

CHARLES DICKENS AND THE MAGIC LANTERN IN HIS WORKS and the combination in the Dutch Dickens Theatre, Laren. Part 1

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This article is based on the presentation given by Adrian and Else at the MLS Birmingham meeting on 30 April 2022 (see p.14).

Of course Charles Dickens was famous for his novels, but became even more famous in his lifetime for his public readings. For many years he volunteered as a reader for charity events. But as a father of 10 children, not yet self-supporting, and with a large immediate family constantly in need of financial assistance, he was in need of a much larger income. Therefore, he decided to make the readings a profitable business (Fig. 1). Between 1853 and 1870 he did more than 400 public readings. And he enjoyed it, because evidence suggests that he had always wanted to be an actor. The way he performed his readings, playing all the different characters, is called a 'monopolylogue'. This is the acting technique we use when performing *Charles Dickens in the Light of the Magic Lantern* in our Dickens Theatre in the Netherlands.

In Part 1 of this article we will look at:

- The influence of the magic lantern in Dickens' childhood
- Performances of Dickens' stories during his life
- Charles Dickens writing as a lanternist
- Examples of the magic lantern in Charles Dickens' works

Then in Part 2:

- Was Charles Dickens himself a magic lanternist?
- Dickens' public readings and the combination in the Dutch Dickens Theatre

We will consider Dickens' work and how the magic lantern influenced his way of looking at the people around him, the cities and countries he walked and travelled through and how his magic lantern view influenced his writing. We will show the results of Adrian's research in presenting a selection of the many instances of the magic lantern in Dickens' works; and discuss how Else's work as a translator and dramatist has shed light on Dickens' public readings and the way we perform Dickens' stories in our theatre.

As a Dickens performer accompanied by magic lantern slides, Adrian had particular questions that needed answering through research:

- Is it possible that during Dickens' lifetime magic lantern slides of his stories were produced and performances of his work took place using a magic lantern?
- Is it possible to prove that Charles Dickens had knowledge of magic lantern shows?
- Is it possible that Dickens himself had hands-on experience with the magic lantern?

During conferences and meetings of the International Dickens Fellowship we reached out to Dickens experts, capable of quoting whole passages off by heart, about their observations of the magic lantern in his books. They shook their heads. No recollections were brought to mind. During our 70-minute presentation to the Dickens Fellowship, one in particular, who had read all Dickens' works, was very surprised. They had simply never noticed the magic lantern! For us this was an added reason for in-depth research.



1. Charles Dickens giving a public reading (from The Illustrated London News, 19 March 1870)

There is little academic literature regarding Dickens and the magic lantern. We searched through Dickens' original texts for his books, his letters and professional publications. One starting point was 'Dickensian 'Dissolving Views''¹ by the well-known expert Joss Marsh, associate professor of 19th-century English literature at Indiana University. Marsh has extensive knowledge of cinema and 'pre-cinema' and she is, with David Francis, owner and curator of the Kent Museum of the Moving Image in Deal, UK.

Marsh starts her article in *Comparative Critical Studies* with a description from *Great Expectations*: "... her own awful figure with its ghostly reflection thrown large by the fire

upon the ceiling and the wall." Marsh recognises in this text a reference to the magic lantern.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MAGIC LANTERN IN DICKENS' CHILDHOOD

Charles Dickens was always fascinated by the magic lantern. As a child he enjoyed this machine of wonder and this was because of his neighbours, who owned a magic lantern. George Stroughill, the boy next door, would come over to show his lantern slides in the kitchen of the Dickens family.

Robert Langton wrote, in 1891, the book *Childhood and Youth of Charles Dickens*. In Chapter 3 he quotes Mrs Gibson, the former Miss Mary Weller, who was a domestic servant in the Dickens family. Mrs Gibson says: "Sometimes Charles would come down stairs and say to me 'Now Mary, clear the kitchen, we are going to have such a game,' and then George Stroughill would come in with his magic lantern, and they would sing, recite, and perform parts of plays."

The magic lantern taught young Charles to see the broader picture as well as the details. During his strolls through London he would use this approach. It is safe to say that he learned from the magic lantern shows how to 'focus'.

On 30 August 1846, during his five-month stay in Lausanne, Switzerland, Dickens wrote to his friend and biographer John Forster. He missed his source of inspiration – London – "But the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern, is immense!" Thus, we can assume that Charles Dickens, with this interest, knew of professional lantern shows. He mentions in his books, as we shall see: "glasses in a magic lantern".

PERFORMANCES OF DICKENS' STORIES DURING HIS LIFETIME

The question of whether Dickens' stories were performed with magic lantern slides during his lifetime is a subject we have not seen addressed as such in the literature. Many members of the Magic Lantern Society (MLS) will know about Professor Pepper, a director of the Royal Polytechnic Institution in London from 1854, and his claimed invention, the Pepper's Ghost Illusion. This is still widely used in museums and theatres. We have one well-documented example of a magic lantern



2. and 3. Two slides from Gabriel Grub, a Christmas story: or, the sexton who was stolen by goblins (York & Son, c.1875)

show by Professor Pepper, presenting the Dickens Christmas story *The Haunted Man*. It was performed at the Royal Polytechnic Institution in London during the 1862/63 season and the illusion was patented in September 1863 (Dickens died in June 1870).

In his 1890 book, *The True History of Pepper's Ghost*, Professor Pepper gives this account: "*The Haunted Man*, which Christmas Story the late Charles Dickens, by his special written permission, allowed me to use for the illustration of the Ghost illusion."

In the same book we find that Professor Pepper's Ghost ran for 15 months and was succeeded by *Scrooge and Marley's Ghost*, another Charles Dickens story, among other presentations. When the Institution closed its doors in 1881 due to bankruptcy, the assets were sold in an auction. Some of the very special magic lantern slides ended up in France. The labels on these slides show that in 1857 *A Christmas Carol* and in the 1860s *The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton* or *Gabriel Grub* (from *The Pickwick Papers*) were projected at the Polytechnic. The *Gabriel Grub* slides are now in the National Science and Media Museum, Bradford, UK. In the Collection of the Cinémathèque française in Paris we came across a hand-painted lantern slide from the Polytechnic showing Fezziwig's ball from *A Christmas Carol* painted by the artist William Robert Hill in 1857.

In short, the answer to the first research question is a simple 'yes'. We know for sure that during Dickens' lifetime magic lantern slides of his stories were shown.

CHARLES DICKENS WRITING AS A LANTERNIST

The story of Gabriel Grub was perfect for magic lantern shows, in particular because Charles Dickens himself uses 'lanternist' phrases. Let us give you a few examples of Dickens describing slide changes.

"And now,' said the King [...] 'and now, show the man of misery and gloom a few of the pictures from our own great storehouse!' As the goblin said this, like a theatrical curtain, a thick cloud which obscured the remoter end of the cavern rolled gradually away, and disclosed, apparently at a great distance, a small and scantily furnished, but neat and clean apartment." (Figs 2 and 3)

After his first visit to the USA (1842) Charles Dickens wrote his book *American Notes*. Travelling through the American forests, through the window of his carriage he saw high tree stumps. Because of the need for firewood in winter, the trees were cut down a bit above the snowline. He imagined himself to see all kinds of strange figures:



4. and 5. The scene in *Martin Chuzzlewit* with Mr Pecksniff "gently travelling across the disc, as if he were a figure in a magic lantern." (Illustrator, J. Barnard; from Chapman & Hall edition, 1871)

"... now, a horse, a dog, an armed man; a hunch-back throwing off his cloak and stepping forth into the light. They were often as entertaining to me as so many glasses in a magic lantern." (*American Notes*, Chapter 14) It is possible to find a contemporary picture of the stumps of trees that inspired Dickens to see these phenomena (e.g. search for 'Donner Party' online).

In Chapter 35 of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-44) we find Dickens describing a spectacle that clearly evokes a magic lantern projecting a slipping slide. Martin Chuzzlewit and Mark Tapley, just returned from the USA to England, were having a drink in the pub:

"They were raising their glasses to their lips, when their hands stopped midway, and their gaze was arrested by a figure which slowly, very slowly, and reflectively, passed the window at that moment." (Figs 4 and 5)

But in the next paragraph he describes the figure as: "gently travelling across the disc ...".

During our research we have often asked whether 'disc' was just another word for a window or glass pane. The answer was always 'no'. Fortunately we then made a startling discovery. In Jeremy Brooker's PhD thesis *The Temple of Minerva*² about the Royal Polytechnic Institution we found a quote from a book published in 1839, well before *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which the word 'disc' is used for a projection screen. And later in his book Brooker mentions an 1879 libretto from *The Fairy Dell* with the sub-heading: 'Illustrative narrative for the Disc and Stage'.

Back to Mr Pecksniff, the figure passing the window in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In this scene with Mr Pecksniff, Charles Dickens does not describe a window but the image, as if the passing Pecksniff is projected onto a screen via a slipping slide: "... gently travelling across the disc, as if he were a figure in a magic lantern." Dickens has even explained to us, with this text, that slow movement used in combination with the magic lantern. There is absolutely no doubt that Dickens was thinking of a magic lantern here.

EXAMPLES OF THE MAGIC LANTERN IN CHARLES DICKENS' WORKS

We have found many examples of the magic lantern in Charles Dickens' works. As members of the International Dickens Fellowship and the MLS, as well as working with his stories in lantern slides in our Dickens Theatre, we really wanted to prove the connection between Dickens and the magic lantern. The following are just a few examples of many we have found.

"Mrs Waterbrook, who was a large lady—or who wore a large dress—came sailing in. I had a dim recollection of having seen her at the theatre, as if I had seen her in a pale magic lantern." (*David Copperfield*, Chapter 25)

"Jo stands amazed in the disk of light, like a ragged figure in a magic lantern." (*Bleak House*, Chapter 22)

"Mistress Affery coming and going, would be thrown upon the house wall that was over the gateway, and would hover there like shadows from a great magic lantern."

(*Little Dorrit*, Chapter 15)

"He kept running up to Meg [...] and running up again like a figure in a magic lantern." (*The Chimes*, 4th Quarter)

The Cricket on the Hearth is a Christmas story. Characters include Caleb Plummer, an old poor toymaker, and his blind daughter Bertha. Caleb's employer, the toy merchant Mr Tackleton, decides to produce a set of lantern slides with goblins, but at high cost:

"[Tackleton] had even lost money [...] by getting up Goblin slides for magic lanterns, whereon the Powers of Darkness were depicted as a sort of supernatural shell-fish, with human faces."

(*The Cricket on the Hearth*, Chirp 1)

In the 1890 life model slides of this story (Figs 6 and 7) we see that it sufficed to portray Caleb Plummer as a maker of glass plates by wearing a yellow work coat with the words 'G & T Glass' on his back.

In addition to magic lanterns, Charles Dickens also mentions phantasmagoria – for instance, in his novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The phantasmagoria shows were apparently so well known in those days that Dickens uses this word and demonstrates the movement with a 'creepy' character. In the following paragraph we witness the shop assistant Kit's encounter with the malicious dwarf Quilp:

"Quilp said not a word in reply, but walking so close to Kit as to bring his eyes within two or three inches of his face [...] approached again, again withdrew, and so on for half-a-dozen times, like a head in a phantasmagoria." (*The Old Curiosity Shop*, Chapter 48)

During his visit to Italy Charles Dickens was impressed by the city of Venice (Figs 8 and 9). In *Pictures from Italy*, Chapter 4, he gives us a long summary ending with:



6. and 7. Caleb Plummer with 'G & T Glass' on his coat in a life model set of *The Cricket on the Hearth* (York & Sons, 1890)

"A bewildering phantasmagoria, with all the inconsistency of a dream, and all the pain and all the pleasure of an extravagant reality!"

And then moves on to another magic lantern effect, namely the 'dissolve' (Fig. 9):

"After a few moments, it would dissolve, like a view in a magic lantern." (*Pictures from Italy*, Chapter 7)

The next example, from the novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, is clearly referring to the magic effect with a lantern.

"Some wildly passionate ideas of the river dissolve under the spell of the moonlight on the Cathedral and the graves." (Chapter 8)

In *David Copperfield* there is a passage about the visit of David and Steerforth to the Peggotty family. Here again we see a description of opposing images, "from the dark cold night into the warm light room" that suggests a slide change. And then there is another quick slide change in the last line:

"The little picture was so instantaneously dissolved by our going in, that one might have doubted whether it had ever been." (*David Copperfield*, Chapter 21)

A Christmas Carol is the most famous, bar one, Christmas story in the world. In the following part we hear a description of a chain of events that seems very close to a lanternist using a biennial magic lantern. To set the scene: it is Christmas Eve and Scrooge "took his melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern" and is on his way home.

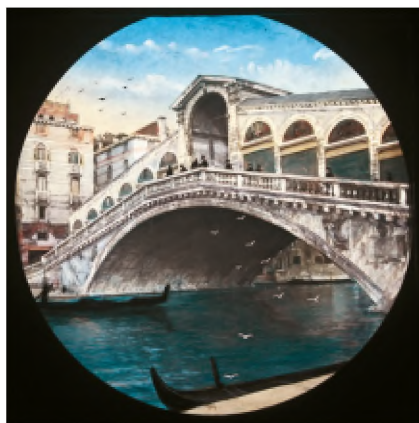
"Now, it is a fact, that there was nothing at all particular about the knocker on the door, except that it was very large. [...] And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his key in the lock of the door, saw in the knocker, with its

undergoing any intermediate process of change, not a knocker, but Marley's face. Marley's face! [...] As Scrooge looked fixedly at this phenomenon, it was a knocker again!" (*A Christmas Carol*, Stave One)

We hope that these examples have convinced you of Charles Dickens' interest in the magic lantern and how he used this in his works.

REFERENCES

1. Joss Marsh, 'Dickensian 'Dissolving Views': The magic lantern, visual story-telling, and the Victorian technological imagination', *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol.6, issue 3, pp. 333-346, 2009
2. Jeremy Brooker, *The Temple of Minerva: Magic and the Magic Lantern at the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London, 1837-1901* Magic Lantern Society, London, pp. 46, 131 and 168, 2013



8. and 9. Dissolving view of the Rialto Bridge, Venice (York & Sons, 1888)



10. and 11. The door knocker becomes Marley's face. Marley's Ghost (W.C. Hughes)