

CONFERENCE REPORT

A MILLION PICTURES: HISTORY, ARCHIVING, AND CREATIVE RE-USE OF EDUCATIONAL MAGIC LANTERN SLIDES

29 AUGUST–1 SEPTEMBER 2017,
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

The *A Million Pictures Conference*, organised by Sarah Dellmann and Frank Kessler of Utrecht University, brought together magic lantern scholars and enthusiasts, collectors and curators, artists and archivists from all four corners of the earth for four days filled with academic papers, roundtables, art installations, lantern shows and, of course, coffee. It featured a keynote speech by Professor Erkki Huhtamo of the University of California (UCLA) on the history and meaning of the screen and creative closing remarks by Professor Vanessa Toulmin of the University of Sheffield.



Frank Kessler introducing Professor Erkki Huhtamo

In light of the fact that this was a somewhat non-traditional conference that included innovative formats such as the '5 x 5-minutes-of-experience' talks, a workshop on creative projection techniques and fascinating art installations and live performances – we have opted for a non-traditional conference report. Instead of recapping the entire event, Richard Crangle, Ine van Dooren and Lydia Jakobs will focus on those aspects that impressed them the most. For detailed information on all of the presenters and their diverse presentations, the printed programme is available for download.

Ine van Dooren

What a shame for those of you that missed it – this was the best conference I have ever attended so let's raise the banner: Power to the Lantern Slide.

The Magic Lantern Society was well represented and we sold a whopping number of books and signed up some new members as well. Day 2 was the Conference Fair with panel presentations, demonstrations, performances and posters. The MLS was sponsoring

Poster presentation



a prize for the best poster – a year's membership and our fabulous book *Realms of Light*. All of the presenters were enthusiastic about their projects so it was a difficult decision. In the end, we decided to award two prizes, to Suzanne Kooloos from the Netherlands and Ariadna Lorenzo from Spain, who took us from the beginnings of lantern history to a more modern form of slide presentation.

Suzanne explained that the *Great Mirror of Folly*, a folio booklet with sixty-three engravings published in Amsterdam in 1720, shows several images in which the lantern plays an important role. The magic lantern was obviously a well-recognised medium as these rather spicy prints were meant for popular consumption. They question and satirise the first global stock market bubble of 1720.

(All engravings can be viewed online: <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3443719>.)

Ariadna, a PhD student, gave us an interesting insight into how the lantern legacy does not stop with the disappearance of glass slides but finds a new life in 35mm slide presentations. She talked about Charles and Ray Eames, who left a rich archive of 300,000 slides that they used in educational projects and visual communications from the 1950s to the 1970s. Watch this space as she hopes to come to a meeting soon.

The Conference Fair was a highlight. It was a marvellous combination of all sorts and a real celebration of the lantern medium, shared with enthusiasm by academics, collectors, archivists and all of us in-between. Everything was hands-on and eyes glued. The research team from the University of Salamanca showed the workings of 'Linternauta', another fabulous magical word, a phone app to simulate the experience of slides, telling you what they are and what they mean. You can run it on your web browser at <http://linternauta.docenciavirtual.es>. One artist presented a modern yet recognisable machine that created eighty-one series of flickering animation, based on four slides each. Fossils were never so attractive. There were several screenings, the results of student collaborations interrogating aspects of lantern heritage and what it means to them today. The *A Million Pictures* project created a DVD featuring all and more – this can be ordered, free of charge, from Sarah Dellmann (s.dellmann@uu.nl).

Of course, what was not missing was a 'market' spirit with some collectors enticing academics to buy their goodies. And last but not least the shows with funny stories, live music, a lot of banter and loud participation from the audience.



Familiar faces in the market

Lydia Jakobs

This was both a very entertaining and highly illuminating conference. I was particularly impressed by all the aspiring researchers and artists as well as the various approaches to the magic lantern they presented. My personal favourite was Oona Libens's performance 'Nausea', a hilarious voyage into the depth of the ocean that skilfully combined front and back projection, shadow play, moving images



Oona Libens performing

and found materials from the beach. Everything was operated live by the artist and her assistant with a complicated system of pulleys, levers and a switchboard. For an impression, you can watch the trailer <https://vimeo.com/103496879>.

The academic contributions were as diverse as they were interesting. Presenters covered a wide range of regions and topics from Alina Novik's work in archives and newspapers to reconstruct the history of the magic lantern in Russia to Márcia Vilarigues from Lisbon University, a specialist in glass and preservation, who leads a research project that is applying chemical analysis to the glass slides of the Cinemateca Portuguesa.

It would be remiss of me if I did not mention some of the digital resources and ways that researchers around the world are making their material available to the public and the lantern community.



Examples from goskatalog.ru

Anna Grasskamp of Hong Kong Baptist University introduced fascinating slides of China – many of them coloured – taken by missionaries of the China Inland Mission between the 1900s and 1930s. Digital reproductions and additional information is available at

<https://library.hkbu.edu.hk/electronic/libdbs/lantern.html>.

And if you speak Russian or are feeling adventurous, go to <http://goskatalog.ru/portal/#/collections>, the website of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and enter the Russian word for 'diapositive', *диапозитив* (you can easily copy and paste it from Google or any other online translator) to browse their collection of lantern slides.

Richard Crangle

It's hard to separate out any particular elements of a very enjoyable and stimulating week, but I suppose the main attraction for me was that this didn't seem at all like 'a conventional academic conference'. The range of backgrounds, ages, career positions and interests of the participants was surprising and impressive; the variety and quality of work being discussed was high; there were lots of new faces as well as some established people – and all of it in a very open and informal atmosphere which made it possible to talk to anyone on any subject. I learned a lot, and that's not something you can always say at the end of a conference! My personal highlight, like Lydia, was probably the extraordinary projection show by Oona Libens (one of the vital things I learned from the week was how many legs a shrimp has, and more importantly what functions they all perform ...). But there were many highlights, and the lasting impression is what an exciting time it is to be a lantern researcher.

FROM THE IVORY TOWER DAGONET EDITION

Lydia Jakobs



George R. Sims

Between 1877 and 1922, George R. Sims – the follicly challenged Victorian journalist, dramatist, and dog owner – wrote a weekly column in the radical Sunday newspaper *The Referee*.¹ Published under the pen name Dagonet (jester to King Arthur) it touched on everything from the latest theatre gossip to the current political climate in Europe and 'the Empire'. And of course the state of his ever-ailing liver.² Mr Sims is also the subject of my soon-to-be completed PhD thesis and author of the most famous British Christmas poem. Please insert your own version of *In the Workhouse: Christmas Day* here – or better yet, e-mail it to me at jako2c01@uni-trier.de. With that in mind, I hope you will forgive me if this column occasionally appears rather flippant for so serious a subject as academic research.

The *A Million Pictures* conference in Utrecht was an absolute treat (more on that below). I would also like to draw your attention to the project's final workshop, which will take place at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, 11–13 January 2018. On 12 January, it will feature a magic lantern spectacle at the local Barnfield Theatre, open to the public. For more information, do not hesitate to contact our Hon. Secretary and Santa lookalike Richard Crangle at r.crangle@googlemail.com.

If you read any German, I can heartily recommend my dear colleague Karen Eifler's new book (see Karen's article) – and if not, you might still consider buying it, if only to impress dinner guests.

If you have ever consulted digitised newspapers for your own research, you will be familiar with OCR (Optical Character Recognition). It is a marvellous piece of technology that translates printed text into machine-readable characters and thus enables full-text searches of enormous amounts of material at one click. It is also sometimes less than reliable and produces virtually unreadable word salad when characters get mixed up. And sometimes, it results in wonderful gems like this one. An advertisement for what I imagine to be a most instructive series of 'photographic views of all the farts of the world'.

And, since Christmas looms large, I will leave you with a few words on the festive season by our common acquaintance and Christmas enthusiast George R. Sims. On Christmas Day of the year 1882, Mr Sims wrote the following in his 'Mustard and Cress' column:

So long as it brings with it a feeling that the rich ought to help the poor, so long as it gives us Christmas treats in Board schools, Christmas trees in hospitals, roast beef and plum pudding in the workhouse, and a spark of generous feeling in hearts that are too full of mammon to feel it at other times, it is something to be thankful for. There are thousands who won't let Christmas be sneered down, who will love it and reverence it still, who with a mighty effort tear the mask of Cynicism from their features, and yield to the potent smell of the season.

NOTES

1. As anyone familiar with Sims knows, he famously campaigned for an absolutely ineffective hair restorer called Tatcho. Fewer people might be aware of the fact that in 1895, Sims printed invitations for 'The Christening of Barney Barnato', his beloved bulldog.
2. Ailing, one presumes, from his steady diet of 'a little weak whiskey and water'.