

# REVIEW: *LICHT UND WAHRHEIT*

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Jens Ruchatz,  
*Licht und Wahrheit: Eine Mediumgeschichte  
der fotografischen Projektion*  
München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003  
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**A FEW ISSUES AGO** (Vol. 9, No. 5, Winter 2003), *NMLJ* editor Richard Crangle described the progress of lantern history as 'fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle'. This recent book by MLS member Jens Ruchatz, whose title translates as 'Light and Truth', describes a few of the most important parts of the puzzle. His special interest and most original research articulates how the new medium of photography slowly merged with the magic lantern in the mid 19th century, to the advantage of both technologies.

To many commentators at the time, the combination of photography and slide projection was more than just a new step in either medium; the pair together embodied, as reported by the *Illustrated Photographer* in 1870, a way of 'storing up in infinitely small space wonders and beauties for revelation by the amplifier' [i.e. the lantern].<sup>1</sup> But Ruchatz wants to go a step further. He conceives the history of the lantern until 1850 as 'the pre-history of photographic projection'<sup>2</sup> and suggests that the lantern's development was a process of rationalisation, moving from 'irrational' beginnings into the 19th century where, through photography, it gained an educational purpose.

It seems to me that in making his case for this redrawing of the picture of lantern use, Ruchatz has misplaced parts of the puzzle, putting down some of his pieces with dubious connections while leaving other pieces so isolated on the table that they do not connect to anything. As Crangle rightly proposed, one of the difficulties of working on the puzzle of lantern history is that 'we don't have the benefit of knowing quite what the finished picture ought to look like'; and there is an open opportunity for Ruchatz to have a major influence on how – and from which starting-point – the history of the lantern is to be conceived. While this book is an extremely ambitious attempt to define the very essence of image projection, which for Ruchatz is a theoretical marriage between photography and the lantern, for me it doesn't prove its case because the evidence is a bit too manipulated.

To take one example, Ruchatz is happy to characterise the magic lantern before the introduction of photographic slides as a mere toy, and in doing so he has a lot of help from ahistorical, self-serving sources in the photographic literature. When John Nicol wrote in the *British Journal of Photography Almanac for 1867* that 'Before the camera made its appearance the lantern was hardly better than a toy',<sup>3</sup> he was setting out a limited, middle-class version of earlier lantern use which served Victorian purposes well and which Ruchatz accepts at face value. In 1869 Samuel Highley, Assistant Editor of the *BJP*, was happy to agree with Nicol, saying that it was photography which 'at once raised that toy of the nursery, the magic lantern, into a valuable philosophical instrument and educational tool'.<sup>4</sup> The Continental physicist Reinhardt looked back in 1904 to reaffirm this reading: 'Since the discovery and perfection of photography, the magic lantern has grown up from a child's plaything [...] into a serious demonstration instrument in academic lecture halls'.<sup>5</sup> Using standard lantern history sources, Ruchatz contends that pre-photographic educational use of the lantern was rare, suggested only by Johannes Zahn and Johann Conrad Creiling before 1710, and he follows a 1924 article by F. Paul Liesegang to imply that their ideas were not taken up until the arrival of photography.<sup>6</sup>

There are problems with this line of argument. Firstly, while emphasising the 'ghostly' side of early lantern history as found in the



Phantasmagoria and some impromptu shows by travelling Savoyards, it completely ignores the aesthetic side of lantern showmanship as seen in the 18th century in gentlemen's after-dinner entertainments derived from classical sources, or in dissolving view exhibitions from early in the 19th century. There is enough evidence from accounts of shows and surviving hand-painted slides to raise serious questions about the exclusively childlike and grotesque uses of the lantern before about 1860 when photographic slides began to be commonly

used. Secondly, in contrast to the slim notice in references like Hecht and Liesegang, there is ample evidence of the educational use of the lantern well before the invention of photography: it featured in many early physical cabinets and lecture halls, such as those of the Universities of Leiden (late 1670s), Marburg (1690s), Groningen (1725) and Utrecht (1732) among many others.

Inside the rather polemical structure Ruchatz has given lantern history is a very good small book on the introduction of photographic slides after 1850, and the transformation of lantern culture that resulted from its vast expansion within the explosively growing photographic world of the later 19th century. For Ruchatz, the lantern only came alive with the arrival of photography, in the first instance with the obsession of the Langenheim brothers with enlarging photographs by projection so that their remarkable details could be easily seen by more than one person at a time. The common way of looking at the extraordinary natural details of a photograph in mid-century was with the aid of a magnifying glass; the Langenheims intended to dispense with this solitary optical examination by projecting the image.

Even though they are crucial to the massive cultural change that the lantern underwent between 1850 and 1875, the Langenheims are not well discussed in most lantern – or photographic – histories, and Ruchatz has now resolved this issue, carefully plotting the introduction of Hyalotype transparencies on glass (an improved and renamed Talbotype [Calotype] process, whose American rights the Langenheims had bought from Fox-Talbot), and their spread from Philadelphia to Negretti & Zambra in the UK, Duboscq in France and Krüss in Germany. Ruchatz documents the very gradual take-up of photographic slides in the 1850s and 1860s, and shows how important the sudden popularity of stereo photography and viewing was both to the integration of photography with the lantern and to the industrialised manufacturing which was the basis for the subsequent explosive growth of photography.

This inner book on the combined history of photography and the lantern can be highly recommended; for me the only problematic material comes from relating Ruchatz's core photographic research to the wider context of the pre-1850 and non-photographic post-1850 lantern, especially from his undervaluation of hand-painted slides and the artistry of dissolving view shows. This non-photographic strand of lantern history cannot be reduced to 'the magic lantern as a toy' in the way that the superior burghers of the late 19th-century photographic societies liked to describe. While it is true that photographic projection turned the lantern into an instrument that had a profound outreach to the developing mass culture of the 'second' industrial revolution, it is equally true that as an instrument for aesthetic representation, in the hands of an experienced showperson with exquisitely hand-painted slides, the lantern continued for decades to be a refined purveyor of beauty and astonishment, even in the face of the ubiquitous if often prosaic upstart photographers.

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## NOTES

1. Jens Ruchatz, *Licht und Wahrheit*, 87.
2. Ruchatz, 173.
3. Ruchatz, 92.
4. Ruchatz, 93.
5. Ruchatz, 97.
6. Ruchatz, 119.