

THE MAGIC LANTERN IN LEISURE, ENTERTAINMENT AND POPULAR CULTURE

Final Conference of the B-magic project – Brussels and Antwerp, 4-7 May 2022

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Perhaps it was the excitement of finally attending a 'proper' conference, with more than 120 old friends and new faces *really there in person* in the same room (plus more lurking out in the online ether). Perhaps it was the excellent food, drink, cultural events and other entertainment. Perhaps it was the sunny weather and relaxed atmosphere of an interesting city. Or perhaps this really was the best academic magic lantern conference I've been to. Maybe all of those are true.

Things kicked off with a half-day 'pre-conference' in Brussels (a rather odd concept, since there wasn't much difference in tone or content between this and the 'conference proper'). For me the most interesting 'interventions' here were by the art historian **Valentine Robert** discussing the rich range of images found in religious slides and film, and **Céline Ruivo** considering the use of colour in slides to create atmosphere and emotional responses. The day culminated in an evening show, mixing films and slides with in-character commentary, music and (brilliant) sound effects, delivered by the early-cinema scholars **André Gaudreault** and **Germain Lacasse** with an entourage including **Bart Moens**, **Dominique Nasta** and the excellent French lanternist **Anne Gourdet-Marès**.

Then on to Antwerp for three days of well-presented, thoughtful lectures and discussions covering a remarkable range of topics. It's unfair to pick out highlights – there actually weren't any 'lowlights' for me, which in itself is unusual in an academic conference. But perhaps I could recall a few presentations that gave me new things to think about.

Gabriela Cruz, a professor of musicology from Michigan, gave a fascinating talk on the lantern's influence on 19th-century music and the effects of optical techniques (especially phantasmagoria, in its evolving forms) on the development of stage opera. This included both the *absence* of music (an example was a Méliès silent film, where the projected images showed 'traces of sound' suggesting musical rhythms in the action), and



Report from the Experimental Media Archaeology lab: Ludwig (in full fireproof PPE) handling the Carpenter lantern (photo by Karin Bienek)



A line of dancing girls from Amandine d'Azevedo's presentation – the feet move from side to side in a 'slipping' effect (Patwardhan Family Collection, National Film Archive of India)



Charlotte Bouckaert deconstructing the Guggenheim Museum (photo by Gwen Sebus)

also the 'effect' use of images in opera staging, like projected portraits voiced by an offstage singer. In several senses, this was a case of there being 'more than meets the eye' in works involving or influenced by the projected image.

Our own Karin Bienek and Ludwig Vogl-Bienek presented the results of an exercise in Experimental Media Archaeology, a.k.a. 'trying things out to see if and how they work'. This recounted their use of a Carpenter 'Improved Phantasmagoria' lantern, with authentic oil illuminant, to show 'copperplate sliders' by rear projection on a screen of dampened cloth, all following Philip Carpenter's instructions in his 1823 booklet *Elements of Zoology*. Presented like a report on practical scientific lab work, this was a great and timely reminder that, for much of the material we look at, one of the best ways of coming to understand its use is actually to try to use it.

A charming presentation by **Amandine D'Azevedo**, a film studies lecturer from Montpellier, revealed a family slide collection held in the National Film Archive of India. This rare surviving example of local appropriation of an imported medium – under the British Raj



From Valentine Robert's discussion of religious slides – a painting by Harold Copping and its adaptation as a slide by Newton & Co. (photo by Gwen Sebus)



La Voix des Clochers from the Maison de la Bonne Presse, presented with live vocal quartet and piano (photo by Bart Moens)

the lantern was more associated with colonial rule and missionary propaganda – gave a tantalising glimpse of lantern use beyond the 'western' world. The Patwardhan Family Collection contains over 240 slides depicting Hindu gods and demons, circus performers, parading soldiers and dancing girls, including some unusual and effective mechanical long slides showing movement effects to be superimposed on a background scene.

Erkki Huhtamo gave two different, yet somehow related, presentations. Firstly his alter ego Professor Huhlabaloo presented an extract from his latest entertainment show, accompanied by atmospheric live music by Alexander Sterkens and Kobe Dupont. Secondly he gave a more conventional paper on the life and career of John 'Pop' Dibble, an American lanternist and film showman from the 1870s onwards who by the 1920s claimed to be 'The Oldest Exhibitor in the United States and Canada.' This was based on Erkki's acquisition (from the Jack Judson Collection) of John Dibble's handwritten autobiography, a rare first-hand document of the 'wild west' of projection. Any similarity between Dibble and the lecture stylings of Professor Huhlabaloo was, presumably, completely coincidental.

And Bernd Scholze, whose research and presentations at our Society meetings continue to impress me, gave an entrancing show of large-format hand-painted dissolving views by Friedrich Böttcher, beautifully interwoven with an orchestral soundtrack. Like everything Bernd does this was close to technical perfection, benefiting from the luxury of being able to *take time* over the dissolves so the change from one image to another was almost imperceptible.

Under the title of the 'B-magic Carrousel' there was a rapid tour of the many and various strands of the project, with each research team discussing the areas they're investigating and conclusions they're approaching. This type of presentation has featured at a couple of the previous B-magic events, and gave a good (though slightly exhausting!) overview of the subjects uncovered in institutional and private collections around Belgium. On the final day a similar 'speed update' approach introduced the next projects lined up by several of the main participants – some intriguing ideas are emerging from the mist which can hopefully be described in future issues of *TML*. And finally, no conference would be complete without a book launch, and here it was a preview of a whole series of histories of media and performance, forthcoming from the Belgian publisher Brepols. The first volume, on

the lantern and religious belief, should be out this summer and will be reviewed in our next issue.

Just as important in any good conference are the *après-ski* events. Here the lasting memories for me were two shows either side of a great buffet dinner in (of all places) a local auction house. First Bart Moens, with Ditmar Bollaert and Els Prevenier at the magnificent lantern, presented two slide sets by the French religious organisation Maison de la Bonne Presse, *La voix des clochers* and *Quo vadis, Domine?* Live singing by a fine vocal quartet brought these two sequences to life and reminded us that the images are only one part of any lantern show.

Then, with everyone suitably fed and watered, the visual artist Charlotte Bouckaert gave a wonderful presentation of her audio-visual performance *11 Seconds*, based on live projection and manipulation of a single photo of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. It's hard to describe this piece (there's a trailer online at vimeo.com/588737285, but you really had to be there for the proper artistic experience, which was perhaps part of its point) but not unlike the conference as a whole it was surprising, intriguing, challenging, thoughtful and *fun* – though not necessarily in that order.

The B-magic project still has a few months to run, but this was its last major event, and it's hard to see it as anything less than a resounding success – 'resounding' in the sense of something that continues to echo for a while after it officially finishes. When the project started I have to admit I had my doubts: could so much detailed research in what must surely be a very small field, with people of limited lantern knowledge setting out without 'native guides' to show them 'the true path'(!), *really* be a good use of a small mountain of Belgian taxpayers' Euros? But I was completely wrong, and it could.

One of the encouraging aspects of watching the B-magic project develop over its four years has been the sense in which the many 'new' researchers involved have grown into their subject. Starting from relatively little specialist knowledge, gradually working out their areas and topics of study, bringing in other experience, they now present in knowledgeable and engaging ways to make superficially uninspiring subjects interesting and make their audience think differently about things we thought we already knew. I couldn't ask for much more than that, and I look forward to whatever comes next – *à la prochaine / tot de volgende keer!*