42 / Poverty as Spectacle? Victorian Magic Lantern Shows and the Urban Poor

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The Rise of the Magic Lantern

In Media Studies the magic lantern is often relegated to technical histories of the film projector, as one of its more primitive ancestors. Instead it should be considered as a medium in its own right, with its own production infrastructure, genres, topics and modes of presentation, some of which influenced early films and film audiences.[1] This essay offers an overview of the history of the magic lantern up to the late 19th century, together with a case study of a Victorian lantern slide-series dealing with urban poverty.

Throughout its history the basic apparatus of the magic lantern has undergone numerous technical and optical improvements, but the lantern was always constructed following the same simple principle described by Deac

Rossell: "*The magic lantern is not a complicated instrument. It consists of a light source, a transparent image-carrying slide, and an enlarging lens, disposed in that order in a line ... so that their combination would throw a greatly enlarged image of a transparent slide onto a wall, a piece of cloth, or even a cloud of smoke.*"[2]

The first magic lanterns appeared in the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark in the middle of the 17th Century and quickly spread all over Europe and soon around the world, aided in no small measure by religious missionaries. Since the light sources for these early lanterns (candles and oil lamps) were comparatively weak, the images could only be projected over short distances and remained fairly small. So did their audiences. Magic lanterns formed part of the private scientific/curiosity cabinets of the well-to-do and were common accessories of the curiosities presented by itinerant 'Savoyards', the so-called 'galantee' showmen.[3]

In the course of the 18th Century, brighter light sources allowed ingenious lantern operators to hide the apparatus behind half-transparent screens in order to frighten audiences in darkened rooms with elaborate apparitions. These *phantasmagoria* shows were thrilling spectacles that included moving images - thanks to projectors mounted on wheels that were pushed towards and pulled away from the screen, minimising or enlarging the image respectively - and eerie sound effects.[4]

Magic lantern spectacles of a more scientific and respectable nature were presented at the Royal Polytechnic Institution in London from 1841 onwards. By then the use of limelight as an illuminant enabled longer-distance projection, and a printing process using copper plates allowed for the mass

manufacture of identical slides that could then be manually coloured or altered. If two or more images were superimposed on the screen (using biunial, triunial or multiple lanterns) and faded into one another, the stunning effects of the 'dissolving views' were produced, for which the Royal Polytechnic soon became known - night scenes turning into day, summer landscapes into winter. The dimensions of these shows were spectacular: according to W.F. Ryan, the screen at the Polytechnic measured 60 square metres, six gigantic lanterns projected on to it, and the Institution's new theatre, opened in 1848, held audiences of up to 1,000 people.[5]

The images on the glass slides used for projection were painted and coloured by hand until the second half of the 19th Century, when it became feasible to produce photographic slides. This allowed for a new quality of realism and introduced new subjects into the repertoire of slide-makers. The so-called 'life model slides' were series of photographic images with costumed actors who posed in studio settings in front of painted backdrops, surrounded by props.[6] These black-and-white photographs were then coloured by hand during post-production. They illustrated pivotal scenes from Biblical stories, songs or literary works by well-known authors.

'The Road to Heaven'

During lantern performances, the source text (or abridged versions of it) would be read or recited, the slides serving as illustrations of the spoken word. One example is a ballad by George R. Sims, 'The Road to Heaven', which was first published on Christmas Eve in 1882 and adapted as a life model slide-series by at least two slide producers before

1890. It relates the tragic story of a street urchin who, in looking for the 'road to heaven', only finds the bottom of the River Thames and later dies in a children's hospital. George Robert Sims was an English writer whose poetic works were enormously popular source texts for life model slide-series. Sims was a prolific author who published long-running theatre plays, an even longer-running column in a weekly newspaper, tear-jerking ballads, comic and detective short stories, and reflections on his life and times.

He also modelled for one of Madame Tussaud's wax figures, and once famously campaigned for a completely ineffective hair restorer. His ballads often depicted social ills like child poverty or adult drunkenness, or dramatic and heroic episodes on the bounds of respectable society (among sailors, street artists, and itinerant puppeteers). Sims found inspiration for his characters during tours of the London slums where he accompanied a School Board Officer on visits to the homes of the London poor.[7] Both in its structure and its theme, 'The Road to Heaven' is a typical example of Sims' interpretation of the ballad form.

It is a monologue by a first-person narrator who relates the story of little Mike to one of the doctors at the hospital where the boy died. In rather anti-climactic fashion, it begins after the boy's death and then flashes back to the circumstances of his "*dreadful fall*" into the Thames (line 4).[8] The narrator claims to have stumbled upon Mike and another street urchin in one of the stone recesses of London Bridge on Christmas Eve. (His motivations, however, seem dubious; he claims to have lost a favourite dog and to be looking for it near the bridge, but after he spots the two boys the precious animal is never mentioned again. He also makes a conscious effort to stand hidden in the shadows while listening very

carefully to every single word of their conversation, but claims to have missed the actual events of the fall.) Unseen by the two waifs, he overhears them talking about heaven, which one describes as "*that place where ye're dressed in white / And has golding* [sic] *'arps to play on, and it's warm and jolly and bright*" (ll. 39-40).

The unnamed narrator relates the children's tragic fates. One, Jack, is an orphan whose drunken grandmother sends him on the streets to earn a living by singing songs. The other, Mike, has two drunkard parents who send him out to beg with a bad leg. He asks his companion, who goes to Sunday School, about heaven and how to get there, and Jack points down "*to where the cold Thames water surged muddy and thick and brown*" (l. 62). Moments later, according to the narrator, the boy seems to lose his balance and falls into the water beneath, hitting his head on the stonework of the bridge.

What sounds like a terrible story clearly unsuited for children's entertainment is then turned into a tale of salvation: the boy is brought to the hospital where he regains consciousness long enough to comically mistake white-robed patients for angels, and his elderly doctor for God. He believes he has found his way to heaven and can die happily, as the last stanza suggests: "*This is the day of scoffers, but who shall say that night / When Mike asked the road to heaven, that Jack didn't tell him right? / 'Twas the children's Jesus pointed the way to the kingdom come / For the poor little tired arab, the waif of a London slum*" (ll. 93-96).

The ending, like most of the ballad, is ambiguous. Death as salvation for poor children who are morally pure and innocent is a common motif in waif stories and in Sims'

ballads. However, the fact that the protagonist perhaps commits suicide and does not seek or receive religious conversion of any kind undermines the supposedly Christian message of the ballad. To resolve this ambiguity, the lantern slide manufacturer Bamforth issued an alternative reading to accompany its life model slide-series for this ballad.

The Bamforth Version

Written by resident author Robert Craven, a surgeon active in the temperance movement, the Bamforth reading resembled Sims' ballad in plot and style but was written to accompany the existing slide images, not adapted from the original text. The main difference is that in Craven's reading, young Mike is corrected in his misunderstanding of "*the road to Heaven*" before he dies of his injuries, and is taught that "*through death alone the soul is freed, / But that to reach the realms of endless day / Our Saviour Christ is the only way*".[9]

This message is much more suited to the demands of Bamforth's customers, who were mainly religious and temperance organisations. The surviving slides from two distinct versions of the life model slide-set 'The Road to Heaven' by Bamforth also make for an interesting contrast. In one, only the two boys are depicted as they sit on the stone bench and talk, and as Mike falls. In the other version, the narrator character is shown watching them and watching the fall.

One depiction puts the poor characters at the centre, while the other displays the whole scene as it might appear on a theatre stage. One has the viewer share the perspective of the narrator, the other has him/her observe the observer. The cameras of the time were not light-sensitive enough to

truthfully re-create the evening setting of the ballad or reproduce the shadows that the narrator might hide in, and as a result all the images were shot in a fully-lit studio. But it may have been an artistic choice to leave the narrator out of the picture rather than to put him in plain sight.

The Temperance Context

Although it is only mentioned in passing, alcoholism is clearly identified as the reason the two protagonists live and sleep on the streets of London. This made the ballad and its adaptations relevant to the temperance movement, especially its address to the working class. In many cases, children were the addressees of temperance messages, as they were thought to be more susceptible to, and not yet corrupted by, the demon drink.

The Band of Hope was an organisation that offered suitable activities to its young members (like magic lantern shows or outings to the country) if they signed the pledge to remain abstinent.[10] The fate of Mike and Jack, the protagonists of 'The Road to Heaven', could serve as a cautionary tale to both children and adults of how drink could corrupt people and destroy their families. This is evidenced by a report of a Band of Hope meeting where this slide set was projected.

The Surrey Mirror of 26 March 1892, p. 5 reports on a Senior Band of Hope meeting held in Redhill on 22 March. The audience would have been older than the usual groups of children at their temperance meetings. During the event, total abstinence was promoted with all the tools of modern marketing: portraits of "*eminent men*" who were supposedly abstainers were projected on to the screen, "*scientific*" evidence was presented by a Dr. Ridge, who had made

experiments that "*showed that a small quantity of alcohol did a vast deal of harm. Drink had no strength in it; it was but a stimulant*". This was followed by an appeal to the listener's purse: insurance companies' returns "s*howed the abstainer to be the longest liver, and consequently they could take him at a much lower premium than a moderate drinker*". The performance culminated in the emotional manipulation of a reading of 'The Road to Heaven', illustrated with lantern slides.

This can be considered a fairly typical temperance event: instruction (lecture) was combined with an entertainment (reading) that reiterated the message of teetotalism in a somewhat less obvious fashion. While the magic lantern was more of a visual aid at Band of Hope meetings (alongside blackboards, printed material, and, later, films), there were also entire evening programmes composed of sequences of slide-sets that had the projected image at their centre. *The Aberdeen Weekly Journal* of 17 December 1890, p. 7, for example, reports on a "*limelight entertainment*" on 12 December in the Public Hall in the local village of Kincardine O'Neil.

Here, one Robert Calder showed his "*splendidly arranged programme*", which included, among other items, three illustrated ballads by George R. Sims - among them 'The Road to Heaven'. The programme combined informative images (in this case a set about Mary, Queen of Scots) with entertaining and comic ones (with one set called 'The Mad Umbrella'). Visual effects like chromatropes (where rotating discs with colourful patterns created kaleidoscopic images) and dissolving views were added to showcase the skill of the operator and what was called "*the eccentricities of the magic lantern*".

Lastly, the *Oxford Journal* of 7 January 1893, p. 5 has a short report of an event on 3 January at a local mission chapel, where a Reverend Oake gave a talk on various religious subjects "*illustrated with dissolving views*". The report also mentions "*a short set entitled* 'The Road to Heaven'". This "*very touching story of a poor little city waif*" could be enjoyed alongside the "*light refreshments*" that were handed around during the "*pleasant and enjoyable evening*". Certainly "*heartily singing*" the hymn 'Safe in the Arms of Jesus' did wonders to ease the misery of the "*poor little city waifs*".

Varying Reception

For the narrator in Sims' ballad 'The Road to Heaven', poverty is a spectacle, something to watch but not engage with – only when it's too late and the boy has fallen into the water does he call for help. The two poor boys are something to peer at and listen to from the safe distance of the shadows, adorable and non-threatening in their quaint ideas of heaven. His positioning mirrors that of the magic lantern show audiences, who can derive pleasure from and be entertained by these images. They can admire the quality of the slides or the ability of the ballad reciter, and study poor characters - even feel sympathetic to them - without having to actively engage with them.

On the other hand, representatives of temperance organisations used dramatic stories like 'The Road to Heaven' to emotionally engage young audiences and enrich their factual lectures with fictional stories that their audience might more immediately relate to in order to drive home the message of complete abstinence. There was a desire for pseudo-realistic images of poverty that were shown not only

for the purpose of instruction but also for their entertainment value, accompanied by images, texts and sometimes songs.

'The Road to Heaven' is only one example of a lantern slide-set that was used in varying exhibition contexts by various organisations or persons for widely different purposes. It could serve as a dramatic illustration of the dangers of alcohol, intended to scare young children into abstinence; it could provide a glimpse of picturesque poverty for audiences who were better off; or it could illustrate dramatic recitals of a well-known poem by aspiring young ladies everywhere.

Notes and References

[1] Ludwig Vogl-Bienek,'"From Life": The Use of the Magic Lantern in Nineteenth-century Social Work', in Andreas Gestrich, Steven King and Lutz Raphael (eds.), *Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800-1940*, Oxford: Lang, 2006, p. 471.

[2] Deac Rossell, *Laterna Magica – Magic Lantern, Vol. 1*, Stuttgart: Füsslin, 2008. pp. 17-18.

[3] *Ibid*, pp. 102 *ff*.

[4] See for example Mervyn Heard, *Phantasmagoria: the Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, Hastings: The Projection Box, 2006, pp. 96 *ff.*

[5] W.F. Ryan, 'Limelight on Eastern Europe – The Great Dissolving Views at the Royal Polytechnic', in Mike Smith, David Henry and Dennis Crompton (eds., *The Ten Year Book*, London: The Magic Lantern Society, 1986, p. 50. See also Heard, *op. cit*., p. 227, and Jeremy Brooker, *The Temple of Minerva: Magic and the Magic Lantern at the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London, 1837-1901*, London: The Magic Lantern Society, 2013.

[6] Richard Crangle, 'Zweidimensionales Leben: Die britischen Life model-Dias', in *Fotogeschichte* vol. 19 no. 74, 1999, pp. 27-28.

[7] Arthur Calder-Marshall (ed.), *Prepare to Shed Them Now: The Ballads of George R. Sims*, London: Hutchinson & Co, 1968, p. 16, and George Robert Sims, *My Life: Sixty Years' Recollections of Bohemian London*, London: Eveleigh Nash, 1917, pp. 100-101.

[8] This and all subsequent quotes from 'The Road to Heaven' are line-numbered according to George Robert Sims, 'The Road to Heaven', in Richard Crangle and Robert MacDonald (eds), *The Illustrated Bamforth Slide Catalogue* (DVD-ROM), London: The Magic Lantern Society, 2009.

[9] Robert Craven, 'The Road to Heaven', in Crangle and MacDonald *op. cit*., lines 140-142.

[10] Steve Humphries, *Victorian Britain Through the Magic Lantern*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989, pp. 48-49.