

REVIEW: THAT'S THE WAY TO DO IT!

Richard Crangle

Mervyn Heard,
Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern
Hastings: The Projection Box, 2006
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MANY YEARS AGO, in what now feels like another lifetime, I was asked by a callow youth [*youth?! – Ed.*] to write a reference to support his application to enrol for a PhD at a well-known university in the south-west of England. Yes, I wrote, he's a suitable candidate to research and write a thesis on the phantasmagoria. In fact, I added, I can't think of anyone better placed to investigate that area. They let him in.

Somewhat further down the line, one of the by-products of the PhD earned by our own Mervyn Heard (for the callow youth was none other than the 'Professor' himself) is this excellent and important volume, which rather confirms my original confidence. If highlighting the academic background of this work sounds a little daunting for those of us not enthusiastic about postmodern critical theory and the other fun that's currently to be had in our university system, be reassured: *Phantasmagoria* is one of those rare works that manages to be both learned and accessible. It's been worth the wait.

To those who profess to know something about the history of the magic lantern, the various developments and personalities of the phantasmagoria may seem like a story we think we know already. This book proves that there's always more to learn, even about familiar subjects. It's not an area where there ever can or should be a 'definitive' history that answers all possible questions, but *Phantasmagoria* is the best offer we have so far, and it's hard to imagine it being superseded for many years. As well as presenting an entertaining and clear account of a complex history, this account has three features that make it a distinctive, ground-breaking and essential piece of work.

Firstly, there is a lot of significant 'new' information here. The activities of Schröpfer and Philidor in the late 18th century have only appeared in previous lantern histories in outline, or as names mentioned in passing as little-known precursors of Robertson's 'invention'. In *Phantasmagoria* they become fully understood characters, whose shows and other activities we can now consider in context. The detailed and critical contemporary account of Philidor's show in Berlin in 1789, to choose just one remarkable discovery, is worth the price of admission on its own, and there's a lot of other original and imaginative use of obscure archives and sources. Mervyn's elegant connection between the phantasmagoria and the use of the lantern for temperance propaganda casts an important new light on both, even if a little of its thunder was stolen – well, borrowed, anyway – by our article on the subject in *Realms of Light*.

Secondly, this account sets out clearly the progression of different phases of the phantasmagoria as it evolved across time and across national boundaries. Aspects like the Masonic connections of the early Continental shows, the fractious relationships with the French Revolution, the rush in the English provinces to cash in on 'the latest

thing in London' (to the extent of providing multiple versions of 'M. St Clair just arrived from Paris' for different cities), or the tentacles which the phantasmagoria extended into subsequent upstart media like the early moving picture, illustrate clearly and enticingly that the phantasmagoria could never have been said to be homogenous or constant. Like all entertainment media, it shifted and evolved as it passed from one pair of inventive hands to the next, and a proper understanding of it isn't possible without taking that shiftiness into account.

And finally, perhaps most engagingly, the tales of the early phantasmagores and their shows are told here by someone who understands what it takes to give a successful performance. Even when previous descriptions of the Phantasmagoria have given accounts of shows and techniques, they have tended to be slightly abstract or technical: descriptions of equipment and recyclings of contemporary references taken at face value, leading to an assumption that the purpose and effect of the phantasmagoria was fairly constant and audience fear was universal. Mervyn Heard, though, brings to his descriptions a showman's knowledge of what does and doesn't work with an audience, and a useful understanding that any performance medium is a pretty movable feast. Here is his analysis of Robertson's show:

If we examine the evidence so far, we can see that Robertson's presentation was far more akin to a theatrical entertainment than a series of dry experiments, and one containing more than a touch of satire. [...] Robertson – quick to understand the complex nature of the audience – was a far more astute showman than Philidor/Philipsthal ever was, or would become. He appears fully aware that the terrified responses of some would be matched by the laughter of others. It was an approach which would also become necessary, as old and knowing patrons returned with friends, wives and sweethearts, eager to observe and laugh at their terrified reactions. Playing the performance on two levels, he could scare the uninitiated and cast winks to the knowing. In some measure he may even have been deliberately satirising his predecessor, the unmentionable Philidor, and the old revolutionaries. [p.93]

One could apply the comment 'far more akin to a theatrical entertainment than a series of dry experiments' to *Phantasmagoria* itself. It's an entertaining book, written with a lively style and a turn of phrase closer to the showman's patter than to the heavyweight historian's prose. People who like their history serious and dry may take exception to vocabulary like 'vamoosed' or 'went pear-shaped' (p.130). But it seems to me completely appropriate, especially when dealing with the shysters and shady operators of the entertainment business – the vamoosers in this case are 'the notorious Italian magician Cagliostro and his lovely wife' – to inject a bit of the energetic life inherent in the story into the language of its telling, and *Phantasmagoria* does all of that and then some. Any book that dares to title a chapter 'Séance and séance-ability' gets my vote every time; there's nothing wrong with flavouring proper research, which this definitely is, with humour.

It's customary in this kind of review to make some kind of pleasant passing remark about the quality of the publication, amount of illustration and so forth, by way of filling up a little space to avoid having to think of something more important to say about the content. This review is no exception, but in this case, as with so many of the Projection Box's products, it's not an empty statement to remark on the superb job Stephen Herbert and Mo Heard have made of the design and production of this book. The achievements of this small but perfectly formed publishing house over the past decade or so are concrete proof of what's possible with a bit of hard work and a love for the subject. Everyone concerned with the conception and production of this excellent book should be proud of it, and all the rest of us can take it as an example.

