

BROKEN TOYS: CHILDHOOD AND WAR IN FRENCH CINEMA (1908-1916)

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The first international conflict, the first filmed war, a true step into the twentieth century... The First World War has been analysed from many points of view. One of the reasons why it was considered a new kind of war was the inclusion of children as active participants in the conflict, along with the rest of the civilian population. Children were the argument used to justify the mobilisation of adults: the fight is for them; sacrifices are being made for their future. From 1915 onwards, family played a predominant role in boosting soldier morale and a special sort of camaraderie was forged between child and soldier. On the front, the soldier was defending his home, his wife and his children, and with his victory, he would ensure a future free of wars. This relationship is clearly reflected in the propaganda images of the time, which made extensive and recurrent use of this idea (Pignot, 2012b: 130-131).

From the beginning of the war, children were the object of a genuine mobilisation project in all the countries involved, through education in the schools, sermons in the churches and also with a wide range of toys, picture books and recreational games. Books and toys spread the themes of Germanophobe and patriotic propaganda with great efficiency through the development of new shapes, colours and designs capable of seducing the youngest members of the public. The aim of this strategy was to justify the war, and thus children were drawn in through patriotic exaltation: they were inculcated with the idea that they belonged to a nation, that they were little soldiers and must therefore participate in its defence (Pignot: 2012b, 133). Drawings by schoolchildren reflect this clearly: images of the father leaving for war, soldiers on the battlefield, hatred towards the enemy, and the harsh conditions they were living in (Pignot: 2004).

Cinema was used during the war years as a tool to exalt national values that both soldiers and civilians had to defend with their efforts. Producers focused on making movies with a patriotic message, as a justification for their occupation in an industry considered frivolous in such a dramatic time (Véray: 2008).

Children and the war was one of the common plotlines used in fiction films produced during the First World War in France, both in comedies and in patriotic melodramas. Comedies were very successful and therefore abundant, most of them featuring famous actors on the French scene such as Max, Rigadin, Boireau or Onésime, who played dedicated patriots on the silver screen. The biggest child star was Bout-de-Zan, the young protagonist of the series directed by Louis Feuillade for Gaumont. René Poyen, who had been four years old when the series started in 1912, continued to play the same young troublemaker from 1914 to 1918 in titles like *Bout-de-Zan pacifiste* in 1914, followed in 1915 by *Bout-de-Zan est patriote*, *Bout-de-Zan et le poilu* and *Bout-de-zan va te'n guerre*; and in 1916 by *Bout-de-zan et le boche*, etc.

In patriotic melodramas children always added a note of melancholy. Frequent images included the resigned child watching his father leave home reluctantly for war, the child kissing his father's photograph, as in *Le Noël du Poilu* (Gaumont, 1916), or, from the other side, the soldier, the *poilu* in the trenches, gazing wistfully at a picture of his family (*Les Poilus de la revanche*, Gaumont, 1915). Manon Pignot speaks of a "*paternité de papier*", a new concept of fatherhood that emerged during the war years, constructed on the basis of anxieties that had been unheard of previously (Pignot, 2012a: 19).

These melodramas integrated children into contemporary situations, like the films about the territories lost in the war of 1870 or about spies. In *Ce qu'ils ont fait* (directed by G. Honoré Lainé in 1917), two orphan children manage to expose

a German spy who had mistreated them before the war.

Although most of these films tended to portray bourgeois environments, *Noël de guerre* (Pathé, 1916) is a sentimental melodrama telling the tragic story of a mother who cannot afford to buy her son toys for Christmas. Little André decides to write a letter to Jesus to ask him for the toys he wants. By chance, the letter reaches a retired military man who lost his son. With his wife, they decide to give André the toys which their own son will never be able to use again. At one point in the film we can see André showing his mother his old broken toys, which include a toy gun.

CHILDREN AND THE WAR WAS ONE OF THE COMMON PLOTLINES USED IN FICTION FILMS PRODUCED DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN FRANCE, BOTH IN COMEDIES AND IN PATRIOTIC MELODRAMAS

Along with papier-mâché guns, tin soldiers and other war toys were very common presents for children of the period, as war games and toys were used to convey a message of patriotism and courage to defend the nation.

With the industrialisation process in the late eighteenth century the toy industry developed significantly, resulting in a profound transformation which by the middle of the nineteenth century had turned childhood into an educational and political challenge. When the First World War broke out, German-French rivalry was also expressed in the creativity of toy makers. Games, leisure activities with fixed rules agreed on by all participants, are especially useful in the context of a traumatic situation where the everyday points of reference have been completely altered by mobilization, uncertainty and fear. Games

create a universe with a beginning and an end, a specific space and timeframe. If the participants in a game are not enjoying it, it can be changed, or begun again as if nothing had happened (Hadley, 2010: 70). Children play at being soldiers, building barricades, using toy guns and helmets, and imitating the war in which their parents are fighting. In their games, the brave *poilu* will fight bravely and will always emerge victorious.

From 1914 on, images advertising toys became full of references to the war, as can be seen in the advertisement reproduced here, from the 1916 *Au Printemps* catalogue, designed by Armand Rapeño, showing a group of children in bed who are watching (dreaming? imagining?) some toy soldiers with a cannon on top of their

bed (Daeninckx, 2013; Vial Kayser and Chopin, 2014: 13). The cover of the 1917 Christmas catalogue, designed by L. Peltier, shows a group of children in the city, playing war. Toy makers and sellers took advantage of current events to sell war-themed toys, and department stores such as *Bon Marché*, *Printemps* or *Magasin du Louvre* filled their windows and catalogues with such toys. The conflict also helped bring the previous German monopoly over the toy industry to an end, as children and their parents were urged to throw out any toys made in the enemy nation. An example of this is the very direct message on the cover of the 1919 Christmas catalogue for the department store *Bon Marché*, designed by Poulbot, in which a girl congratulates a brave boy who, with his wooden sword, has defeated a German toy, a *boche*/soldier with a tag that reads “Made in Germany” (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2004).

Despite the ubiquity of war toys in advertising images, it is important to note that their high price tags made them affordable only to the urban bourgeoisie (Pignot, 2012aa: 62). This does not mean, however, that “playing war” was not a popular pastime among all social classes, as the photographs and pictures drawn by schoolchildren during these years make it clear that it was.

Among the toys that met with the greatest success in those years were toy soldiers. Made of lead, tin or polychrome wood, these little toys made up a small army equipped with cannons, tanks and other elements to recreate the action. These toys seem to have had a military origin, as they were used to simulate battle strategies in preparation for actual battles. The first figurines were made in the cities of Nuremberg and Furt in the mid-eighteenth century (Claretie, 1920: 44-45). They were made of tin and were two-dimensional. In France in the late eighteenth century, French metallurgist Lucotte made little three-dimensional men using an alloy of tin, lead and antimony, which became popularly known as *petits bons hommes de Lucotte*. In Paris in 1825,

Figure 1. Advertising image, Armand Rapeño, 1916.



Cuperly, Blondel and Gerbeau founded CBG Mignot, which became the most important manufacturer of tin soldiers and other war toys like miniature cannons and weapons.

TOY SOLDIERS ALSO APPEARED IN THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE OF THE TIME. ONE OF THE MOST PROLIFIC AUTHORS WAS ANDRE HELLÉ, THE PENNAME OF ANDRÉ LACLÔTRE (1871-1945), AN ILLUSTRATOR AND MAKER OF TOYS AND FURNITURE FOR CHILDREN

Toy soldiers also appeared in the children's literature of the time. One of the most prolific authors was Andre Hellé, the penname of André Laclôtre (1871-1945), an illustrator and maker of toys and furniture for children. His illustrations for books and advertising designs feature wooden toys on great adventures. According to Olivier-Messonier, Hellé's art is characterised by the "use of the anthropomorphic and identifiable toy, which symbolically represents the body of the child. Its design clearly echoes the industrial development of toys in the second half of the nineteenth century, since it determines the child's cultural, social and emotional life" (Olivier-Messonier: 2013). A constant of Hellé's work is the toy soldier: he designed toys like *PioliPioli*, a jointed wooden soldier; the tin soldier is featured in illustrations for magazines, like a drawing in the *La vie parisienne*, in which countless tin soldiers fall from the sky as a Christmas present, with a caption reading: "A million soldiers to help us expel the Germans from France and Belgium!" They also illustrate a cover of *La joie des enfants* (No. 11, 9 February 1905), and advertising images like the poster for the furniture designed by Hellé for the department store *Le Printemps* in 1910.¹

In Hellé's illustrations for books, the presence of military iconography is also a constant. His *Alphabet de la grande Guerre 1914-1916*, with the subtitle *pour les enfants de nos soldats*, was very successful. Published in 1916, each letter represents an element related to the conflict: A for *Alsace*, B for *Batterie*, C for *Charge*, etc. The war already appears on the cover, showing a group of soldiers getting ready to fire a cannon. Audoin-Rouzeau highlights the fact that children's literature during these years is permeated by images of and references to the war. Far from trying to shield children from the reality around them, both books and periodicals portrayed the political events of the time with the intention of integrating the child into the national conflict (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2004: 64). The presence of war iconography is notable, especially in works targeting younger ages, as is the case of Hellé's alphabet, full of violent images associating each letter with an element related to war.

The toy soldier is an omnipresent image in Hellé's illustrations for the book of poems by Georges Auriol (penname for Jean-Georges Huyot) *La geste héroïque des petits soldats de bois et plomb*, published in 1915; it is also one of the characters in *La boîte à joujoux*, a ballet composed by Claude Debussy in collaboration with Hellé in 1913,² and Quillembois, the wooden soldier, is the protagonist of *Histoire de Quillembois Soldat*, a story written and illustrated by Hellé in 1919.

In 1915, Charlotte Schaller-Mouillot, a Swiss-born French author, painter and illustrator, published *Histoire d'un brave petit soldat* and *En guerre!*, both illustrated by the author. Both books take a clear anti-German stance. In the first, the protagonist of the story is a toy soldier who, together with his comrades and equipped with bayonets, cannons, planes, etc., fight against the evil Germans. The brave soldier defeats the enemy by throwing chestnuts at them. In another episode, the soldier is captured by the Germans, but he escapes by dressing up as a *boche*, and, with

the help of some English soldiers, he liberates his Belgian friends from the dreaded Germans and finally returns home victorious. In *En guerre!* the protagonist Bobby is transformed into a “little soldier” in order to save his country. He burns his German tin soldiers and, at night, dreams that all the nations that are fighting for freedom are marching in front of him.

Books, games, illustrations for magazines, advertising... in the childhood imaginary of the years of the Great War, toy soldiers took up arms to become the protagonists of the stories. In his studies of the history of toys and children’s literature, Michel Manson notes that in nineteenth-century children’s literature the idea of toys coming to life appears frequently (MANSON:2011b). This is also true of the cinema of the time, where, as will be explored below, toys coming to life while children sleep is a recurring theme.

A few years before the war, tin soldiers coming to life had already appeared as protagonists in films. One of the pioneers of animation in France, Émil Cohl, directed *Le petit soldat qui devient dieu* in 1908 and *Les Beaux-Arts mystérieux* in 1910, for the Gaumont film company. In both films, the tin soldiers are animated using the stop-motion technique. In *Les Beaux-Arts mystérieux*, the animation appears and disappears on a white square over which a paintbrush, a quill and other objects such as nails, needles or matches paint paintings which transform into photographs, some of them of Paris landmarks. In one of the scenes, from which two stills are reproduced here, three toy soldiers move in different directions over the square with no movement of their joints. The film ends with the appearance of the image of a cuirassier (with a comically exaggerated helmet) framed in a circle of lightning.

Cohl, who had enjoyed a significant career as a caricaturist and cartoonist before going into cinema, had also illustrated magazines and children’s books, and in 1907 he had invented a toy

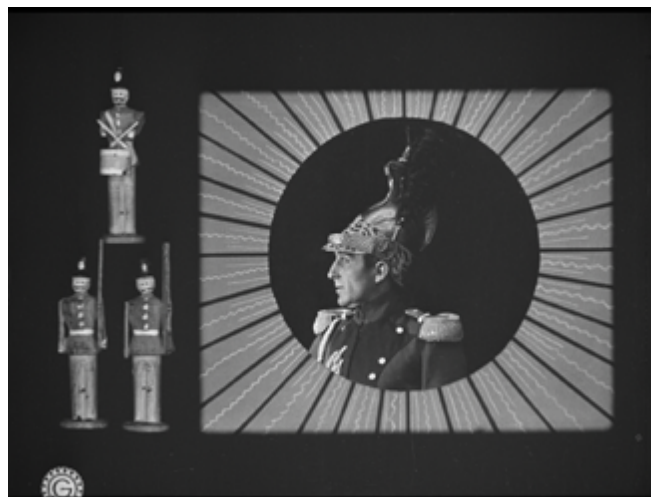


Figure 2. *Les Beaux-Arts mystérieux*, É. Cohl, 1910. Gaumont Pathé Archives.

for children, the *ABCD à la ficelle*. This toy consisted of a board on a wooden or thick carton holder with a series of nails; children had to follow the examples provided in the margins and, braiding a string around the nails, they would draw various letters of the alphabet and numbers. As Cécile Boulaire points out, this is the game that Cohl reproduces in *Les Beaux-Arts mystérieux*, when the nails mark out the silhouette through which the string will mark the outline of the Arc de Triomphe (Boulaire: 2007:, 130).

Le petit soldat qui devient dieu starts with two girls who receive a box of tin soldiers. From this moment the animation starts: out of the box come three soldiers who perform against a background of childish drawings. Other soldiers appear with a cart, a stick and, finally, the armed battalion in formation. The camera is fixed the whole time on a wide shot and the toys are barely animated: only a few of them move their arms and the object they carry, such as a drum or a broom held like a gun. All of the soldiers go back into the box except for one, who gets distracted while the battalion is leaving. The soldier, left behind by his comrades, sails away on a paper boat and reaches a riverbank. At this moment in the film there are two wide shots of an actual river,



Figure 3. *Le petit soldat qui devient dieu*, É. Cohl, 1908. Gaumont Pathé Archives.

real filmed images that clash with the image of fantasy presented in the film up until this point.

The animation ends here and the film continues with live actors. A child, belonging to a tribe of “savages”, finds the soldier and takes it home. At this point we see the film’s only close-up, when the chief of the tribe licks the toy soldier and dies. His successor is then crowned and turns the soldier into a deity to adore. The film ends with a grand finale shot, following a tradition of many early films that highlights cinema’s theatrical heritage.

Cécile Boulaire compares this film to *Mon ami Polichinelle*, a story by Abel Deparc illustrated by Cohl in 1897 (Boulaire: 2007: 130 et seq.) that bears several resemblances to the movie: a boy who owns a box of lead soldiers who come alive in a dream-like adventure which the protagonist embarks on with his toy Pulcinella, the encounter with a tribe, a journey on a boat... although the moralistic message of the story is subverted by a comic ending in the film.

Pathé also produced animated films with lead soldiers, which are identified in the Pathé catalogue compiled by Henri Bousquet (1994: 487; 1995: 696): *Les Soldats de Jack au Maroc* (1911) and *Les soldats du Petit Bob* (1913). Unfortunately, I

have not been able to locate any copy of these films, and thus it is not possible to conduct a detailed analysis of the type of animation they use, or of any other cinematographic aspects. Nevertheless, it seems relevant to include them in this study as their plots are based on stories very similar to the movies analysed above. In *Les Soldats de Jack au Maroc*, young Jack plays war with the lead soldiers he has received as a birthday gift from his uncle. When it is time for bed, however, his mother makes him put away the soldiers in their box. In his dreams Jack imagines his brave soldiers fighting to conquer a faraway territory in the name of their beloved country. In *Les Soldats du Petit Bob* (1913) little Bob’s godmother gives him some beautiful lead soldiers. While he sleeps, he dreams that his old wooden soldiers, jealous of the new intruders, decide to attack their rivals. They use a chair to build a trench. Seeing they cannot defeat them, the leader of the wooden soldiers decides to sacrifice himself and, burning like a flaming torch, he attacks their metal enemies. When Bob wakes up, he realises that it was all a dream and that his troops, old and new, are still intact.

The fact that Cohl’s films pre-date the conflict is surely the reason why no direct historical

Figure 4. *Le petit soldat qui devient dieu*, É. Cohl, 1908. Gaumont Pathé Archives.



relation is established between his toy soldiers and war (although in the case of *Les Beaux-Arts Mystérieux* there is the image of the cuirassier at the end of the animation). Although there was certainly an atmosphere of impending war prior to 1914, the presence of the toy soldier in these two films seems more a pretext for the animation than a direct reference to war. The case of Pathé's films is different in that the toy is, in both cases, the leitmotiv which relates the presence of the child to the conflict which, in 1913, was about to break out. In both films, the toy soldiers come alive in the dreams of the child protagonists, a narrative element they share with the 1916 film *Les petits soldats de Plomb*.

Directed by Pierre Bressol³ for Pathé, *Les petits soldats de Plomb* tells the story of young Bébé, who receives a box of lead soldiers from his uncle. They start playing war and the uncle explains battle and attack strategies to the boy. When Bébé goes to sleep, he dreams that the toy soldiers come alive and fight a war which the French win. He wakes up to find his sorely missed father, on leave from the war, in his bedroom and he goes to hug him. The news does not surprise little Bébé because in his dream he saw his father, as one of the soldiers, winning the battle. The film presents frame-by-frame animation of the lead soldiers coming out of the box and marching towards a toy set with houses, a bridge over which a train passes, and the field where the battle will take place, with special effects simulating fire. The images appear in a pan shot that covers the whole set and three wide shots showing the soldiers' battle in greater detail.

The animation of the lead soldiers in the boy's dream featured in the above mentioned French films inevitably recalls *La guerra e il sogno di Momi* made by Segundo de Chomón for the Itala Film in 1916. The connection between dream and war is a very common iconographic stereotype in the nineteenth century: we find it in images as diverse as advertising, popular illustrations

or images for the magic lantern. In the case of France there are the examples cited of advertising images such as those by Armand Rapeño for *Au Printemps*, or Charlotte Schaller-Mouillot's work, *En guerre!*, in which the boy protagonist dreams a victorious battle.

In some of the French illustrations mentioned above there is a parallelism with *Les petits soldats de Plomb*. In one of the scenes in the film, the child is sitting on the bed, with the box of toy soldiers on his lap, as in Rapeño's advertisement. In another scene, he is playing with the soldiers on the table, recalling one of the illustrations by Hellé for *La geste héroïque des petits soldats de bois et plomb*; specifically, the image on page 17, reproduced here together with the still from the film.

THE FACT THAT COHL'S FILMS PRE-DATE THE CONFLICT IS SURELY THE REASON WHY NO DIRECT HISTORICAL RELATION IS ESTABLISHED BETWEEN HIS TOY SOLDIERS AND WAR

In the early twentieth century, particularly as a result of the conflict, the relationship between dream and war was further consolidated by the dissemination of illustrated postcards. Silvio Alovio and Luca Mazzei analyse the symbolism of dreams in several Italian movies produced during the war that feature children dreaming: *Il sogno del bimbo d'Italia* (Riccardo Cassano, 1915), *Umanità* (Elvira Giallanella, 1919), *Il sogno patriottico di Cinessino* (Gennaro Righelli, 1915) and *La guerra e il sogno di Momi* (1916). Based on the dream interpretation theories in vogue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, led by Freud, these authors analyse the symbolism of the dreams in these films, an analysis which can be extrapolated to the French titles chosen here (Alovio, Mazzei, 2015).

The thematic similarities between the films by Bressol and Chomón, made in the same year, are obvious: in both, the child thinks about his father in the war, and when he falls asleep, he dreams of his toys waging a battle. But Chomón's film is longer and its animation techniques are much more advanced than Pathé's. I have not been able to ascertain whether Chomón had the chance to watch Bressol's movie, or if Bressol knew about Chomón's work. It was common in those days for different production companies to release films with similar themes, especially if they made reference to contemporary events as significant as the war, which permeated the popular imaginary in every country involved in the conflict.

According to Simona Nonsenzo, the Aragonese director apparently adapted the script from an original story written by himself and Pastrone. With *La guerra e il sogno di Momi*, Chomón probably wanted to explore a theme of contemporary importance without having to worry about censorship and without ascribing to a particular ideological position. He thus produced a fable directed at a child audience and made use of the dream formula to be able to express himself freely (Nonsenzo, 2007: 63-65). In technical terms, his film is much more complex than Bressol's. The movements of the soldiers are not the product of a simple stop-motion technique, as in the French film; rather, in the Italian film, the jointed figurines perform fluid and complex movements. Moreover, the special effects in the two films are also different: while in Bressol's they are limited to a few explosions, in Chomón's there are battles, explosions, aeroplanes flying, and highly detailed scenery with miniatures, scaled models of cannons, a fire extinguisher, gas masks and various gadgets. All in all, it is a very complex film that combines real actors with animation in the same scene, and demonstrates Chomón's extraordinary technical skill. Despite its success with audiences and critics, the movie did not inspire further



Figure 5. *La geste héroïque des petits soldats de bois et plomb*, A. Hellé, 1915, p. 17.

animation films in Italy, but stands as an isolated example, and as a sign, as Nonsenzo suggests, that Chomón was a unique character with a technical prowess and creativity far superior to those of his contemporaries.

Although less technically advanced than Chomón's, the French films analysed show how the theme of the war was present not only in comedy and melodrama, but in animated movies as well. Using the toy soldier, the fashionable children's toy in the pre-war climate, there were numerous stories where the toy comes alive through the stop-motion technique, present in all the films discussed above. The staging, set dimensions and number of soldiers increased, but the animation did not improve significantly from the first film in 1908 to the last one in 1916, nor did other aspects of the film grammar. With the end of the conflict, war stories, though still present on French screens, would no longer convey the nationalist message that characterised the films of the previ-

ous period. War toys would disappear from children's catalogues and advertising messages would encourage children to stop playing war with the same energy they had previously devoted to advertising tanks, cannons and soldiers. ■

NOTES

- * The images illustrating this article have been contributed voluntarily by the author of the text, who were liable for locating and requesting the proprietary rights of reproduction. In any event, the inclusion of images in the texts of *L'Atalante* is always done by way of citation, for their analysis, commentary and critical assessment. (Editor's note).
- 1 Hellé had made a toy catalogue for this department store the previous year, and he would continue to contribute to the design of toys and advertising during the war years (Hardy, 2014: 27-28).
 - 2 This ballet arose from a proposal that André Hellé made to Debussy for him to compose a piece of music for children in four acts. Hellé had written the plot and built the sets. The result was *La Boîte à joujoux*, a ballet that Debussy dedicated to his daughter. The libretto, illustrated by Hellé, was published in 1913.
 - 3 I have not as yet been able to locate more information on this director, whose real name is Pierre Dubois (1874-1925) and who also worked as an actor. During the war, he made three films, including *Les petits soldats de plomb*. <http://centenaire.org/fr/autour-de-la-grande-guerre/cinema-audiovisuel/les-petits-soldats-de-plomb>.

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BROKEN TOYS: CHILDHOOD AND WAR IN FRENCH CINEMA (1908-1916)

Abstract

During the First World War many patriotic films were performed in order to keep the high moral of the population, magnifying patriotic symbols and repeating stereotypes. Among these films, *Le petit soldat qui devient dieu* (1908) and *Les Beaux-Arts mystérieux* (1910) directed by Emil Cohl for Gaumont and Pathé productions such as *Les Soldats de Jack au Maroc* (1911), *Les soldats du Petit Bob* (1913) and *Les petits soldats de Plomb*, directed by Pierre Bressol in 1916. In all of them we can find animation toy soldiers. Bressol's film is contemporary to *La guerra e il sogno di Momi*, directed by Segundo de Chomón, where the director resorts to the crank step technique to give life to toy soldiers, the same technique used in French films. In the article, these films are linked to French culture and popular literature.

Key words

First World War; Fiction animated film; Toy soldiers.

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JUGUETES ROTOS: LA INFANCIA Y LA GUERRA EN EL CINE FRANCÉS (1908-1916)

Resumen

Durante la Primera Guerra Mundial se realizaron un gran número de ficciones patrióticas con la finalidad de mantener la moral alta de la población, magnificando símbolos y repitiendo estereotipos. Entre estas películas, *Le petit soldat qui devient dieu* (1908) y *Les Beaux-Arts mystérieux* (1910) dirigidas por Emil Cohl para Gaumont, y producciones de Pathé como *Les Soldats de Jack au Maroc* (1911), *Les soldats du Petit Bob* (1913) y *Les petits soldats de Plomb*, dirigida por Pierre Bressol en 1916. En todas ellas coincide la animación de soldaditos de plomo. La película de Bressol es contemporánea a *La guerra e il sogno di Momi* de Segundo de Chomón, en la que el director recurre a la técnica del paso de manivela para dar vida a los soldados de juguete, la misma técnica utilizada en los films franceses. En el artículo se analizan estas películas así como su vinculación con la cultura y literatura popular francesas.

Palabras clave

Primera Guerra Mundial; cine de animación; soldados de plomo.

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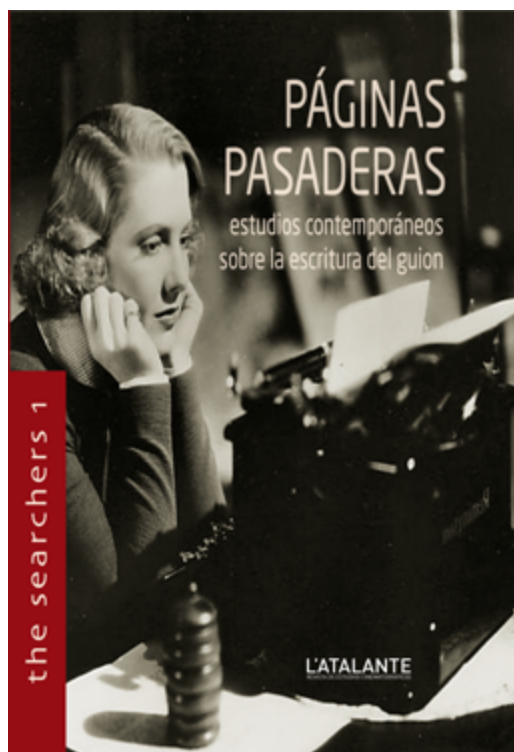
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