

Through a Glass Brightly: The Magic Lantern in History

On 16–17 February 2001, the Academy hosted a two-day colloquium, 'Lantern Projections', which brought together over twenty invited speakers from the UK, the United States, Italy and Belgium. Its aim was to map the emerging 'intermedial' field of Lantern studies, involving early cinema specialists, art historians and lantern enthusiasts, and lay a basis for future concerted research. **Professor Ian Christie FBA**, who organised the colloquium with Professor William Vaughan, both at Birkbeck College's School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media, explains.

Samuel Pepys, Goethe and Proust were enthusiastic amateurs. Marie Antoinette was sceptical, until she saw its potential to motivate her unscholarly son the Dauphin. John Ruskin, Heinrich Wölfflin and Aby Warburg, among the founders of art history, were all dedicated and innovative users. The Lantern – variously known as Magic or Optical – was for nearly four centuries a vital medium of entertainment and instruction. By the late nineteenth century, lantern lecturers were addressing audiences of up to a thousand on subjects ranging from contemporary exploration and classical antiquity to biology and astronomy, not to mention presenting Wagner's *Ring* and Dickens' novels, as well as maudlin Temperance tracts.

In the twentieth century, the slides would become smaller and their showing ubiquitous, from the social hazard of holiday pictures at home to growing school and college use of 'visual aids', and the obligatory business presentation. Today, the overhead projector and, increasingly, the data projector linked to a computer continue this tradition of bright images shown to an audience in a darkened room.

But is this more than a sequence of technological developments? Could it be considered a 'medium', with its own distinctive culture and history? A colloquium held under the Academy's auspices brought together an unusual range of specialists from different fields to test this hypothesis. Of course, for art and film historians, such as Will Vaughan and myself, the lantern already has a privileged status. The academic discipline of art history could be said to have assumed its distinctive modern form in the legendary slide lectures of Wölfflin, delivered as if spontaneously from among the audience, 'distilling the experiences common to everyone'. And successive generations of art historians have continued to show two images side by side in the profession's trademark format. By the same token, cinema historians have long recognized the turn of the

century lantern as the basis of the first film projectors and the lantern show, in both its documentary and fictional forms, as the inspiration for early moving pictures and their presentation. Yet neither art nor film historians have been in the habit of attaching more than instrumental, antiquarian status to the lantern aspect of their traditions.

By contrast, the Magic Lantern has attracted a passionate network of enthusiasts who collect and restore surviving equipment, and present lantern shows with varying degrees of performative authenticity. To mount a serious exploration of the lantern's history and culture without involving such practising lanternists would be impossible; so part of the challenge of the colloquium was to create a forum in which many different kinds of expertise would be welcome – including the ability to project large 'standard English' slides idiomatically, a task ably performed by Jeremy Brooker, an early music specialist as well as lanternist.

Perhaps the most distinguished of the performer-scholars was David Francis, former Curator of the

Figure 1. 'Slum Life in our Great Cities', projected by lanternist and musician Jeremy Brooker.



National Film Archive and co-founder of the British Film Institute's much-missed Museum of the Moving Image, latterly head of the Motion Picture division of the US Library of Congress, who has remained an active collector and lantern presenter. His rare examples of nineteenth-century photographic slides depicting urban poverty were one of the colloquium's highlights. Ian Mackley (Exeter), another practitioner-historian, showed how widely mainstream nineteenth-century literature was adapted for lantern illustration, anticipating modern screen adaptation; while Charlie Gere (Birkbeck), a theorist of digital culture, pondered the prevalence of lantern figures and references in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

If the nineteenth century is often considered the heyday of lanternism, and certainly saw its development as an optical industry, a theme developed by Richard Crangle (Exeter), the previous century now looks equally promising as a research field. Will Vaughan (Birkbeck) drew on the frequent lantern analogies used by Kant and Goethe to explain perception, showing how these influenced the practice of such German Romantic artists as Runge, Friedrich and Schinkel, who also experimented with painted transparencies. This theme was echoed in presentations by Yuri Tsivian (Riga/Chicago) on the significance of lantern figures in Russian poetry, by Amy Sargeant (Birkbeck) on the English eighteenth-century taste for projected spectacle, as in de Louthenburg's 'The

Wonders of Derbyshire' of 1779, and by Sarah Baylis (Cambridge) placing the lantern in relation to a longer tradition of glass painting.

The most eagerly awaited topic, however, was the Phantasmagoria, with a number of contributors promising new perspectives on this early form of horror spectacle. Born shortly after the French Revolution in Paris, and popularized by the Liège-born Etienne-Gaspar Robert, known professionally as Robertson, the Phantasmagoria quickly spread across Europe, encouraging lanternists to develop new techniques of illusion, with gauzes and moving lanterns, and musical accompaniment, using the eerie sound of the glass harmonica. Its themes were Gothic and supernatural, and it attracted an educated audience in search of excitement. Edwin Carels (Gent) traced the confusing ancestry of the phenomenon among scientists and showmen, while Deac Rossell (London) and Mervyn Heard (Exeter) traced German influences and British popular responses. Another highlight was Helen Weston's (UCL) survey of lantern iconography in engravings after the French Revolution, showing how it could connote both rational enlightenment and obscurantist illusion.

The role of lantern practice in shaping the discipline of art history was explored from two angles. Stephen Bann FBA (Bristol) drew on recent French historiography to reveal a livelier tradition of slide lecturing in the late nineteenth century

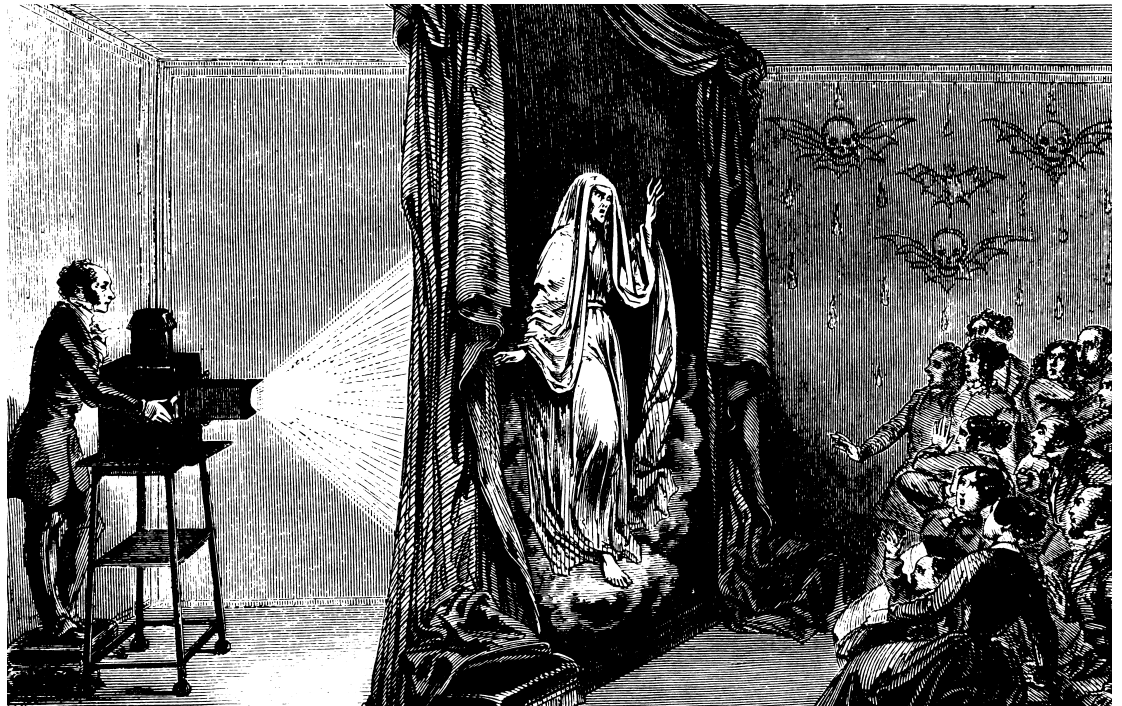


Figure 2. A nineteenth-century engraving of the Phantasmagoria, suggesting its frightening impact on audiences through careful stage management.



With an audience drawn from as many disciplines and interests as those speaking, the colloquium demonstrated beyond doubt that the lantern is a fruitful subject, both in its own right as a frequent motif in art and literature over five centuries, and also as a central strand in early media studies. Yet it lacks an academic 'home', despite the sterling efforts of the Magic Lantern Society, and there were recurrent calls for better inventories and access to collections. All present agreed that the colloquium provided a promising basis for further dialogue and plans are in hand for a publication.

Slides reproduced from the collections of David Francis and Ian Mackley, with sources confirmed by Richard Crangle.

Figure 3 (left). 'The Pilgrim's Progress', was a popular subject for painted lantern slides.

than has been widely supposed. Benedetta Guidi (Rome), who has written on Aby Warburg with Nicholas Mann FBA, discussed Warburg's emphasis on visual comparisons, using projected images and the composite 'mnemosynes' which are now attracting wide interest as precursors of multimedia imaging. Finally, the relation between the Magic Lantern and early moving pictures was explored by Frank Gray (Brighton), who revealed a truly cinematic (not to mention Vernean) ambition present in the 'dioramic tours' of the Brighton pioneer G.A. Smith, and Stephen Bottomore (London) who traced the extended coexistence of the two media well into the 'teens, in a variety of hybrid presentations.



Figure 4. 'Jessica's First Prayer', a narrative Life Model set from one of the main slide publishers, York and Son, 1884.