

THE ORIGINAL BARON AND BAILEY LIGHT CIRCUS

The Magic Lantern in 1960s Chicago

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In July 1968 the *Chicago Tribune* reviewed a record release by a local band, "A new group with a sound as listenable as any local one around – far more original than most".¹ The band in question was Haymarket Square, and their album was named *Magic Lantern*.

Originally released in an edition of just 80–100 copies, *Magic Lantern* would acquire a cult status amongst aficionados of psychedelic pop and was bootlegged several times before its first official re-release in 2001 on the Gear Fab Records label. "From the opening cut, it is fairly apparent why the original album is so sought after – *Magic Lantern* is as fine a display of American psychedelia as late-'60s albums by It's a Beautiful Day and Jefferson Airplane."² According to another reviewer, "it is one of the stronger – not to mention one of the earliest – slices of acid rock from the era, outstanding in every way".³

Musically and lyrically, *Magic Lantern* is a product of its time. The words are esoteric and hallucinatory, ranging 'from the psychedelic to the occult';⁴ one song about witchcraft is even titled 'Phantasmagoria' and includes references to magic broomsticks, pointed hats and Ouija boards. The songs themselves are extravagantly long (there are just six tracks on the whole album, one lasting almost 11 minutes); and there are the customary extended drum and guitar solos filled with 'trippy' electronic effects and distortion. The instrumental track 'Ahimsa', named for the ancient Indian principle of nonviolence, lasts for over seven minutes. The lurid pink album cover is a collage of photographs and hand-drawn graphics typical of the period, and features a poem by Michael Siwek which sets the tone nicely: "The lights inside the mind exploding in flashes of purple. Ripped with scarlet, yellow. Tangerine mist exploding through the walls of reality, images fade, descend, become changed thru thought process of good to evil".⁵

This was a band thoroughly conversant with the contemporary musical scene – and not just in America. They later cited Jefferson Airplane and Chicago-based H.P. Lovecraft as providing inspiration, but their main influences were from the UK. Originally called The Real Things, in imitation of The Pretty Things, guitarist Marc Swenson was brought into the band following an impressive audition imitating his hero Dave Davies of The Kinks.⁶ The English band Cream were another acknowledged influence, and the only song on *Magic Lantern* not written by the band was an excellent cover of 'The Train Kept A Rollin'', popularised by The Yardbirds in 1967.

If the band was up-to-date in its musical references, it also flirted with the political upheavals of the time. The name of the band commemorates the site



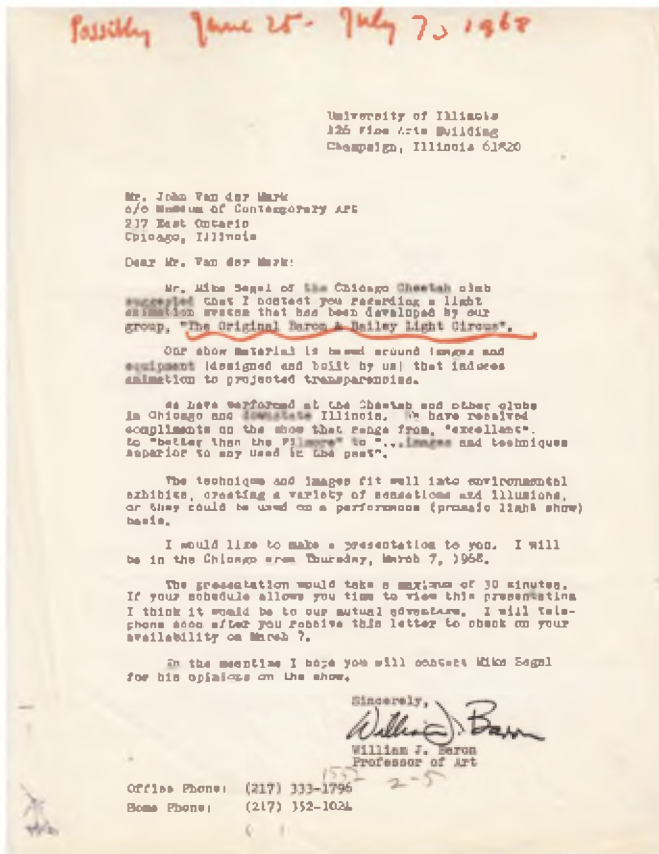
2. Promotional flyer for The Original Baron & Bailey Light Circus, MCA, Chicago, 25 June–7 July 1968 (Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives)

of a famous Chicago labour demonstration on 4 May 1886 in which many policemen and protestors were injured and killed. The statue of a policeman erected to commemorate this event became a potent symbol of student rebellion, vandalised with paint following a Vietnam protest in 1968 and blown up during the 1969 'Days of Rage' protests and again after restoration in 1970, by the radical leftist militant group the Weathermen. However, Haymarket Square were not primarily political in their motivation. Drummer John Kowalski recalled noticing the statue in 1967 and his amusement at seeing a policeman with "His hand ... raised over his head with two fingers pointed up in the form of a peace sign".⁷

All this poses a question. Why did a band, so studiously wedded to the psychedelic culture of its own time, choose to evoke an archaic visual medium like the magic lantern in its search for an album title? The answer turns out to be a rather surprising one which might help us reconsider the role of the



1. Album cover Haymarket Square *Magic Lantern* (1968) (CD reissue, courtesy of Gear Fab Records)



3. Letter from William J. Baron to MCA Chicago Director Jan van der Marck, 1968, exact date unknown (Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives)

lantern since the Second World War. Though no longer in practical use as a projection device, the term 'magic lantern' had a greater currency (at least in 1960s Chicago) than we might previously have imagined.

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It is likely that the name *Magic Lantern* was in part an acknowledgement of the visual origins of the album. Though the songs were probably from the band's established repertoire, the recording was released in connection with an art installation using state-of-the-art projection techniques. Like the statue of the policeman in 19th-century uniform which inspired the name Haymarket Square, there was an anachronistic appeal in calling the album after an optical device dating from around the same historical period.

Early in 1968 a letter arrived on the desk of Jan van der Mark, curator of the recently founded Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago (Fig. 3). Erroneously addressed to 'John' it was penned by William J. Baron, a professor of art at the University of Illinois, and proposed a meeting on 7 March to discuss "environmental exhibits, creating a variety of sensations and illusions" using "images and equipment (designed and built by us) that induces animation to projected transparencies".⁸ Devised together with long-time friend and collaborator William ('Bill') Bailey, the show would feature "images and techniques superior to any used in the past". The two men had met as students at the University of Illinois, and, inspired by the happy similarity of their names to the famous Barnum and Bailey Circus, now operated under the sobriquet 'The Original Baron and Bailey Light Circus'.

Both men were from an artistic background. In addition to his professorship at the University of Illinois, Baron (then aged 31) described himself as the designer for Baron Industrial Design, and claimed to have won 'numerous awards' for his design work. Bill Bailey similarly identified himself as industrial designer and art director for the

long-established company Thomas A. Shutz Inc. Nevertheless, the genesis of the Art Circus lay not in galleries but in the thriving club scene of downtown Chicago, notably the Cheetah Club at 1106 Lawrence Avenue, whose manager had first encouraged them to approach the MCA and was willing to provide a testimonial.⁹

Opened as a dance hall in the 1930s, the Cheetah had re-launched in October 1966 as a 'psychedelic dance palace'.¹⁰ By the time of Baron's letter the club was beginning to attract big-name acts including The Byrds, The Who and Wilson Pickett, but was already in financial difficulties, compounded by the cancellation of a high-profile booking in the aftermath of the Martin Luther King assassination in April 1968.

The Cheetah was not alone in Chicago in offering a programme of music and psychedelic imagery. In April 1968 another former dance hall was given a make-over, at first named the Electric Theater and later becoming the Kinetic Playground. A massive structure suspended from the ceiling housed 50 film, slide and overhead projectors, supplemented by six high-intensity strobe lights at ground level, all operated through a computer. The aim was for sensory overload, with a sound system so loud that plaster fell from the roof on the opening night.¹¹ According to the club's founder and director Aaron Russo, "The entertainment takes place above, beneath and around the audience, completely enveloping and involving the spectators", creating unique non-repeating performances lasting fully six and a half hours.¹² You can get a good impression of the venue in its heyday in the semi-fictional documentary film *Medium Cool* (1968) which features a sequence filmed in the Kinetic Playground to a soundtrack by Frank Zappa.¹³

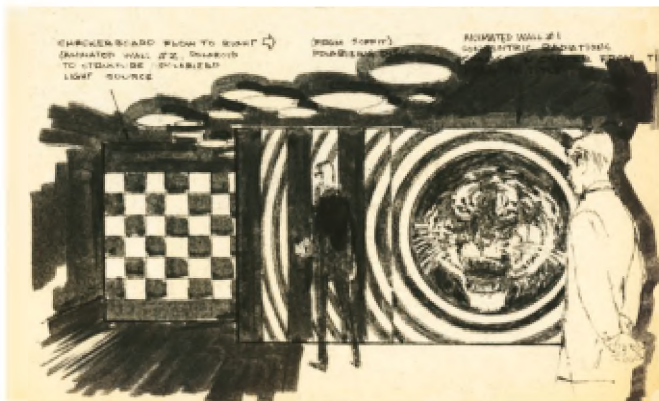
These venues saw themselves as the avant-garde for a new art form, a "Mixed media ... theatre of people and environment".¹⁴ In the event, such optimism was short-lived. By June 1968 the Cheetah had reverted to a more conventional music venue and despite the spectacular success of the Kinetic Playground in drawing the biggest names in rock music to the city, it failed to survive a small fire in November 1969. Although it briefly re-opened in 1972 the light shows were no more.

At the time Baron and Bailey approached the MCA, interest in these immersive entertainments was still at its height, but as we have seen there were already signs that clubs like this might not last. When the Cheetah began to fail the building's owner suggested "Grown-up people don't need all that psychedelic light-flashing to enjoy themselves!"¹⁵

For Baron and Bailey, the move to the MCA was a logical one. The Museum had opened its doors in 1967 on the site of the former Playboy headquarters and from the outset encouraged a culture of experimentation which promoted "collaboration among practitioners of today's many-faceted art expressions".¹⁶ There were 'Happenings' and



4. Installation view, The Original Baron & Bailey Light Circus, MCA Chicago, 25 June–7 July 1968 (photograph © MCA Chicago)



5. Entrance to Light Circus. Animated Walls no. 1 and no. 2 (top)
 6. Maze no. 1 showing screens and projections on people (above)
 Detail from proposed floor plan for The Original Baron & Bailey Light Circus, MCA Chicago, 25 June–7 July 1968
 (Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives)

avant-garde performances featuring composer John Cage and Fluxus artists Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins, challenging political exhibitions such as *Violence! In Recent American Art* (1968), and an innovative *Art by Telephone*, in which museum staff created works on site following instructions phoned in by artists.

'The Original Baron and Bailey Light Circus' operated at the intersection between contemporary art practice and popular culture, and perhaps also commerce. The two men identified themselves as industrial designers and may have seen the Light Circus as the launch for an economic venture. In an interview, Bailey pointed out the similarity of their own work to displays created for the Playboy clubs recently opened in London and in nearby Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. They also appear to have thought of this in part as a psychological or mood experiment. "It makes you feel good. We think it will make you forget everything that you were thinking of or worrying about before you came in."¹⁷

Whatever the thinking behind the proposal it could have been purpose-built for the MCA. The application was approved, a total budget of \$1,000 agreed for hiring equipment and labour, and the exhibition scheduled to run from 25 June to 7 July 1968.¹⁸

For Baron and Bailey, the exhibition was the fruit of a year of experimentation in local clubs, and we are fortunate that their detailed floor plans exist with sketches of the various elements making up what they described as a 'Seven Ring Circus'. According to one eyewitness, "It comes on strong to both the eye and ear with an impact similar to the

Electric Theater – employing 17 projectors (12 for slides, 3 for movies, and 2 just for light), various screens and objects, and a rock band".¹⁹

Visitors would enter the exhibition space past an 'Animated Wall' displaying the exhibition title and projected slides "based upon special techniques developed by Mr Baron and Mr Bailey, which by means of polarization, causes moving effects to appear on slides projected by a standard projector".²⁰ A second 'Animated Wall' led to a 'Maze' comprising six massive panels made from a variety of materials including mesh, frosted clear vinyl and reflective sheets of mylar – a plastic sheet material developed by DuPont in the 1950s and no doubt familiar to Baron and Bailey through its many industrial applications. Some of these screens functioned as conventional projection surfaces, but others allowed the light to pass through or to be reflected to other parts of the room.

As the exhibition proposal made clear, the audience themselves became part of the projections, with images of 'people, animals, machines' from three projectors at elevated positions in the room. This visual art form "differs from other forms because it offers people-involvement and allows the visitor to explore lighting effects and in so doing they create additional effects from their shadows".²¹ Recalling the passageways of distorting mirrors found at the Electric Theater, "There is a walkway with gauze-like scrims, which both catch the projected images and let them pass thru and onto the scrim beyond. Also effective is a projector aimed at about a 75 degree angle along the wall beside it; the images distort and dim as they broaden along the wall".

From the first 'Maze', visitors would enter a space dominated by a large 'Optical Cube' filled with inflated vinyl balls, which images from four projectors "are projected on and thru causing distortion, overlap etc."²² Perhaps the most intriguing space was described as a "360° cyclorama" which served as a screen for "animated projections" – sequences "producing strong visual effects" to create physiological effects of "vertigo, shock, nausea, etc." Again, these images were "made kinetic through a special process of polarization". A reviewer expressed this in more prosaic terms: "In the center of the room, five carousel projectors throw an interesting hodgepodge of camp and psychedelic images (some painted, some photographic) on five screens. The blinking of the projectors and the use of spinning colour wheels cause a mobile, prismatic effect."²³

A second 'Maze' comprising floor-to-ceiling projection screens of various materials was somewhat similar to the first, and featured "several slide and movie projectors". The rationale behind the images was somewhat obscure. Two specific films are mentioned in the initial



7. Optical cube. Detail from proposed floor plan for The Original Baron & Bailey Light Circus, MCA Chicago, 25 June–7 July 1968 (Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives)



8. Cyclorama. Detail from proposed floor plan for The Original Baron & Bailey Light Circus, MCA Chicago, 25 June–7 July 1968 (Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives)

proposal – some "mating prairie chickens and a girl in an animated Eames chair". By the time the exhibition opened, "The movies are of flowers growing, someone asleep in the grass, a child in a swing, and a little girl zipping along the sidewalk in a red Eames chair – looking for all the world like Dorothy in her ruby slippers".²⁴ The slides (some animated through polarisation) were equally eclectic. "A tarantula on one side; a Lincoln with a blinking Cyclops eye on the other. Sunset on a small lake. Lots of hippies, rock groups, motorcycles, pop art mouths ... several Frank Zappas, the Avedon ... Beatles portraits ... [and] one with horns sketched on – looking peculiarly like Baron himself." Identifying the subjects was like a "psychedelic ... guessing game" held at local poster shop The Mousehole.²⁵

Psychedelic rock music must have played a prominent part when elements of the Light Circus premiered in clubs like the Cheetah, and it is perhaps surprising that the exhibition proposal and press release make no mention of music aside from a soundtrack "derived from a recording of corn growing".²⁶ This subtle soundscape must have had some difficulty competing with Haymarket Square who revelled in the extreme volume offered through their Fender Dual Showman amplifiers.²⁷ As Kowalski later recalled, "God, could we play LOUD!" A contemporary reviewer attending the Light Circus sniffily observed that "The Haymarket Square, tho' not bad, play far too loud"²⁸ and although purchasers of their subsequent album were exhorted to 'Play it Loud', one reviewer had reservations. "I'm not sure I agree, and I also think they overdo volume at the museum."²⁹

In fact, Haymarket Square were an essential element of the Light Circus, playing live from midday to 5pm for both weekends and on tape during the weekdays, but also featuring in some of the screen images and serving as a surface for projections.³⁰

THE MAGIC LANTERN IN 1960S CHICAGO

It is quite possible the choice of album title was simply a playful linking of ideas from the (old) magic lantern to the (new) light show devised by Baron and Bailey, and no doubt the notion of a magical lamp would have appealed to the hippie sentiments of the band's protagonists. However, a search through newspaper archives in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily of a single publication (the *Chicago Tribune*), suggests that the magic lantern was by no means forgotten during this period.

True, there are references to this as an historic device belonging to a distant past. At an exhibition in 1959 visitors could hear a Polyphon and handle a magic lantern, "the still projector of olden days".³¹ There was a *Magic Lantern Christmas* TV special in 1963 where ragtime pianist Max Morath evoked 'Christmas at the turn of the century' and nostalgic

recollections of lantern shows given above the local funeral home in the early days of cinema.³²

Remarkably, there were even some active lanternists during this period. In 1950, we hear of Mrs Robert O. Clark of the Garden Club of Deerfield, not only chairman of the speakers' bureau but also custodian of its lantern slide library.³³ In 1964, a rural theatre in a barn behind Shady Lane Farm near Marengo (60 miles north-west of Chicago) employed a young pianist who "plays piano for the sing-along at the theater before the play, while the words are flashed on the screen ... If, as sometimes has been known to happen, he's playing one song and the projectionist is showing the lyrics for another, it's Chet who has to switch, not the guy with the magic lantern".³⁴

Passing references to the lantern also crop up in other contexts. We find mention of Robert Carson's 1952 novel *The Magic Lantern*, successor to his classic *A Star is Born*.³⁵ A photograph for a women's fashion advertisement credited "Photography by Magic Lantern".³⁶ A new colourful variety of tulip was called 'Magic Lantern' and described as "... a lively pepper-red with a large, clear yellow base, which appears to light up when the sun is shining".³⁷

More interestingly, we also find the magic lantern used as a frame of reference to explain contemporary developments in retail advertising and education. A Canadian department store "using the old-fashioned magic lantern to boost sales" by setting aside eight booths, each equipped with an assistant and projector who would illustrate catalogue items.³⁸ In 1951, a 'precision magic lantern' called a tachistoscope was used to train students to 'read' information flashed on screen for thousandths of a second, with applications in teaching reading and military training and even in baseball coaching.³⁹ In 1962, students at the University of Illinois were trialling a pioneering interactive computer system which resembled "a 1963 model of the old 'magic lantern', with a built-in screen and automatic transportation of the pictures".⁴⁰ A year later, a Professor at the University of Pittsburgh was developing a 'see and do' teaching system using an overhead projector and reported that "... the 'magic lantern' approach works extremely well".⁴¹ In these instances, modern visual media were understood through an assumed knowledge of the lantern and its long association with these particular areas of activity.

Perhaps the most striking example of this appropriation of the term 'magic lantern' is from the pen of the *Chicago Tribune's* television critic. During the 1950s and 1960s he frequently used the term as an affectionate substitute for 'television'. Cowboys become "Western heroes on the magic lantern"; he describes "[flicking] on the Magic Lantern" to watch a popular medical drama; and observes that "many television actors never watch the electronic lantern". These examples could be extended many times over. Affectionate, but also somewhat pejorative – the TV is, he implies, little better than the older medium it has long since supplanted. Nevertheless, it is clear that the magic



9. Camille Cook, Director of the Magic Lantern Society 1967–1972 from *Chicago Tribune*, 24 October 1976

lantern was still a familiar frame of reference for readers long after the lantern itself had fallen out of practical use.

In this wider context, we even find references to a Chicago-based Magic Lantern Society dedicated to experimental and art-house cinema. Formed under the auspices of the Society of Typographic Artists in 1956, the initial remit was to provide a platform for "art and documentary films, experimental movies and cartoons, films of the dance, and unusual scientific subjects."⁴² The Society failed to flourish in this first iteration but was revived by graphic designer Camille Cook in 1967 and run by her until 1972 with considerable success. Again, the term 'magic lantern' is used playfully; perhaps undermining the pomposity which often surrounds experimental cinema, and perhaps also making the subject matter seem more approachable to a general audience.

The final year of this MLS was also its most ambitious. By this time screenings were held at the MCA and the season comprised three packed programmes, each attracting 400–600 people.⁴³ There was a distinctly didactic flavour with spoken introductions, printed handbills and discussions with local film makers. There was also an attempt to illustrate and explain terms like 'synaesthetic' or 'structural', commonly used in the context of contemporary film criticism, through the selection of films.⁴⁴

In 1972 Cook's work was rewarded when she became the first director of a new film centre attached to the School of the Art Institute and the Magic Lantern Society was disbanded. However, the legacy of the MLS lives on in the work of the Chicago Film Center, which continues to the present day as the Gene Siskel Film Center presenting "cutting edge cinema to an annual audience of 85,000 ... trailblazing work by today's independent filmmakers, restorations and revivals of essential films from cinema history, and insightful, provocative discussions with filmmakers and media artists".⁴⁵

It is striking to consider that a Magic Lantern Society existed in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, and ended its run just four years before the foundation of our own MLS in 1976. In the context of the present study, it is hard to imagine that the members of Haymarket Square and the Baron and Bailey Light Circus were not at least familiar with Camille Cook and her work with the Magic Lantern Society; an organisation dedicated to the latest in what Cook termed 'new American cinema' in preference to 'experimental', 'underground' or 'avant-garde'.⁴⁶ It is quite conceivable that Haymarket Square's album title was at least suggested by this potent symbol of the Chicago counterculture.

We tend to think of the magic lantern since the Second World War as primarily the preserve of media historians and collectors, but it is important to remember that it still had a currency within collective memory long after the device itself had been consigned to obsolescence. This obsolescence was brought about not primarily by film, as has so often been asserted, but more directly by 35mm slide projectors, overhead projectors and (in the home, at least) by television – as the TV critic for the *Chicago Tribune* recognised in his playful appropriation of the name. It was this wider context that made it possible for Haymarket Square to adopt the magic lantern and even the phantasmagoria in connection with an installation based on the latest developments in music and visual spectacle.

We have seen that the term 'magic lantern' was still in casual use in a number of contexts, but specifically in areas traditionally associated with the lantern – primarily education and entertainment. It should come as no surprise that an organisation dedicated to showing the latest experimental cinema, while at the same time educating its audience to become more discerning consumers of film, should call itself the Magic Lantern Society.

Light installations reached a new level of sophistication in the late 1960s as expressions of a psychedelic culture based in large part on hedonism and excess, but it is surely not too fanciful to see a direct connection to earlier institutions. We often think of the phantasmagoria, the pleasure gardens of 18th- and 19th-century London or the 'rational' entertainments promised by the Adelaide Gallery, Polytechnic and Panopticon in terms of purely visual spectacle, but these were all intended as multi-sensory experiences. A visitor to the Polytechnic in 1841 found an overwhelming place full of the "constant noise from the operations of the several working models, and the number of persons who are talking", assailed by the smell of machinery in operation, and the tactile sensations of descending in a diving bell or receiving electric shocks.⁴⁷ The sensory overload which was the *raison d'être* of the Electric Theater or the Original Baron and Bailey Light Circus may have been extreme, but its rationale would surely have been recognised by their Victorian forbears.

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