’ attempts to replicate East Harlem teenagers’ non-standard speech. Richard Dyer’s analysis of entertainment’s “utopian sensibility” has been helpful to me here. Richard Dyer, ‘Entertainment and utopia’, in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods: Volume II* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 220–32.

42) YWCA, ‘Report’, p. 4.

43) Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 136.

this environment, conflicts often turned on the movies. Thus, twenty-year-old “Miss S.” who was interviewed by the well-known educator Leonard Covello as a part of his doctoral research on Italian American culture and families, yearned to attend movie screenings, and deeply resented her father’s strict dictum on their “demoralizing” effects.⁴⁴⁾ Still, girls and young women did find ways of circumventing parental control in order to frequent their favorite commercial establishments. Reed discovered that while the girls and young women whom she interviewed may have required an escort to attend movie screenings, they frequently flouted this rule. Reed wrote that the girls “side-stepped [their parents’ rules] by going without permission and finding another excuse.”⁴⁵⁾

Diachronically produced histories of young working- and middle-class women’s movie-going in the early twentieth century have demonstrated the influence that film culture and other commercialized aspects of culture exerted on evolving forms of public culture and self-expression, although not on their feminist agency.⁴⁶⁾ In light of this research, the significance of the data from the studies of East Harlem girls is deepened. These data suggest that cinema offered a form of independence which enabled young people to circumvent strict parental control, for at least part of the time. When they are compared to other public and commercialized entertainment, movie theaters may also have offered a “safe space” in which to mix with others. Kathy Peiss’ history of women and early cinema supports such an assessment. Peiss argued that a movie culture characterized by interaction both with other women and families provided a relative haven for young women, one that facilitated hetero-sociality without the social and physical risks of engaging in more direct forms of contact with men, as might have been the case with visits to dance halls and amusements parks.⁴⁷⁾ Moreover, although both Thrasher and Cressey worried about what Thrasher called “sub-rosa activities” in movie houses,⁴⁸⁾ theater attendance in East Harlem — characterized by one teenage boy as a “married couples with one or two children, old ladies, old men, young girls in groups of from [sic] two to six and young fellows who come in gangs of from three to ten” — seemed relatively safe.⁴⁹⁾ Teenagers told MPS investigators about the protocols of courtship that shaped heterosexual interaction at theaters, suggesting boys and girls mutually agreed the limits of sexual contact,⁵⁰⁾ with unwanted ad-

44) CP, Box 65, folder 14. Cited in Orsi, *Madonna*, p. 126.

45) Reed, *Leisure-Time*, p. 46. Notably, these questions were not asked in the MPS study, presumably because it was understood that immigrant teenage boys were extended certain freedoms in East Harlem. For an historical analysis of the conservative attitudes of Italian families towards their female children in American cities of the early twentieth century see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), pp. 68–70, 73, 51; Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston, 1880–1960* (New York: Penguin, 1988), pp. 10–11; Palladino, *Teenagers*, pp. 11–12; Orsi, *Madonna*, pp. 129–149.

46) Judith Mayne, ‘Immigrants and spectators’, *Wide Angle*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1982), pp. 32–41; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Schrum, *Some Wore*.

47) Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, p. 153.

48) Frederic Thrasher, ‘Social attitudes of superior boys’, in Kimball Young and Luther Lee Bernard (eds) *Social Attitudes* (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1931), p. 247; Cressey, ‘The community’, pp. 103–110.

49) Thrasher, ‘Social attitudes’, p. 249.

50) Cressey, ‘The community’, pp. 108–109, 110.

vances rejected easily by girls and young women. "A few of the males are so thick-skinned that only a good slap in the face will cure them of their 'hand trouble'", explained one youth;⁵¹⁾ another suggested that "De girl calls an usher if dey get wise".⁵²⁾

For the young immigrant girls of East Harlem interviewed in Reed's study, movie-going and film consumption offered a way of temporarily circumventing the difficulties of material circumstances, of living in close quarters, of loneliness, and of poverty, as well as the possibility of achieving both homo- and hetero-sociality in safe, public spaces.⁵³⁾ Reed's study nuances the girls' connection between *getting outside* to the movie house, and an expansion of the mind, by which I mean a *getting outside* of the normative views on teenage female heterosexual desire, with romance movies providing them with "ideas". Indeed, in the one movie testimony from a teenage girl that is in fact cited in the MPS documents, the writer asserts that the girl used such fare to try on new states of mind and to explore her emotions:

[T]he best thing about a movie is that it's like a dream. ... [T]he movies give us a chance to enjoy things we wouldn't dare do ourselves and to realize what they're like second hand. ... We wouldn't dare do some of the things we see the movie heroines do, but we let the movie heroine do it for us. But we don't know, really. Maybe we'd violate the commandment and do those things if we were faced with the situation shown in the picture. That's why I don't always condemn a movie heroine for doing them. In fact, when I see a picture I sort of put aside in my mind what she did and how she met her problem, as a sort of reference to myself, in case I might run into that problem in the future.⁵⁴⁾

Although Cressey comments on this girl's "imaginative adjustments", he expressed doubts about her and her peers' capacity to deal with "problems in sex conduct which they encounter [on the screen]".⁵⁵⁾ Yet, however much Cressey's comments might emphasize the need for pedagogical intervention into teenagers' engagement with "love pictures", this young girl clearly demonstrates a sophisticated propensity for self-reflection. Her description of making a "reference to myself" suggests she is placing film narrative onto a mental bookshelf filled with other stories; one which she may "consult" at a later date. In this respect, the girl can "try on" an adult judgment safely without needing to experience that story firsthand.

51) Thrasher, 'Social attitudes', p. 247.

52) Cressey, 'The community', p. 109.

53) I am indebted to Annette Kuhn's view of British movie theaters as independent childhood destinations. Annette Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 16–37.

54) Paul Cressey, 'Youth looks at the world', in *Youth Looks at the World: Specific Contributions of the Photoplays to Youth*. Unpublished manuscript, n.d., CP Box 65, Folder 14, pp. 9–10.

55) Ibid., p. 9. Cressey was probably referring to the so-called fallen woman pictures that Lea Jacobs identified as a significant source of anxiety and regulation during the 1930s. See Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

The girl's anecdote coheres strikingly with what developmental psychologists and anthropologists have suggested about the world of play, which includes the spheres of art, reading, film consumption and reflection, and other cultural practices. From these perspectives, playing with reality — as in the girl's drawing on romantic films as a "reference" in her mind — is an essential way of modulating life's complexities and expanding one's sense of possibility in the world.⁵⁶⁾ Providing additional perspectives on these theoretical concepts is Ien Ang's and Jackie Stacey's research on women audiences. Both Ang and Stacey argue that although media texts like television shows or feature films might express traditional patriarchal values, some women still find the very act of consumption and reflection of these media to be liberating, because they use these experiences mentally to "transcend" everyday circumstances and hardships, and to consider ideas from multiple angles. Similarly, even though the romance films that East Harlem girl teenagers preferred did not feature liberatory narratives, they did offer content and themes that facilitated East Harlem girls' consideration of new states of desire — ones that were disavowed in the repressive environment of their immigrant culture.⁵⁷⁾ These ideas could help girls to test the adult world's conceptions of sexuality and gender in a non-threatening way — that is without needing, as other commercial establishments demanded, the presence of a real-life male partner. In Blumer and Hauser's study, a teenage girl in Chicago summarized the value of these films thus: "[p]assionate love pictures make me think most".⁵⁸⁾

The Movies and Role-Play

The MPS contains a wealth of information about East Harlem male teenagers' imitations of movie stars, and about their using film to try on new versions of themselves, whether privately, among peers of both sexes, or in the wider adult world. Their adult interviewers may have sometimes dismissed teens' actions as "dressing up" or as mimicking the idiolect of movie stars, but a significant amount of material exists to suggest that the teenagers embodied these characters wholesale by playing them out on city streets. Many instances of role-play described in MPS documents revolved around the actors Rudolph Valentino and James Cagney, and tended to engage with ethnic and gendered aspects of their respective star personae.

In what is perhaps the richest document on role-play included in the MPS, one teenage boy, who is described as "like [Valentino] both in appearance and nationality",⁵⁹⁾ recounts this star's effect on his fantasy life in the following way:

56) D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971), p. 13; Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, pp. 11–12, 18–27; Roger Lancaster, 'Guto's Performance', Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy (eds), *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America* (New York & London: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 24–26.

57) I am indebted for this insight to Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 120; Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 77–92.

58) Herbert Blumer and Philip Hauser, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime. Payne Fund Studies Vol. 8* (New York: MacMillan), p. 85.

59) Cressey, 'The community', p. 149.

My first yearning to become a movie star was when Valentino passed away. That was because my folks and friends were saying that I looked very much like him. I had a scar on myself as he had and combed my hair in the same style. Then I did not think of the fact that I lacked eight or nine inches to be as tall as he was. I could already picture myself taking Vilma Banky in my arms and kissing her. Flashing my eyes here and there. And whenever I would reach the Grand Central Station young ladies would beg for my autograph or attempt to kiss me and probably swoon away. The idea of running away to Hollywood began to gnaw on my brain but thank heavens I got over it after a few years.⁶⁰⁾

From a developmental perspective, role-play, whether it is enacted as play or in therapeutic contexts, is considered to be a developmentally complex undertaking that shows a person's ability to stand outside the self and to craft the self differently, even as a possible "self" he or she may inhabit one day.⁶¹⁾ In the passage cited above, the young man advances a remarkable narrative of self-transformation that reveals something of his social world. He inserts himself into the narrative of Valentino's 1926 film *The Son of the Sheik* when he talks of "taking [the actress] Vilma Banky into my arms and kissing her", even as he relocates this story to a local setting by adding "when I arrived at Grand Central Station, the girls would swoon". This youth's imagined diegetic and extra-diegetic participation in the film is rich in kinetic and spatial detail, which conveys his connection to Valentino's physicality. The youth's identification with Valentino also overlaps with extra-textual discourses that circulated contemporaneously around this star, especially his appeal to both working-class immigrant and middle-class non-immigrant women fans. Valentino's cross-class and cross-ethnic appeal is recast by this youth as the teenager's own magnetism for girls in East Harlem and at Grand Central Station.⁶²⁾ By invoking Valentino's Hollywood success, this youth also invokes a public manifestation of the immigrant worker's socio-cultural integration, financial prosperity, and professional success that were central to the American Dream.⁶³⁾ The testimony of this Italian-American teenager supports recent claims about the more radical dimensions of immigrant audiences' perceptions of Valentino's star persona, particularly its invocation of the social boundary-crossings offered by contemporaneous urban life, including mixed-class, racial, and ethnic socialization, as well as its embodiment of a form of male heterosexuality that departed from dominant norms of white, middle-class masculinity.⁶⁴⁾ Valentino inaugurated what Anderson called the "desegregation of modern cinema", a phenomenon that would be continued by such immigrant stars

60) Ibid.

61) Peter Fonagy, Gyorgy Gergely, Elliot Jurist, and Mary Target, *Affect Regulation, Mentalization, and the Development of the Self* (New York: Other Press, 2002), unpaginated.

62) Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 70–124; Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, pp. 245–94; Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 150–198.

63) Anderson considers the ambivalent reception of this story. See Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, 106–109; see also Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, pp. 258–259).

64) Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 70–154; Giorgio Bertellini 'Duce/Divo: masculinity, racial identity, and politics among Italian Americans in 1920s New York City', *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 31, no. 5 (2005), pp. 685–726.

as the Mexican-born heartthrob Ramón Navarro and the attractive Polish-born actress Pola Negri; Valentino himself opened myriad points of identification for diverse ethnic groups.⁶⁵ Accordingly, Giuseppe Bertellini has heralded Valentino as a new model for Italian-American audiences, one marked by youthful, urbanized sophistication and pleasure-seeking sensuality, which working-class Italian Americans could celebrate as a departure from nativist and Italian middle-class gender norms.⁶⁶ In the MPS, East Harlem boys frequently referred to themselves and their male peers as “a sheik” (by which they meant a lady’s man), or they shared Valentino’s influence on their own courting practices. A special investigator interviewed a youth called “Patsy”, reporting that “I ... asked him if he knew Big Jack (a youth who resembled Clark Gable). ‘Sure, I know that shiek [sic]. He’s a sucker for de women’.”⁶⁷ In another movie life story, a youth recalled emulating Valentino’s “long kiss” on a first date, and boasted that his date had called him a “*man of the world*” [emphasis in original].⁶⁸ This youth’s anecdote reveals how Valentino’s projection of a mysterious, sexually-experienced, and exotic persona resonated with boys and girls who wished to escape the confines of East Harlem’s patriarchal culture, if only through a fleeting kiss.⁶⁹

As suggested by the first Valentino movie anecdote cited above, the possibilities evoked by Valentino’s reputation as an adventurous libertine had uses beyond East Harlem. Robert Orsi has underlined the importance of the southern Italian “domus” or patriarchal culture in circumscribing immigrant social relations in East Harlem. He argued that immigrants were expected to perform traditionally gendered roles of self-abnegation and loyalty to family and community, both at home and in public:

In a very fundamental way, the individual could not exist apart from the domus and remain a human being. He or she could not make plans or take steps apart from the priorities of the domus. All were expected to forego personal satisfaction on behalf of it.⁷⁰

Orsi explains that this loyalty was translated frequently into indifference and aversion to community outsiders — attitudes which contributed to hostility among Italians towards their African-American and Puerto Rican neighbors.⁷¹

From an anthropological perspective, role-play is a means of testing of social relations, as one group member tries out a role or a social activity that has a bearing on the entire group’s belief system and culture.⁷² For the East Harlem youth who breaks away from the neighborhood in his imagined role-playing of the star, Valentino — especially in terms of

65) Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 138; Bertellini, ‘Duce/Divo’, p. 706.

66) Bertellini, ‘Duce/Divo’, p. 717.

67) Cressey, ‘The community’, p. 142.

68) *Ibid.*, p. 145.

69) I am grateful here to Anderson’s subtle analysis of Valentino’s “ideological crossing of sexual desire and an exotic distant past”. See Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 128.

70) Orsi, *Madonna*, p. 82.

71) *Ibid.*, p. 102.

72) Nigel Rappaport and Joanna Overring, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 30.

his youth and physicality — represented independence, mobility, and a trying on of new social relations, notably in terms of forging new intimacies outside the circumscription of ethnicity and class. After all, Grand Central represented both the quintessential “central” station to New York’s mixture of cultures and a prime route to the outside world. “[T]hank goodness I got over that”, remarked the youth. Such a declaration invites a number of interpretations: his recognition of the caprice of his Hollywood dream, his comprehension of the futility of crossing larger structural boundaries of class and ethnicity, and his resignation to the domus. Although it is impossible to know precisely what this youth is referring to, his testimony does make it possible to more fully conceive of Valentino’s meaning for immigrant male youth in East Harlem. Valentino offered a vehicle through which these youth could test social boundaries, offering a sense of possibility for otherwise unattainably fluid forms of contact and intimacy.

Cressey notes in the MPS that in 1930–1931 James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson were the “unquestioned ‘favorite actors’” of East Harlem.⁷³⁾ One interviewee noted “[a]lmost all the guys imitate Cagney.”⁷⁴⁾ A smaller survey determined that 50% of the 20 older teenage boys that were interviewed in this study emulated Cagney. The investigator wrote that most subjects:

[Used] Cagney’s friendly, ‘one, two’ punch to the rib, chin, and shoulder. They imitate his little jig. They fake his ‘shake hands’ and laugh at you as they point their thumbs back over their shoulder as Cagney might have done. They develop that big Cagney swagger. They smiled a la Cagney with all teeth exposed and two of the boys wear the Cagney spear head shirts.⁷⁵⁾

One MPS interviewer noted that his Italian-American subject had adopted Cagney’s trademark accent and dialect, encapsulated in the following utterance:

I ain’t going to get in Dutch wid de law [meaning: to get in trouble with the law] ‘cause I’m gonna get protection before I do anything. An’ I ain’t havin’ no broads aroun’ while dere’s work to do. You can’t trust ‘em and dey get you in trouble. If it wasn’t for a broad dey never woulda got Little Caesar.⁷⁶⁾

Cagney’s codification of the gangster type in *THE PUBLIC ENEMY* (1931) and later films held special significance for second-generation immigrant male youths, who were negotiating the demands of American society and traditional attachments in the 1930s.⁷⁷⁾ As well as contemporaneous new gangsters played by George Raft, Paul Muni, and Edward G.

73) Cressey, ‘The community’, p. 140, n.1.

74) Ibid., p. 154.

75) Ibid.

76) Ibid., p. 136.

77) Richard Maltby, ‘Why boys go wrong: gangsters, hoodlums, and the natural history of delinquent careers’, in Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield (eds), *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the Gangster Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 55; Lizabeth Cohen., *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1931* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 144–147.

Robinson, Cagney's personae signified an explicit confrontation with the larger structural order.⁷⁸⁾ In the MPS interview cited immediately above, Cagney's sartorial and vernacular style serves to enhance the content of the interviewee's testimony or to support his claim to have figured out the system, as exemplified by his boast that "I ain't going to get in Dutch wid de law because I'm gonna get protection". This teenager's affectation of Cagney's style is at least in part a resistance to power.⁷⁹⁾ It also illuminates gendered power relations in East Harlem. Both Robert Sklar and Norman Mailer have pinpointed Cagney's specific and inimitable contribution to the tough guy figure, namely what Sklar called Cagney's "softie side" — a trait rooted in his characters' dependence on strong women.⁸⁰⁾ Cagney's embodiment of masculine independence, coupled with an attachment to strong females, was perhaps particularly appealing to East Harlem's immigrant male youth, on account of their need to negotiate what Orsi has called the "public patriarchy" and the "private matriarchy" of the domus.⁸¹⁾ Orsi writes that mothers in the community were the "hidden center of the domus-centered society, the fountainhead of the blood which bound together members of the domus and connected it to the rest of the community".⁸²⁾ Compared to playing at Valentino, taking on the role of Cagney on the city streets may well have represented a different and a more complex way of testing social relations. The role of Cagney revealed the gender conflicts subtending East Harlem culture, even as it represented a challenge to the larger racialized order.⁸³⁾ In another MPS testimony, a teenage boy rationalized his emulating of Cagney thus: "Well, it makes me feel big".⁸⁴⁾

Crucially, however, it was not gangster pictures' narratives — the rise and fall trajectories of some high-profile films or the redemptive arcs of others — that were naturalized by East Harlem youth.⁸⁵⁾ As Cressey laments with respect to the older teens, "there is a strong discounting of the (outcome) of the underworld pictures".⁸⁶⁾ Such sentiments are apparent in the previous Cagney testimony, where the youth asserts that while he likes "*Little Caesar* and Jim Cagney ... dat's de baloney dey give you in de pictures. Dey always die or get canned. Dan't ain't true. Looka Joe Citro, Pedro Salami, and Tony Vendatta. Looka de ol' man".⁸⁷⁾ During this interview, the teenager — and perhaps even more so in his affectation

78) Giorgio Bertellini, 'Black hands and white hearts: southern Italian immigrants, crime, and race in early American cinema', In Grieveson, Sonnet, and Stanfield (eds), *Mob Culture*, p. 209.

79) Kuhn draws similar conclusions about working-class male youth subjects growing up in 1930s England. See, Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger*, pp. 108–109). Meanwhile, Chicano poet José Montoya wrote a poem entitled "El Louie" about a Northern California pachuco (a Chicano teenager identified by his idiolect and zoot suits) who was also an admirer of 1930s gangster stars: "El Louie's" emulation of the gangster stars is linked in the poem to the pachuco culture's larger resistance to Anglo power structures. José Montoya, 'El Louie', *El Sol y Los De Abajo and other R.C.A.F. poems por José Montoya* (San Francisco: Ediciones Pochoche, 1972), unpaginated.

80) Norman Mailer, cited in Richard Schickel, *James Cagney: A Celebration* (New York: Applause, 1999, p. 10; Robert Sklar, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 34.

81) Orsi, *Madonna*, pp. 120, 131.

82) Ibid, p. 131.

83) I am grateful to Cindy Dell Clark for this insight.

84) Cressey, 'The community', p. 153.

85) For an analysis of the later, reformist narratives of the gangster genre, see Lee Grieveson, 'Gangsters and governance in the silent era', in Grieveson, Sonnet, and Stanfield, *Mob Culture*, pp. 13–40.

86) Cressey, 'The community', p. 136.

87) Ibid.

of Cagney's speech and dress — distinguishes between the movie gangster's style and the fate of actual local gangsters. The reality of successful extralegal activity in East Harlem is encapsulated in an anecdote that he was told by a Boys' Club counselor, and which is printed in Thrasher's final report. The counselor, who worked in a male youth reformatory, instructed his students to draft a job application letter. All of the students wrote to gangsters. Perhaps assuming that the mass media had a negative effect on vulnerable youth, the counselor was surprised to find that they were not writing to celebrity criminals of the day, but to local gangsters. Extralegal activity was clearly a source of income, survival, and even deference on the streets of East Harlem. As Orsi revealed, the Mafia was seen as a protector and enforcer of East Harlem's patriarchal culture.⁸⁸⁾ The community conflated the mob's extralegal activity with the *domus*, believing it to be an institution that outsiders misunderstood and unfairly maligned.⁸⁹⁾ Thus, the fate of celluloid gangsters had little purchase for youth in a neighborhood where gangsters "g[o]t away", ran well-known businesses, forged important political connections, and garnered respect from the community. For East Harlem's teenagers, if not for well-meaning middle-class reformers, it was obvious that one's fate was conditioned by structural forces, and not by the influence of James Cagney.

Conclusion

East Harlem youths of the 1930s viewed movie-going as an act of independence that involved a location to which they returned time and again in the process of separating themselves from the adult world.⁹⁰⁾ The route to the movies was hewn by these teenagers, often with their own income, in pursuit of freedom and breathing room from the home, the school, and the street; for aspiring to a future; for imagining and sometimes trying out romantic intimacy in a safe and secure environment; and for trying on new roles, including those that promised to generate visibility and status in the community. In particular, cinema seemed to offer a way for East Harlem immigrant youth to mitigate the strains of negotiating the polarizing modes of growing up between the patriarchal strictures of their immigrant families and the individualizing and often racializing culture of American consumerism and schooling. In this sense, theatres provided an opportunity to get lost in play and to try on new subjectivities, actions which psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott deems necessary to lifelong human development.⁹¹⁾ Just as love stories and fallen woman pictures allowed East Harlem's teenage girls safely to imagine new states of desiring, so Valentino's star persona permitted teenage boys increasingly flexible options for asserting gendered, sexual, and class identities, and Cagney provided many boys a conduit through which to take a public stance in their neighborhood and in the culture at large.

Importantly, East Harlem youths' play with filmic worlds also created local culture, as teens engaged their movie knowledge in courting rituals, cinema talk, and public perfor-

88) Orsi, *Madonna*, pp. 103–104, 127–129.

89) *Ibid.*

90) Here I am again indebted to Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger*, pp. 16–37.

91) Winnicott, *Playing with Reality*, p. 13.



Figure 2. East Harlem youth, photograph Helen Levitt, c. 1940

mances on city streets. Crystallizing this phenomenon is a rare Puerto Rican testimony in Thrasher's final report on the Boys' Club Study. Entitled "Porto Rican Life in East Harlem", this document recounts the separate behavior of different generations of Puerto Ricans at a wake. While the elders are described as "immediately gathering to exchange their various premonitions before the unfortunate incident occurred", the youth notes that "[t]he younger people gather and discuss the various topics such as dances, movies, parties, etc., all of course, with proper decorum".⁹²⁾ The juxtaposition of adult discussion of older Puerto Rican folkways related to death, on the one hand, and on the other youth talking about movies and other urban leisure activities, underscores how cinema helped to create new demarcations of social groups in East Harlem between the generations.⁹³⁾ While their elders looked to the past, the teenagers embrace the present and the possibilities of the not-too-distant future.

Recent developments in Reception Studies stress that movie-going and movie culture can provide deep fonts of social history. Meanwhile, existing histories of twentieth-century childhood and adolescence have shed new light on the role that movies and other consumer culture played in helping teenagers to more clearly demarcate the culture of adolescence.⁹⁴⁾ This essay has developed these two strands of historiography by showing that in East Harlem, film and film culture helped teenagers forge youth identities. The East Harlem Movie Studies aimed to determine how working-class immigrant youth's consumption of movies was connected to what their writers saw as a failure of culture in that community: a lack of tradition, of middle-class morals, of parental control, of schooling. What the documents reveal, however, is that cinema was very much a part of East Harlem teenagers' own culture, a culture in which issues of class, ethnicity, and gender were both salient and deeply intertwined. As I hope this essay demonstrates, East Harlem youth used the images and narratives of cinema for vital, creative, and social acts: that is, for making themselves subjects in the world.

92) Unnamed Porto Rican resident, quoted in Thrasher, 'Final report', p. 296.

93) Sarah Chinn's historicization of an earlier generation gap between immigrant teenagers and adult society in the first decades of the twentieth century has been helpful to me here. See Chinn, *Inventing*.

94) Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1978); Palladino, *Teenagers*; Chinn, *Inventing*; Schrum, *Some Wore*.

Notes

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Films Cited

Alias Jimmy Valentine (Jack Conway, 1928); *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930); *Cimarron* (Wesley Ruggles, 1931); *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931); *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931); *Skippy* (Norman Taurog, 1931); *The Son of the Sheik* (George Fitzmaurice, 1926); *Taxi!* (Roy Del Ruth, 1932); *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927); *Up for Murder* (Monta Bell, 1931).

Lisa M. Rabin is Associate Professor of Spanish at George Mason University, USA, where she teaches film, literary, and cultural studies in Spanish and is a member of the programs in Film & Media Studies and Cultural Studies. Her article "The Social Uses of Classroom Cinema: A Reception History of the 'Human Relations Film Series' at Benjamin Franklin High School, East Harlem, 1936–1955" was published in *The Velvet Light Trap* 72 (2013): 58–70. Lisa is currently working on a book-length project on the international history of the educational documentary.

SUMMARY

The Normals, the Questionables, and the Delinquents:
East Harlem Youth and the Movies, 1931–1934

Lisa M. Rabin

This essay is a reception history of adolescents' encounters with cinema in the working-class and predominantly Italian and Puerto Rican neighborhood of 1930s East Harlem. From 1929 to 1934, sociologists at the Payne Foundation conducted a "Motion Picture Study" on the allegedly deleterious effects of Hollywood cinema on the area's male youths, with two similar studies of girls also undertaken at this time. I examine the institutional forces shaping these young people's testimonies and the ways in which these testimonies show immigrant teenagers' using films and movie-going as a means of negotiating both their roles and independence in this urban environment. I also analyze the gangster movies and romances they discuss in order to understand the aesthetic and gendered influences these films exerted on the formation of new youth identities in East Harlem.