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Apparitional Girlhood: Material Ephemerality and the Historiography of Female Adolescence in Early American Film¹

Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, the figure of the adolescent girl emerged in popular culture, her amorphous specter haunting the American screen. For the next two decades, psychologists, scientists, columnists, and filmmakers struggled to visualize a figure that was—physically, intellectually, and spiritually—defined by the ephemerality of transformation. Further, shaped by a deep-seated cultural tradition that equated young femininity with mysticism, the adolescent girl became quickly visualized as a liminal figure, an uncanny mediator between the living and the dead.

Focusing on D.W. Griffith's *What The Daisy Said* (1910), Thanhouser's *The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1912), and the lost IFC serial *The Mysteries of Myra* (1916), this paper proposes to trace the protean representations of mystical girlhood. Through an analysis of these three objects, I explore the links between the invention of adolescent girlhood as it was conceived by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall in the 1900s, and the growth of American Spiritualism, a religious movement founded in the mid-1800s that often recruited "budding girls" as their most sensitive mediums. Additionally, I also interrogate how early American filmmaking intersected with modern science's campaign to debunk spiritualism via the employment of mechanical apparatuses.

Lastly, following Giuliana Bruno's methodology of "textual remanence," I have used surviving ephemera to fill in the gaps left by the material absence of *The Mysteries of Myra*. Although only four fragments of its original fifteen chapters survive today, the serial was completely predicated on an eighteen-year-old girl's mystical awakening. By mapping a historiography of this lost object, in sum, this paper attempts to shed light on two intersecting early histories: that of female adolescence and that of American cinema.

"But, as the poet said of the flower in the crannied wall, to know the budding girl, who is the mystery of all mysteries in the world, would be to know nature and God, and all things." – G. Stanley Hall, "The Awkward Age," (1908)²

At the turn of the twentieth century, the figure of the adolescent girl emerged in popular culture, her amorphous specter haunting the American screen. A symbol of ephemerality, the growing girl was defined by her mysterious shape-shifting transformation from young child into young woman. In the influential words of G. Stanley Hall, the psychologist responsible for bringing Freud to America and for first theorizing

adolescence, the elusive "budding girl" was "no longer a little girl, but by no means yet a young woman, nor [was] she a cross between or a mixture of the two, but something quite unique and apart. She [was] the most intricate and baffling problem that science [had] ever attacked."³ Hall's seminal conceptualization of adolescent girlhood as a distinct but inscrutable phase placed the girl in a unique position between science and mysticism. I argue this understanding of girlhood was appropriated by early popular culture in general and by American cinema in particular. In their endeavor to visualize the ephemerality of human growth, American filmmakers recurrently depicted the girl as a mystical figure whose adolescent development was tied to concurrent supernatural and sexual awakenings.

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This paper aims then to unearth cinematic depictions of mystical girlhood, since many of those material objects—as susceptible to the inclement action of time as the girl's growing body—have aged, been undertheorized, and become lost to contemporary audiences. To their premature grave of oblivion, however, these documents took a singular vision of girlhood, as liminal and ambivalent as the transitional period that fostered her. It is a discursive séance then, what this paper aims to enact. Following Giuliana Bruno's methodology of "textual remanence"—i.e., filling the lacunae created by the loss of material objects with surviving ephemera—I will accomplish a twofold resurrection: I will bring back to life film objects whose cultural and material ephemerality has doomed them to historical obscurity; and I will reveal a view of uncanny girlhood that has been obliterated.⁴ Further, my argument will unravel anachronistically, providing a thematic analysis of three essential films—*The Mysteries of Myra* (1916), *The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1913), and *What the Daisy Said* (1910). Such backward chronology intends to force the reader to travel discursively back in time, back to the foundations of this cinematic figuration.

One of the most meaningful objects portraying adolescent girlhood as having an affinity for the occult is the feature-length serial *The Mysteries of Myra*. The 1916 serial was released weekly from April 24 to July 31 by media-mogul William Hearst's new entrepreneurial venture, the distributing company International Film Service (IFS). Nowadays, all complete prints of *Myra's* fifteen episodes have been destroyed; only fragments of four chapters remain at the British Film Institute and the Library of Congress. However, surviving film scripts and trade reviews describe *The Mysteries of Myra* as a "spiritual drama" pivoted on an adolescent girl's "becoming": Myra's transition from unaware child to adult heiress via her mediumnic awakening.⁵ This spiritual transformation takes place on Myra's eighteenth birthday, coinciding with two other formative awakenings: her falling under the influence of the evil Black Order; and her falling in love with the paranormal researcher Dr. Payson Alden. In the serial's first episode "The Dagger of Dreams," Myra, played by nineteen-year-old Jean Sothern,



On her eighteenth birthday, Myra sleepwalks into suicide.

sleepwalks, attempting to kill herself while under the devil worshipers' spell. Saved by Alden, Myra realizes that her older sisters' suicides—which had also occurred on each sister's respective eighteenth birthday—were not coincidences, but part of a master plan orchestrated by the High Master of the Black Order. After murdering Myra's father, this mystic fiend plots to kill all the Maynard heiresses in order to claim a generous inheritance. The following fourteen installments continue the tug-of-war established in the first episode, placing Alden, the scientist, and the High Master, the devil worshiper, as contenders for Myra's soul.

When praising the serial, trade press latched on to how well *The Mysteries of Myra* visualized female adolescence as a phase innately susceptible to mysticism. According to a *Moving Picture World* review, "this beautiful girl that is doomed to die on her eighteenth-birthday [...] [is] the blond, young, perfect picture of sweet girlhood."⁶ Clearly, it is Myra's supernatural death-sentence that enables her to personify "sweet girlhood." Furthermore, the continuous uncertainty if Myra would survive such precarious predicament struck

a chord in turn-of-the-century audiences; film critic Lynde Dening raved that “in ‘The Mysteries of Myra,’ the outstanding impression [...] is the suggestion of an occult power threatening the life of the pretty heroine.”

By depending so completely on an adolescent girl’s psychic vulnerability to the supernatural, *The Mysteries of Myra*, as well as many other films depicting the adolescent girl as mediator of the living and the dead, visualized the important link between girlhood and mystic spirituality, a link that had been culturally forged in the mid-1800s. In fact, the figure of the adolescent medium-girl harks back to 1848 when, in upstate New York, the two adolescent Fox Sisters, Kate and Margaret, claimed to have communicated with a ghost through raps on their bedroom wall. Building upon the supernatural connection established between the pubescent girls and the disembodied spirit, the doctrine of Spiritualism would emerge in the 1850s, having as a main tenet the belief in communicating with the dead via the body of a passive medium.⁷

Although mediumship was not exclusive to young girls, the notion that adolescents’ inchoate femininity made them particularly sensitive to spiritual intercourses was quite pervasive. According to feminist historian Ann Braude, “Americans throughout the country found messages from spirits more plausible when delivered through the agency of adolescent girls. [...] Youth associated the medium with the innocence of childhood,” dispelling fears of fraud.⁸ In other words, the “not here, nor there” developmental fluidity that Hall had described as the girl’s defining feature was, according to Braude, the key characteristic that underscored Spiritualism’s conceptualization of the young girl as the ideal spirit medium. Temporarily in flux between childish innocence and womanly passivity, the female adolescent was, above all, understood as a liminal identity. She belonged to neither biological category, but powerlessly floated through a developmental twilight zone. Such short-lived ambiguity was readily interpreted by Spiritualists as the defining quality that enabled the pubescent girl to peer into realms as liminal as herself, such as the afterlife, and trustworthily report back with messages from the dead.

When Hall analyzed the awakening of spirituality in adolescence throughout the 1910s, his scientific observations inadvertently reinforced the cultural belief that girlhood was linked with mysticism. Through his first-hand research on female mediumship, Hall concluded that the performance of mediumship was more recurrent in adolescent girls because it stemmed from their genetic proclivity for deceptiveness, impressionability, and make-believe.⁹ In addition, even when gazing at clouds and daydreaming, girls already devised otherworldly images: “the shape of an angel’s wing, which brought to mind a young friend who had just died; [...] Christ with saints and white angels, [...] [and] a silver path leading from earth to heaven.”¹⁰ In sum, both Spiritualists and scientists interpreted the adolescent girl as having a natural preponderance for the mystical and the fantastic. However, while, as Braude noted, Spiritualists believed that the adolescent girl’s mystic abilities were a reliable byproduct of her porous and pure youth, for scientists such as Hall, the girl’s supernatural manifestations were nothing more than the delusional product of an over-romantic mind. Nonetheless, as a result, both schools of thought publicized interest in the female adolescent’s mysterious coming-of-age. By the time *The Mysteries of Myra* was released, the girl’s psychic permeability to mystic phenomena had already become a legible cultural construction in American popular imagination.

In fact, films depicting the adolescent girl as supernaturally-inclined abounded in American cinema of the 1910s. For example, in *The Portrait of Lady Anne* (1912), Florence LaBadie, leading lady and popular young star of Thanhouser Company, undergoes a spiritual awakening similar to Myra’s. LaBadie plays the two main characters, both named Anne: a revived ghost and a twentieth-century haunted girl. In this short, the spirit of an eighteenth-century beauty, Lady Anne, comes alive in 1912 in order to advise her descendant not to repeat the same mistake of giving into unwarranted jealousy and losing her fiancé to death. More importantly, the encounter between the time-traveling Lady and the modern Anne enables the latter’s departure from adolescence and proper entrance into womanhood.

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Lady Anne's ghost materializes at her descendant's party.

Through the film's elaborate use of double-exposures, Lady Anne utilizes a portrait of herself as a haunted portal and appears in her descendant's masquerade ball. Since the modern Anne decided to dress up in the same clothes as those depicted in her ancestor's portrait, the girl haplessly becomes a doppelganger of her ghostly visitor. A romantic comedy of errors unfolds when, seized by jealousy, the modern Anne mimics her ancestor's behavior and dissolves her romantic engagement. Materialized in the present time, the ghost of Lady Anne decides to intervene and amend for her past faults. Spying through a window, modern Anne sees her fiancé—unaware that he is wooing the eighteenth-century Anne—showering her double with promises of love. Realizing her jealousy was unwarranted, the modern Anne embraces her beau, forgiving him. In a parallel scene, Anne's ghost merges back with her painted image, an intertitle announcing: "the spirit of Lady Anne is content."

This short film suggests then that the adolescent girl's ability to cease bratty tantrums and finally embark on an adult heterosexual commitment is linked with her ability to be haunted. Finally ready

to leave childish games behind, the modern Anne is now in a position to benefit from the mystical advice of a wiser, older version of herself, a familial ancestor who maternally points the girl into the right path towards wifely completion. Female adolescence is here, once again, visualized as a moment of transition, where spiritual awakening—the receptivity to be haunted by a warning ghost from the past—is matched with marital settlement and emotional maturation.

Writing for the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1907, Juliet Virginia Strauss penned an article, appropriately titled "The Chronicles of a Queer Girl," that prescribed this same remedial conclusion for uncanny girlhood: "the charm of the girl is so elusive. [...] I do heartily sympathize with mankind when he marries the girl and finds the woman. [...] Often the woman is as sweet as the girl, and once in a long time a woman carries the charm of girlhood with her into old age [...] But this is not to be desired – she is safer without it. The sons of Adam never quite tire of seeking the elusive thing."¹¹ Describing girlhood as a ghostly "charm" that haunts the grown woman and

taunts the courting man, Strauss suggests that the adolescent girl's elusiveness was dangerous if long-lived—a valuable clue on why so many films from the early twentieth century prescribed a swift growth from unattached, bewitching girlhood to married, defanged wifehood.

In this vein, D.W. Griffith's early Biograph shorts offer the most iconic representation of how girlhood's uneasy liminality could be dispelled by conservative wifehood. In 1917, the groundbreaking director was described by a *Photoplay* reader as "the master of the movie mob, *who first injected the ingénue into the film play*. Everyone followed, so that life, if we may judge by the films, is an eternal sweet sixteen."¹² This idealized depiction of "sweet sixteen" girlhood was a popular film figuration foremost found in many of Griffith's early one-reelers. The widespread success of such female characterization also demonstrates that, by the 1910s, film was being used as means to combat mechanically the ephemerality of

human growth. Considered the most elusive and fleeting developmental phase, girlhood thus became a main target of turn-of-the-century culture's preservationist desire. While analyzing Lewis Carroll's photographs of young girls, art historian Carol Mavor has remarked that, because "children 'grow up with the speed of darkness,' only the camera can keep up with the[ir] velocity."¹³

By the same token, it can also be argued that, by insistently depicting girlhood as a perennially unfinished phase, Griffith was promoting a Victorian view of arrested feminine development famously sponsored by evolutionist theorists such as Charles Darwin and Carl Vogt.¹⁴ Always on the cusp of womanhood, but unable to progress beyond her teen years, Griffith's idolized "sweet sixteen" figuration was barred from mature completion and fleshed-out individual agency. Such a flattening view of female youth echoed Spiritualists' idealization of the nubile girl as a pliable, pure, and passive



The sisters pluck the daisy—"He loves me, he loves me not."

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medium. In both cases, the female adolescent became the evacuated canvas whose beautiful and inexperienced form served only to channel a more knowledgeable and dominant voice: either that of a filmmaker, or of a dearly departed.

In his 1910 romantic short, *What The Daisy Said*, Griffith directly broached this association of girlhood with the occult. In the film two adolescent sisters, Martha and Milly, respectively played by adolescent actresses Mary Pickford and Gertrude Robinson, compete for the attention of a crooked fortuneteller. Although their ages are never mentioned in the narrative, the sisters' girlhood is conveyed through visual clues: their loose hair and above-the-ankle skirts; or their unconstrained behavior that includes running around the fields and freely cavorting with men. However, the protagonists' adolescence is moreover evinced through their irrational belief in mystic spirituality. This belief is first visualized in

the opening scene showing the sisters' divinatory plucking of a daisy, and later, by their complete reliance on the gypsy's fraudulent palm-reading.

After discovering that they were both deceived by the gypsy's false predictions of love, however, the girls undergo the key transformation from foolishly romantic adolescents to responsible young women. They choose to stay by their father's side instead of eloping with the lying gypsy, and lastly find love with honest farmhands. In short, the girls' abandonment of charlatanic spirituality—evinced by the substitution of the gypsy's fanciful magic-thinking for the farmhand's marital responsibility—anchors Martha and Milly's transformation from childish girls into reasonable women. Griffith's short only reinforces what Hall and Strauss had previously remarked: that the girl's natural proclivity for the occult was dangerous if stimulated, and it could only be safely dispelled by the maturity acquired with matrimony.



Flying bullets penetrate Myra's boudoir.

In sum, *The Mysteries of Myra*, *The Portrait of Lady Anne*, and *What the Daisy Said* all make the girl's coming-of-age visible through motifs popularized by Spiritualism—visions, divinations, ghosts, female mediation between the living and the dead. Yet, this appropriation is ambiguous, since deploying the girl in such a light did not aim to validate the Spiritualist belief in life after death. On the contrary, such tropes were used only as means to reiterate the film's understanding of adolescent girlhood's developmental transition as a literal negotiation between life and death. In other words, these three films reconfigure mystical tropes historically associated with Spiritualism in order to visualize an unfathomable process that, according to Hall, eluded even the most pragmatic eyes: a girl's "baffling" transformation from child into adult woman.¹⁵ While *What the Daisy Said* and *The Portrait of Lady Anne* depict the successful passage from gullible adolescence to reasonable wifedom, *The Mysteries of Myra* rehearses the power-shift from passive girl-child into active girl-medium. Ultimately, the cinematic employment of supernatural motifs did not conspire to promote Spiritualist viewpoints; instead, it labored to make visually legible the liminality inherent to the "budding girl's" growing process.

On one hand, trading off the girl's mystical sensitivity for wifely stability may seem an unfair bargain; yet, on the other hand, by placing the emphasis on the girl's uncanny transformative abilities, early cinema rendered mysticism not a defining characteristic, but the conducive means to a valuable end. Often in American film, the adolescent girl's spiritual receptivity does not render her a mere passive intermediary, nor an empty vessel, as it did in Spiritualist doctrine; instead, her susceptibility to the supernatural empowers the girl to undergo the fundamental metamorphosis from unaware child to proactive adult.

The accentuation of the girl's agency through supernatural means is made clearer in *The Mysteries of Myra*. Myra's psychic receptivity enables her to challenge stereotypes associated with 1910s serial heroines. Typified by their physical strength, athletic serial queens Pearl

White and Helen Holmes have been theorized by film scholars Ben Singer and Shelley Stamp as the embodiment of the New Woman, a modern figuration reflective of the increase of able young women joining the workforce and the public sphere.¹⁶ At a glance, Myra represents the opposite of these active heroines who readily jumped off moving trains to catch criminals. Contrarily, Myra is depicted in film, scripts, and ads as a delicate upper-class damsel, whose body is often domesticated by her recurrent use of nightgowns and her placement within the family home—her bedroom, her boudoir, and her dead father's secret workroom. Additionally, she is blatantly human, having no special physical ability that enables her to fight her own battles. Notwithstanding, according to *Motion Picture World*, Myra's ordinary fragility was a welcoming change from the other athletically endowed heroines: "the strong element of human interest is developed with the introduction of a charmingly fresh, seemingly normal young girl, who unconsciously is falling under the spell of the occult powers."¹⁷ Once more, it was Myra's fragility, signified by her vulnerable "unconscious," that made her such an appealing character. Adding to her psychic susceptibility, when not asleep or under hypnotic trances, Myra is often portrayed as a victim: she endures gas poisoning in episode 5; a fire in episode 13; flying bullets in episode 8; and an impromptu soul-exchange in episode 6.

However, if Myra's vulnerable and recumbent body is not equipped with Pearl's or Helen's resilience and strength, her mind is abuzz with heroism. Strapped to Dr. Alden's machines, Myra's mediumnic abilities are often crucial to track down criminals and fence off the Master's attacks. In episode 3, according to a *Motion Picture World* summary,

Alden places [Myra] before a hypnotizing machine. 'I am going to release your astral body in hopes that it will go in search of the persons who are persecuting you,' he explains. Slowly the machine with its myriad lights begins to revolve at high speed. Then a strange thing happens, for a fully formed, thought transparent duplicate

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of Myra arises to her full height and glides across the room disappearing in the vortex of the machine. The astral body of the girl has been released, while the material form still sits before the machine.¹⁸

In this disembodied form, Myra locates the Master's lair, enabling Alden to raid the evil coven in a later chapter. Further, in episode 13, Myra's supernatural mental abilities come even handier when, "Myra defends the cabin with her pistol, shooting one of the Black Order men. They cease trying to break in, but set the cabin on fire. Myra, in a fainting spell, manages to communicate with a sleeping telegraph operator, who, under her telepathic suggestion, sends a real telegram to Alden, begging for help."¹⁹ Although her physical attempts to fence off the assailants fail, Myra emerges as a figure of unusual heroism, as her powerful psyche overrides the fragility of a human body surrounded by flames. Escaping the earthly inferno, Myra's unbound mind emits a call for help via telepathic telegraphy. By harnessing the occult strength rooted in her unconscious instead of relying on blunt physical force, in conclusion, Myra becomes an unparalleled example of female heroism in early American film, one the loss of material prints has unfortunately obscured.²⁰

This liminal understanding of adolescent girlhood, moreover, was not only found in Spiritualist doctrine, but also in scientific thought. Like Hall attempted to apply rigorous research methods to female mediumship, *Myra* attempted to make sense of two opposite spectrums of knowledge: science and Spiritualism. *Myra's* young psychic may have been modeled after the mid-nineteenth-century adolescent mediums—from her "fainting spells" to her white delicate dresses—yet her mediumship was couched in Dr. Alden's scientific research and mechanical contraptions: "the astral alarm"; "the hypnotizing machine"; "the electrocope."

Therefore, *Myra's* utilization of technology as means to visualize occult manifestations was unique since, historically, early filmmakers had utilized cinematography to disavow Spiritualism. According to film scholar Matthew Solomon, in early trick shorts, Spiritualist tropes were

debunked by the magician's skeptical employment of film's mechanical properties. Magicians-turned-filmmakers, such as Georges Méliès or Robert W. Paul, made their careers deconstructing Spiritualist motifs—e.g., the appearance and disappearance of ghosts, disembodied raps, shaking tables—in front of the camera. By demonstrating how these tricks were produced by means of mechanical technology—double-exposures, superimpositions, and jump-cuts—and not by spiritual intervention, the filmmakers proved that the so-called Spiritualist miracles were not contingent on the medium's mystical power; in fact, those supernatural manifestations were just well-executed illusions produced by tech-savvy prestidigitators.²¹ In *Myra*, however, the same film technology invented by these early filmmakers is employed, not to strip Spiritualism of its mysticism, but to make it scientifically legible to a mass audience.

If utilizing technological apparatus to legitimize Spiritualism was new to American filmmaking, the idea that the girl's occult potential could only be unleashed by a male scientist's mechanical knowledge was not. In 1874, British scientist William Crookes famously conducted a series of laboratory experiments on the seventeen-year-old medium Florence Cook. In the séance proceedings, Crookes described how he hooked young Florence to a resistance coil and a galvanometer, so that her body was made part of a closed electric circuit. By meshing girl and apparatus, he aimed to prove scientifically the existence of Florence's "control spirit," the adolescent ghost Katie King. At the end of the experiment, Crookes argued that, by harnessing Florence's mystical ability via the technological apparatus, he had succeeded in seeing Katie's form materialize in the room, an appearance he registered photographically. Although Crookes now considered himself to have irrefutable proof of Florence's genuine mediumship, as well as of the existence of the ghost-girl Katie, he still admitted to have failed at mechanically reproducing "the brilliant purity of her complexion [...] with all the innocence of happy."²² Tellingly, it was not Katie's spectral body, but her elusive girlhood, that escaped the objective grasp of the machine.

Myra's and Anne's girlhoods were visualized as equally spectral, negotiated in the limbo between skeptical technology and supernatural belief. As described above, in *The Mysteries of Myra*, the heroine's body is recurrently hooked to Alden's "hypnotizing machine"; with her mental visions externalized through Alden's mechanical apparatus and her psychic energy feeding its circuits, the serial closely duplicated Crookes's scientific manipulations of Florence's mediumship. Further, in episode 3, when Myra's physical body is separated from its astral counterpart, Florence's reproduction of her ghostly double is equally reenacted.

Similarly, in *The Portrait of Lady Anne*, the image of Anne comes alive via double-exposure, when the modern girl masquerades in the likeness of her ancestor's painting. This spectral doubling is akin to the ghostly duplication taking place when Florence materialized Katie: firstly, because both Lady Anne and Katie physically resembled

their mediums;²³ and secondly, because both ghosts used mechanical technology—film and photography, respectively—to be made visible to their audiences. Additionally, in both cases the process of mechanically capturing the doubling of medium and specter seems to trouble a modern reliance on the apparatus' ability to distinguish between original and reproduction, living girl and girlish apparition.

Clearly, all these films relied as much on new cinematographic techniques as on well-established understandings of mystical girlhood in order to straddle the thin line separating realism and wonder. *The Mysteries of Myra*, however, went even further, employing the renowned paranormal researcher Hereward Carrington as its screenwriter and visual consultant. This decision successfully added credibility to *Myra's* goal of bringing mysticism and science together in a realistic fashion. In June, the *Motion Picture World* and the *New York Dramatic Mirror* both



In episode 2, Myra foresees Alden is in danger.

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ran a story on how “Miss Sothern was actually hypnotized” while “seated before a huge hypnotizing machine” that Carrington had designed from life.²⁴ This publicized occurrence enhanced *Myra’s* authenticity claims, suggesting that its depiction of mysticism was so effectively anchored on Carrington’s scientific knowledge of the paranormal that, when exposed to Carrington’s devices, *Myra’s* adolescent actress could not avoid being mesmerized. In other words, these articles demonstrate how *Myra’s* promotion campaign capitalized on two modern cultural perceptions: that science could be harnessed to clarify any mystery, even occultism; and that female adolescence was inherently susceptible to mysticism, even in an age when the supernatural was being negotiated vis-à-vis technology.

Thus *Myra’s* production and promotion history clearly demonstrate a cultural shift in how popular imagination construed the adolescent girl, the supernatural, and lastly the role of cinema. By the late 1910s, a skeptical worldview—shaped by the widespread impact of capitalism, industrialization, war, and modern disciplines such as psychology—was very much in place, ultimately dooming *Myra’s* enduring spectatorial appeal. Although the serial’s first installments were received enthusiastically by audiences and exhibitors alike, by episode 8 mentions in popular press grew scarcer, and so did the number of showtimes and theaters advertising this title. In fact, the release of *Myra’s* fifteenth and final episode on July 31 was more a damage-control cancelation than an organic conclusion. In the last page of the script, the subtitle announcing “Next Week in the 16th episode of *The Mysteries of Myra*” is still visible, although it has been manually crossed out. These markings evidence the impromptu ending of the serial.

The dire predictions of film critic Oscar Cooper had unfortunately come true: “*The Mysteries of Myra* is a serial based on occult phenomena, and therefore dependent on a large degree on weird camera effects, tricks of lighting, and general superiority of technical work. If these were not well done, if they were overdone, the atmosphere of mystery and suspense could

not be maintained.”²⁵ Often its repetitive and outlandish plots were blamed for *Myra’s* inability to secure a loyal audience. The episodes became too gimmicky; its “human interest” dissipated amongst stodgy gadgets and disjointed secondary characters. Hearst’s IFS released only one more serial, a stereotypical story concerning a girl-detective and her fight against crime titled *Beatrix Fairfax*. On July 6, 1918, IFS was dissolved due to Hearst’s economical downfall resulting from his pro-German involvement in the Great War.

In conclusion, as the ephemeral interest in uncanny girlhood faded throughout the 1920s, the mystical girl, such a popular representation of girlhood throughout the 1910s, was replaced by the liberated flapper, whose practical interest in motorcars and fashion blueprinted a legible image of female adolescence deeply embedded in the rise of a materialistic youth culture. These films depicting female mediumship were thus forgotten, undertheorized, restrictively confined to archives, and often even destroyed. Due to this loss, I suggest that our contemporary understanding of how girlhood was mass visualized at the time of its invention became incomplete, compromised even, as did our views on early American cinema. My excavated historiography of these films, especially *The Mysteries of Myra*, gestures then towards the inexactitude of histories based solely on preserved objects. I propose that, in the gaps produced by film’s material ephemerality, is a latent history waiting to be brought back to life, one that defies the prevalent notion that material survival dictates historical truth.

As a matter of fact, by so pervasively visualizing the adolescent girl as a clairvoyant figure, American cinema helped blueprint a visual paradigm of early girlhood that historiographies of early adolescence may have overlooked, but whose afterglow still haunts contemporary media representations of female adolescence. Think of popular TV shows such as *Medium* (2005-2011), *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *True Blood* (2008-2012), or recent blockbuster movies such as *The Twilight Saga* (2007-2012), *Jennifer’s Body* (2009), and *Red Riding Hood* (2010), and she is still there, the mystical girl, mediating the connections between this world and the next.

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End Notes

- 1 Research for this paper was generously supported by the Faculdade para as Ciências e Tecnologia PhD Grant, University of California - Irvine's International Center for Writing and Translation Summer Research Grant and the University of California Humanities Research Center Grant. Thank you to Ned Thanhouser for kindly supplying the image from *The Portrait of Lady Anne*.
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- 5 "The Mysteries of Myra," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, April 24, 1916, 30.
- 6 Lynde Denning, "The Mysteries of Myra," *Moving Picture World*, May 6, 1916, 984.
- 7 For a reading on how the Fox sisters' incident played upon modern understandings of "haunted technology," see Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
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- 11 Juliet Virginia Strauss, "The Chronicles of a Queer Girl," *Ladies' Home Journal*, August 1907, 9.
- 12 "Comments and Questions," *Photoplay*, February 1917, 156 (italics mine).
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- 15 Hall, "The Budding Girl," 2.
- 16 See Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) and Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
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- 18 "The Mysteries of Myra," *Moving Picture World*, May 20, 1916, 1402.
- 19 "Mysteries of Myra," *Moving Picture World*, August 5, 1916, 1000.
- 20 Moreover, this figuration spoke to key psychological theses being developed in the first years of the twentieth century, namely by Sigmund Freud. These theories on "the unconscious" argued that the human mind was not a uniform repository of hereditary traits; instead, it was a complex reservoir of repressed memories and secret desires which shaped the individual's unique personality. See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill. (New York: Macmillan, 1913).
- 21 Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
- 22 William Crookes, *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (London: J. Burns, 1874), 95.
- 23 Florence and Katie resembled each other so much that polemic ensued when other séance participators suspected Katie's materialization of being a forgery. Florence's detractors accused her of inconspicuously slipping away from the cabinet where she was usually kept in a trance, dressing up in different clothes, and entering the main room to pose as "Katie." Other disbelievers, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, supported the theory that Eliza White was the model hired to masquerade as Katie in later spirit photographs. See Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (New York: McFarland, 2009) and Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, vol. 1-2 (New York: G.H. Doran, Co., 1926).
- 24 "The Mysteries of Myra," *Motion Picture World*, June 12, 1916.
- 25 Oscar Cooper, "The Mysteries of Myra," *Moving Picture News*, May 9, 1916, 2646.