

LE GRAND ART DE LA LUMIÈRE ET DE L'OMBRE ARCHÉOLOGIE DU CINÉMA

reviewed by
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Le Grand Art de la lumière et de l'ombre archéologie du cinéma, Laurent Mannoni, Editions Nathan, Paris, 1994. 512pp, illustrated. ISBN 2 09 190 077X

All the time I was reading Laurent Mannoni's book, I was thinking about my recent meeting with him in Bologna. How could someone so young have consulted so many original sources in so many different languages? How could he have organised all this information in such a way that, for instance, one clearly sees the link between Reeves, Petit, deMonconys and Christiaan Huygens? It helps, of course, to live near the Bibliothèque Nationale and be curator of the Musée Henri Langlois. He did not, however, have much opportunity to make use of Hermann Hecht's excellent bibliography, which was published only a year earlier.

Clearly, Laurent particularly relishes some parts of the story. Christiaan Huygens is no longer a shadowy character crouched behind Athanasius Kircher. Careful analysis of his correspondence gives us an intimate portrait of his daily life and his relationship with his father, Constantin. Although Kircher is the chronicler of scientific recreations to savants and the aristocracy, Huygens emerges as the true pioneer of the magic lantern.

But by making that statement, I too am perpetuating a myth. In the same way that the cinema was not invented by a particular person at a specific time, so the magic lantern evolved from the ordinary lantern and the camera obscura. For this period as well, Laurent goes into great detail and introduces many new names. I particularly like Jean Prevost's 'lantern vive', which uses translucent paintings on a paper cylinder illuminated from the inside with a flickering candle, and Mario Bellini's multiple camera obscura of 1642. I would

love to have been inside his 'chambre noir' when an army marched past outside. However, my prize for the best illustration – and my one regret about the book is that there are so few – must go to Huygen's animated skeleton, devised in 1659. As the pioneers of the cinema had explored the potential of the medium by 1906, so the lantern pioneers understood the potential of their equipment relatively quickly.

I must admit that I am fascinated by the first part of the book, but the surprises continue throughout its 500-odd pages. I thought as a result of Françoise Levie's researches we knew all there was to know about Robertson and the 'Fantasmagorie', but here there are also new names, such as Philipidor. And there is a little mystery too. Was he the same person as the 'Fantasmagoriste' de Philipstahl, who took out a patent for the Phantasmagoria in England in 1802? Certainly, I have heard little about de Philipstahl before this date, so perhaps he changed his identity because of another liaison which took place before he met Madame Tussauds. This is pure speculation on my behalf. Laurent, however, has many other better researched suggestions for Philipidor's identity, and I do not intend to give them away.

And why until now has no one else come up with the report prepared by Jamin and Richer (reproduced in full in the book's appendix) as evidence in the legal battle between Robertson and his assistant Clisorius. Some of the most interesting documents about the early days of the cinema were contained in legal files, so this is probably true for the pre-cinema period as well.

Also, I had never heard of Patrice d'Arcy's *Mémoire sur la durée de la sensation de la vue*, and his ingenious method of demonstrating the theory of

the persistence of vision; nor had I appreciated the importance of the Anorthoscope in the demonstration of this theory. I associated Ducos du Hauron with researches into colour photography. I knew of beautiful still and stereo photographs, and Duboscq as the inventor of a sophisticated modern-looking scientific lantern. Seguin and DuMont I did not know at all. Laurent shows how they all made a major contribution to 'la photographie mouvementée', which was finally demonstrated by Heyl in Philadelphia in 1870.

Naturally, the book tends to have a French bias. I have no problem with that, but I was disappointed not to find out more about the great British enigma, Henry Dircks. Perhaps sometime in the future the Museum of the Moving Image in London and the Musée Henri Langlois in Paris could exchange curators so that Laurent can have a chance to examine the dusty archives of the Regent Street Polytechnic, and his English counterpart can study in depth the Will Day Collection.

This is indeed a book that no one interested in the pre-history of the cinema can afford to be without. In fact I think it will become the first book to turn to when searching for an answer to a specific historical question. It is not just a technological history, as David Robinson says in his excellent introduction. It also shows how important optical entertainments were in yesterday's society. They overcame the barriers of literacy and language and mixed the excitement of illusion with the representation of reality.

Finally, for those with Beaujolais French, do not be deterred. Laurent's book is generally easy to understand, although I expect many of us will not appreciate the subtleties of his language until it is translated into English – by the Magic Lantern Society, I hope.

