German Historical Institute London
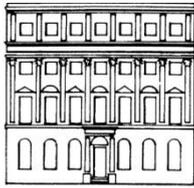

BULLETIN

Screen Culture and the Social Question: Poverty on Screen 1880–1914.
Conference of the German Historical Institute London in cooperation
with Screen1900 Project, University of Trier, held at the GHIL, 1–3
Dec. 2011. Conveners: Andreas Gestrich (GHIL) and Ludwig Vogl-
Bienek (University of Trier).

Public screenings with the magic lantern emerged as a widespread
social practice in the nineteenth century. The 'art of projection' firm-
ly established the screen as a part of international cultural life. The
audience was already prepared for the rapid success of 'cinematog-
raphy', which took off at the beginning of the twentieth century. An
astonishingly large number of lantern slides and early films were
used to present the living conditions of the poor and the controver-
sial discourse on the Social Question in public performances around
1900. In line with the various aspects of the conference topic, the
papers approached this issue from very different perspectives.

In their introductory address, conveners Andreas Gestrich and
Ludwig Vogl-Bienek indicated the shared interest of their institu-
tions in exploring representations of poverty. As examples Gestrich
named Trier University's Collaborative Research Centre 'Strangers
and Poor People' (SFB600) and the GHIL's current research project
'Pauper Letters and Petitions for Poor Relief in Germany and Great
Britain, 1770–1914'. Ludwig Vogl-Bienek spoke of the 'hidden histo-
ry' of lantern and screen culture in the nineteenth century. Their his-
toric function in the public sphere has hardly been explored by social
historians, he said, and is seriously under researched in media histo-
ry. Vogl-Bienek named the lack of availability of primary sources,
especially the lantern slides themselves, as one of the main obstacles
to research, and pointed to current efforts to publicize knowledge of
the magic lantern by making digitized lantern slides available to
researchers and the general public alike.

The first panel was entitled 'Screen Culture and the Public Sphere:
Historical Context and Social Impact 1880–1914'. In his paper 'The
Social Impact of Screen Culture 1880–1914', Martin Loiperdinger
(Trier) showed that lantern shows were used in diverse contexts such
as public lectures, church services, German Navy League recruiting
drives, and by religious and charitable organizations in Britain. He

The full conference programme can be found on the GHIL's website <www.
ghil.ac.uk> under Events and Conferences.

suggested that descriptions of audience response should use the concept of appropriation instead of the stimulus–response model. Stephen Bottomore (Bangkok) focused on the role of the magic lantern and the cinematograph in political campaigns in his paper, 'The Lantern and Early Film for Political Uses'. As a basis for further research he presented a typology of the various applications of projection media in political campaigns. One of his major examples was the 1907 campaign by the Conservative Party in Britain. In his comment Andreas Gestrich discussed the relationship between screen culture and the public sphere. He highlighted the public reception of projection media as a shift away from privatization compared with the private consumption of print media. He assumed that social competition between different organizations was one of the bases of the mass distribution of media. In the discussion, the elements of performance in the art of projection were suggested as a basis for crucial research questions: audiences and their living environment, organizers (organizations), performers, venues, apparatus, slides and films, texts, and music.

The following panel, entitled 'Road Show: Approaches to the Hidden History of Screen Culture', shifted the focus towards the current situation of research in this field. Ine van Dooren (Brighton) and Frank Gray (Brighton) in their dual roles as researchers and archivists spoke about the obstacles lantern scholars face and efforts to establish the digital slide collection and information database LUCERNA. They also reported on the related Lucerna cooperation network established by the universities of Brighton, Indiana, and Trier, and the Magic Lantern Society. Frank Gray suggested that the lack of research structures and a common methodological framework were preventing the establishment of 'lantern studies'. He stressed the importance of a contextual approach to magic lantern history that takes into account various inter-textual and inter-medial relationships with other cultural practices and art forms. In her presentation 'Archiving and Preserving Lantern Slides and Related Resources', Ine van Dooren described the work of the Screen Archive South East and its effort to collect and publicize (through digitization) lantern artefacts for educational and research purposes. The first day of the conference concluded with the 'academic launch' of the LUCERNA database, <http://slides.uni-trier.de>. The developer of the database, Richard Crangle, impressed the participants with a practical

demonstration. The database brings together various primary and secondary source materials on the history of the magic lantern. The open access database is an attempt to lay the foundation for future research by de-privatizing sources such as slides, texts, and readings.

The second day started with the panel 'Raising Public Awareness of Living Conditions in Slums and Tenements'. Vogl-Bienek presented a paper entitled 'Slum Life and Living Conditions of the Poor in Fictional and Documentary Lantern Slide Sets'. He differentiated between the life model slides, which presented narratives on the living conditions of the poor, and documentary sets, which claimed to show 'realistic' images of street life and big city slums. He reflected on the concept of a seemingly 'virtual inclusion' of the respectable poor, depicted in different ways by different producers according to their liberal or conservative points of view. In their paper 'Poetry of Poverty: The Magic Lantern and the Ballads of George R. Sims', Joss Marsh (Bloomington) and David Francis (Bloomington) stressed the social relevance of Victorian author George R. Sims, whose ballads brought the poor into the homes of his middle-class readers and gave the disreputable and desperate a voice. Sims was characterized as 'the quintessential multi-media celebrity of Victorian London' because of the various genres in which the prolific writer worked (theatre, poetry, social investigation) and the large number of adaptations of his stories for lantern slide series. After this portrayal of fictionalized representations of poverty, curator Bonnie Yochelson (New York) spoke on 'Jacob Riis, his Photographs, and Poverty in New York, 1888–1914'. Riis is mostly remembered today for his book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and its photographic illustrations. What is less well known is that until his death in 1914 he devoted several months of each year to delivering nationwide lantern slide lectures on New York slums. Yochelson pointed out that Riis used photographs as material evidence of the living conditions of the poor to authenticate his reports. For this purpose he and the amateur photographers accompanying him undertook 'raids' on New York slums and immigrant tenements. The subsequent panel discussion reflected on interconnections between art, philanthropy, and business. Visual representations, specifically, photographs of the poor created by middle-class producers for middle-class audiences, were questioned as exploiting or expropriating the poor. Investigations of magic

lantern slides and shows on social topics need to take this aspect of exclusion into account.

The third panel dealt with 'Education and Entertainment for the Poor: The Use of Lantern Shows and Early Films by Charity Organizations'. In her presentation 'Educating *Moyshe*: Jewish Socialists, Gentile Entertainments, and the Future of the Jewish Immigrant Masses in America', Judith Thissen (Utrecht) made clear that the educated elites often distrusted the efforts of early film to school the working-class 'masses'. Her detailed case study of the socialist Jewish daily *Forverts* revealed that Jewish intellectuals and labour leaders in turn-of-the-century New York rejected the notion that cinema had any educational value. Instead they relied on the high-brow form of Yiddish literary drama to educate *Moyshe* (the Jewish mass audience) while the 'uneducated' masses themselves embraced the low-brow cultural forms of moving pictures, penny arcades, and the phonograph. The subsequent discussion of Thissen's paper clarified that the use of media by social movements is an open research question (known examples draw quite divergent pictures) that requires international comparative research. Looking at British and German Christmas films, Caroline Henkes (Trier) analysed narrative strategies used to evoke compassion from the audience. She applied an intermedial framework to demonstrate how these Christmas films adopted 'various modes of representation from the established visualization techniques of the magic lantern', comparing them with lantern-slide sets that illustrated the same stories. Intermediality and the repetition of certain tropes in pauper narratives were the subject of subsequent discussion. Frank Gray commented on the often neglected need for material evidence as the 'bedrock' of research and required for understanding new media phenomena such as cinematography in historical context. He stressed the importance of repetition for certain representational strategies in narratives on poverty with similar depictions of the poor repeated across media borders and often featuring death and ascension to heaven as their resolution (like several Christmas stories). The second day concluded with the live magic lantern performance 'Tidings of Comfort and Joy: A Festive and True-Made Victorian Magic Lantern Show for the Deserving Poor of London' given at the Foundling Museum by showman Mervyn Heard accompanied by Juliette Harcourt (recitation and song) and Stephen Horne (piano).

The fourth and final panel was entitled 'Social Prevention with the Aid of the Screen and Exhibitions'. Annemarie McAllister (Preston) spoke on 'The Use of the Magic Lantern in the Band of Hope', Britain's largest temperance organization for young members. In their weekly meetings, magic lantern performances combined instruction and entertainment to reinforce the message of abstinence and to show the evils of strong drink, which was considered one of the main causes of poverty. McAllister outlined the development of the extensive lantern department set up by the UK Band of Hope Union which lent lanterns, slides, and readings to its local branches, British colonies, and the European continent. Marina Dahlquist (Stockholm) spoke of philanthropic organizations in the United States and their use of moving pictures and lantern slides in health campaigns. She showed that these organizations devised veritable multi-media campaigns to promote sanitary measures and to warn the inhabitants of slums and overcrowded living quarters about health hazards. These activities were also intended to encourage the Americanization of immigrants. Michelle Lamunière (Harvard) presented a paper entitled 'Sentiment as Moral Motivator: From Jacob Riis's Lantern Slide Presentations to Harvard University's Social Museum'. She analysed Riis's sensationalist imagery as a tactic to engage audiences for social reform by appealing to 'familiar cultural symbols and prejudices'. Lamunière contrasted them with exhibits from the collection of Harvard University's Social Museum founded by Francis Greenwood Peabody in 1903. The collection of 4,500 photographs and 1,500 related items provides empirical data 'to facilitate the comparative study of social problems and the institutions and methods devised to alleviate them in Europe and America'. In his comment, Scott Curtis (Evanston) discussed the role of the image in education. The extensive use of visual media in social instruction and prevention was based on a widely held belief that images could establish a direct and immediate connection with the mind of the 'uneducated' or the child. Participants also stressed, however, that the combination of sound (text) and image as an inherent feature of lantern performances should be taken into account. A comparison of the different ways of presenting images of the poor to the well-to-do clarified that they appealed not only to their social conscience but also to their self-interest: poverty could pose a threat to their own security and health.

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Closing remarks by Ian Christie (London) and Clemens Zimmermann (Saarbrücken) directed the concluding discussion towards methodological requirements. The history of the cultural establishment of the screen and its influence on social history, as so impressively demonstrated by the papers delivered at this conference, needs international research to be better coordinated. More empirical data is necessary to answer economic, political, technical, and design questions and to enable audience research. Comparative analysis of historical screen practice (lantern and early cinema) within the wider context of social and cultural history requires micro-analytical approaches based on an internationally agreed research agenda. The participants felt confident that this conference had taken a crucial step towards this end.

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