

REVIEW:

# THE GREAT ART OF LIGHT AND SHADOW

Stephen Herbert

Laurent Mannoni

*The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema.*  
 Edited and translated by Richard Crangle, with a  
 Foreword by David Robinson and an Introduction by Tom Gunning.  
 Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000.  
 546pp, ill. Hardback £50, ISBN 0-85989-567-X;  
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**I FIRST GLIMPSED** Laurent Mannoni's important book in manuscript form, when visiting Paris a year or so before the original French edition<sup>1</sup> was published in 1995. I seem to remember that Laurent had just convinced the publisher to print it without cutting the text. Laurent Mannoni is one of the most meticulous historians in the field. I was eager to read the book, unabridged. I happened to be in Paris again just as *Le Grand Art ...* was being published, and the Curator of the Cinémathèque Française was evidently and understandably delighted at the prospect of the launch of this important work from the Cinémathèque's newly-appointed expert. That was only a few years ago, but those were the last moments of another century and another world, one where museums encouraged curators to research their collections, and to publish the considered results of their work. Perhaps that world still exists in France; I do not know.

Of course *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* had predecessors, but none of them was quite like it. As David Robinson notes in his Foreword, Hermann Hecht's 1993 *Pre-Cinema History* is a reference tool rather than a narrative. And the existing popular overviews of the history of the projected and moving image – Olive Cook's *Movement in Two Dimensions* and C.W. Ceram's *Archaeology of the Cinema* (from which Mannoni takes his subtitle) – had been published in the early 60s and hence were showing their age and were long overdue for replacement. *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* did not disappoint.

*Journal* readers will particularly appreciate the important detailed account of Christiaan Huygens – our best contender yet for the inventor of the magic lantern – and comprehensive accounts of 'The Lantern of Fear', 'The Eighteenth-Century Lantern Slide' and 'The Phantasmagoria'. Later lantern subjects include the Royal Polytechnic; Abbé Moigno (the 'Apostle of Projection'); the travelling lanternist's trade; mass-production of magic lanterns; Aubert and Lapiere; Alfred Molteni; and the industrialisation of lantern slide manufacture. The camera obscura, optical boxes and peepshows, phenakistiscopes and bioscopes, are dealt with in similar careful detail and in each case the result is a very engaging narrative; somehow (and I know how difficult this is to achieve), the author makes the technical descriptions, although unsparing in their detailed accuracy, accessible to the non-specialist.

Certainly the book has a French perspective, as one would expect, but there is a good deal of material relating to other nations. And the balance is being provided elsewhere: as Tom Gunning points out in his Introduction to the book, recent publications by Deac Rossell on the chronophotography and motion synthesis of Ottomar Anschütz in Germany complement Mannoni's detailed accounts of the work of Demeny and Marey.

One delightful aspect of *The Great Art ...* is the illustrations. Although supplementary to the text, they have been chosen with careful selectivity. I remember how gratifying it was, at the time of publication of the French edition, to see so many 'new' pictures: unfamiliar lantern bookplates, photographs of rare surviving devices such as Reynaud's Toupie-Fantoché, and a charming painting of the interior of Edison's 'Black Maria' studio.

I admit to a typical English person's inexcusable lack of languages; I struggled through the French edition and frequently referred to it when I knew that certain information was not contained elsewhere. But too often, when there was an alternative source in English I would lazily refer to that instead, even though Laurent's version of events was in many cases more authoritative. So I was very pleased to learn

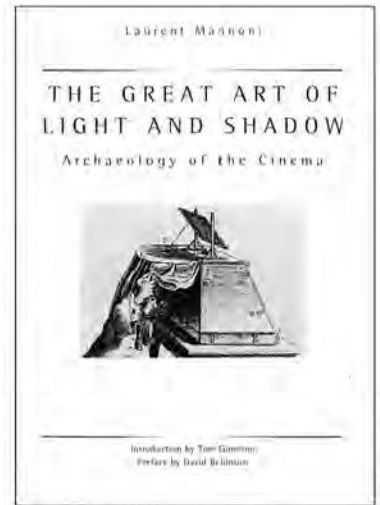
that Richard Crangle was to provide an English translation. It was well worth the wait. Translations of such technical text can go horribly wrong (there are some awful gaffes in the English translation of the Lumière Letters, for instance). But Richard's technical understanding is evident throughout – and the result is peerless.

Publication of the English edition came just too late to be fully absorbed by most of the English contributors to the Society's *Encyclopaedia*. Laurent Mannoni has written many excellent *Encyclopaedia* entries himself, but

many other entries would have been improved if the facts in this volume had had time to filter through. But this makes a good reason for lantern enthusiasts to think of Laurent's book as a suitable companion to the *Encyclopaedia* (that took 40 of us to put together; Laurent produced a work of at least comparable importance single-handed!). As well as supplementing the magic lantern information given in the *Encyclopaedia*, *The Great Art ...* provides alternative and valid interpretations of many lantern facts and fleshes out with wonderful detail many slight entries. In addition Laurent covers important subjects and characters that we omitted, and places the magic lantern field in context with the panoramas, optical boxes, philosophical toys, stereoscopes, dioramas and chronophotographic experiments that he understands so well. The technical detail is frequently complemented by a less expansive but well-informed comment on the social, religious and political situations into which these media were developed and released.

Tom Gunning's Introduction is a useful and very readable overview of the book's content. But I would take issue with one contentious statement: Gunning makes the case that Mannoni could *only* have started his work with the Renaissance in Europe, since any previous accounts of the arts of shadow and light are 'speculative' and 'ahistorical'. Even if we do not believe that these arts are indeed 'an eternal factor of human culture' (and, as it happens, that is what I do believe), there are certainly historical predecessors – i.e. related media and technologies of which early written evidence survives, as well as artefacts that bear witness – to make this position untenable. A clue to just one example appears in this book. Mannoni includes a paragraph mentioning Chinese and Japanese magic mirrors, but notes that there is 'little convincing work in the West on these curious devices'. These amazing mirrors can project onto a wall, from an apparently clear polished metal surface, an image such as a Buddha (moulded in relief on the back of the object). With their mysterious hidden images they are far more impressive than the etched mirrors of the Middle Ages. The first reference by a Chinese scribe was possibly during the Han Dynasty (206BC–AD24), and certainly there are references by the 11th century AD when they were already 'ancient'. Joseph Needham, the West's authority on Chinese technology, suggests that they had been in use since 'some time before the 5th century' (AD). These mirrors are not a myth; the technology is fully understood (and in fact has now been patented) and new working magic mirrors, made in China, can be purchased today. They are as much a part of the story of projected images as any other technology discussed in *The Great Art ...*

Similarly, it is difficult to make any reasoned argument, in terms of theory, for the exclusion of shadow puppets and/or shadow theatre. Laurent Mannoni suggests that this subject would 'appear to form part of a separate study'. It is certainly the case that a



detailed account of shadow play could take a volume equal in size to the one under review, and one can understand the exclusion for practical reasons. But I would argue that there is no theoretical reason. Although clearly prehistoric shadow making is speculation, the wider subject is certainly not 'ahistoric': written accounts of shadow theatre shows stretch way back, and artefacts survive from several cultures. The shadow play typically lasts for two hours or (often) more, the images appear on a white screen in the dark and are produced by the illumination of a lamp; they are frequently coloured; there is accompanying narration and music, strong narrative (including traditional stories), and characters familiar to the audience. A closer analogy to cinema would be difficult to find. And as those who attended the recent MLS Convention will appreciate, at least one magic lantern culture – that of Japan – cannot be fully understood without recognising its debt to shadow play techniques.

So, potential researchers, don't be dissuaded from recognising the relevance of many media that do not happen to be contained in this

## 1880–81 AND ALL THAT: A SLICE OF LANTERN LIFE

Stephen Herbert

**BOOKS SUCH AS** *The Great Art of Light and Shadow* will perhaps inspire some readers to dig out unknown lantern facts for themselves. Tracking down long-lost references in esoteric ancient books, à la Mannoni, takes a good deal of time, access to the very best libraries, and, arguably, a particular talent. So this is not something that all of us can participate in. On the other hand, researching lantern shows in old newspapers is something that can be done by anyone with the inclination and a little spare time. Naturally, most of us would be mainly interested in knowing about the magic lantern activities in our home town, or the place where we live now. At least one member of the Society, Damer Waddington, has taken this activity to its limit by checking the newspapers for his locality, in this case Jersey, from 1814 to 1914 inclusive. That requires considerable dedication, and more time than many of us are able to find. However, checking just one season isn't too demanding, and this gave me the idea of 'A Slice of Lantern Life'.

The proposal is that MLS members could check the newspapers of a particular town, in their local reference library, for lantern references from a given 'lantern season'. This information would then be centrally collated and analysed, and a report on the lantern activities thereby discovered would be published in the *Journal*. This idea was well received by members when mentioned at a recent Society meeting. The following are some suggestions for anyone who may be interested in taking part.

- Firstly, decide on the town or area to be researched. Check with your local reference library to ensure that it has newspapers for the area and period (for dates, see below), or that such newspapers are accessible at a location not too far away. A negative result is not a failure – it will also be important to know if a town or area does not have this information available.
- It is a good idea to take a preliminary look at some samples of the newspapers that you intend to use. Check at least one daily and one weekly title, if possible, to determine which gives the best coverage of local events, including lectures and shows. Check the advertising columns for forthcoming lectures, and check reviews of recent local events.
- I suggest that once you have decided on which newspaper(s) to research, you send me an e-mail or postcard (addresses at the end of this article) with that information. I can then alert any members who are proposing to cover the same ground.

If you haven't undertaken newspaper research before, here are some tips (and for those who have, there are also suggestions for managing the material for this particular project):

- Some newspapers will be available in their original form, and some as microfilm. There are good and bad points about each. Newspapers are usually easier to read (the small text can be rather trying on microfilm), but handling original papers can be

book but could equally well justify inclusion in the story. The magic mirrors and shadow theatres of the East will eventually take their rightful place. If you're looking down, hang on in there Will Day; it will take time – but it will happen!

It has taken a great many years to create a widespread understanding that screen techniques did not start with 1895 and the Lumières. In this contribution to that understanding Laurent Mannoni tackles, with resounding success, a myriad of related media techniques, spanning half a millennium. To quote David Robinson's Foreword, this is 'no cold, dry, academic study, but a pulsing, vital chronicle'.

### NOTES

1. Laurent Mannoni, *Le Grand Art de la Lumière et de l'Ombre: Archéologie du Cinéma* (Paris: Nathan, 1995). A review by David Francis appeared in *NMLJ* Vol. 7 No. 3 (November 1995).

a problem if they are fragile (and they usually are). Newspaper pages must be turned slowly to avoid tearing, whereas on a microfilm reader it is possible to whizz from the reports page of one issue through to the same page of the next issue.

- It is cheaper, and usually easier, to copy out relevant parts, rather than try to arrange for photocopies to be made. Try to copy the whole of an advertisement or report, keeping original typeface and punctuation eccentricities if possible. A laptop PC is useful, but hand copying is fine – although it does of course mean that the material needs to be typed out at a later stage.
- Include as much information as possible, but (if it is available) the following should be seen as more or less essential: date(s), venue(s) and title(s) of each show or event; any names of individuals or organisations associated with the show; and the location of the reference (title of paper, date of issue, page number). If you need any more advice on organising the information, or on computer file formats to use etc., please get in touch with me.
- I would suggest a twin-column method of entry, with lantern-related material entered in one column and supplementary material (notes on panoramas, Pepper's Ghost shows, etc.) in the other. If your time is limited, the second column could consist of just brief notes to help give some context to the lantern information.
- Lectures were frequently advertised as including 'Limelight Views' or 'Diagrams with the aid of the optical lantern'. Of course, it is possible that many advertised lectures that didn't specify the use of the lantern nevertheless did make use of it. When we publish our results, we shall have to bear in mind that the references that we find to the lantern being used in lectures are not necessarily a complete record of all such instances.
- Although most of our research is likely to be in the UK, overseas members are encouraged to participate too. We need more information about lantern activity in all countries.

If we have enough response to this project, it should be possible to discover some previously unknown travelling lanternists and showmen. We should also find more details of the activities of already-known lantern lecturers. And perhaps we shall get a better idea of the actual number of lantern shows and lectures in towns, villages and cities in the 'lantern season' of the autumn/winter/spring of – well, how about 1880–1881? I don't know of any reason that would make that particular season impractical to research (e.g. the Great Gasbag Shortage of 1880, or the 1881 Limelight Operators' Guild Strike – I made those two up), so I would suggest September 1880 to May 1881 inclusive as the dates to look for.

Do try to take part! Don't leave this to others – your input will be invaluable in putting together this 'Slice of Lantern Life'. There is a particular thrill in reading about lantern shows that took place in one's own 'neck of the woods'. Let me know which area you intend to research, and make a date now to visit your local library.

And finally, a few words about the follow-up project to the *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern*. An online database is now being