

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MAGIC LANTERN!

Richard Crangle

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Cover picture:

This is perhaps a familiar image, and perhaps not the most dramatic picture that has graced our cover. However it has a claim to be the most historically significant, being the first known reference to the magic lantern, drawn by Christiaan Huygens in 1659. The sketches – bound into one of Huygens' scientific notebooks – seem to be a design for one or more moving slides probably created by superimposing rotatable sheets of glass. It would remain a cryptic set of curious little images were it not for the caption, *'pour des représentations par le moyen de verres convexes à la lampe'*, which indicates that there was something called a lantern ('lampe') which could show images at that date. The original is in the Library of the University of Leiden and currently features in the exhibition *Lanterne magique et film peint* at the Cinémathèque française in Paris. (Leiden, University Library, ms. HUG 10, fol. 76v – reproduced by permission).

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Thanks for assistance with this issue go to all its contributors, everyone involved with its design, editing and production, and to Laurent Mannoni and Stéphane Dabrowski of the Cinémathèque française, the Salzburg Museum, and Lucille Brakefield and John Cramer of the University of Leiden Library.

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Origination and printing for the Society
by Dave Morgan, London

Published by the Magic Lantern Society,
South Park, Galphay Road, Kirkby Malzeard,
Ripon, North Yorkshire HG4 3RX, UK.

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LEAVING ASIDE THE PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION of whether anniversaries are really important, and the other inconvenient fact that we still don't know for sure when the first magic lantern was created, or by whom, or where, or why, the best reference point to its origin remains the curious little sketches by Christiaan Huygens that grace the cover of this issue. And since those sketches date from 1659, the magic lantern is therefore now (at least) 350 years old.

It would be interesting at this point to look back on a year of festivities – TV documentaries, commemorative postage stamps, marketing tie-ins with breakfast cereal producers, cuddly Huygens dolls – recognising the significance of this 'birth' of a medium that over the past three and a half centuries has permeated every aspect of human culture and every part of the globe. But with the honourable exception of the excellent *Lanterne magique et film peint* exhibition at the Cinémathèque française (which intriguingly subtitles itself *'400 years of cinema'!*), as far as I am aware no celebrations of any of these sorts have taken place in 2009.

If the ability to project an image really is an important feature of human endeavour over the last third of a millennium – and I think one could make a case for its significance being not far short of that of the printing press – and if anniversaries are important, why haven't we really noticed this one?

Perhaps, first of all, familiarity breeds contempt, and it may simply be that projection is now so widespread as to be taken for granted. It's very difficult today to imagine a time when it wasn't possible to conjure up an image consisting of nothing but different colours of light, where there was nothing a moment before. Those of us who have endured a few thousand PowerPoint presentations may wonder if it was all worth it, but the fact is that in the developed world it's now quite unusual ('old-fashioned', even) to give a lecture, launch a product, attend an interview, or simply walk down a city street without some form of illuminated projection of information or images taking place before your eyes. Even the London Underground, always at the cutting edge of technology, now projects advertising images onto spaces formerly occupied by printed posters. If we're surrounded by projections, it's easy to assume that they've always been there.

The image of 'a slide' thrown from 'a lantern' onto 'a screen' has also been rather overshadowed by some of its offspring. This isn't really the place to complain (again) about the tendency to see 250 of the years of lantern development as just 'the archaeology of the cinema', but this is perhaps a key factor in a lack of recognition of its full significance. Viewing the history of the projected image as being solely directed towards one entertainment medium, albeit an important one with worldwide influence, tends to overlook its equal significance for (among other areas) news, education, advertising, scientific research and technological development, and religious, social and political propaganda, all of which are essential components of modern life.

This very diversity of the projected image makes it difficult to define. Over the 350 years, projection of images has taken on many different technical and cultural forms, and developed in different ways, some of which may not seem like 'traditional' projection at all – television, for example, is arguably a medium we wouldn't have, at least in its current form, without Huygens' sketches, but to regard it as a projected image takes a bit of additional thought (its 'projector' and 'screen' are combined, or perhaps its 'screen' is the viewer's own retina or optic nerve). In other words, the projected image is probably now not generally seen as a separate medium in its own right, but as an aspect of lots of different activities, some of which are more celebrated than others. Rather like the 'familiarity breeds contempt' point above, in this respect projected images don't receive attention of their own, simply because they're so fundamental to so many other things.

So ... happy birthday, magic lantern, even if all you get is a quiet celebration in an obscure specialist journal that splashes out on colour illustration to mark the occasion. Most of our modern ways of life wouldn't be the same without the ability to show each other images that move or change, or images that bring us laughter, fear, amazement, concern or new knowledge. And the 350-year process that takes its starting point from Huygens' little skeletons – if, indeed, that was a 'start' and not a continuation of some much longer story – isn't over yet.

Our next issue is scheduled to appear in Autumn 2010 and will complete Volume 10; as ever, contributions of any size or shape are very welcome via the editorial address on this page.