

TWO REVIEWS

Richard Crangle

Grahame Smith

Dickens and the Dream of Cinema

Manchester and New York:

Manchester University Press, 2003.

206pp, ill.

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Damer Waddington

Panoramas, Magic Lanterns and Cinemas:

A Century of 'Light' Entertainment in Jersey 1814–1914

St Lawrence, Jersey: Tocan Press, 2003.

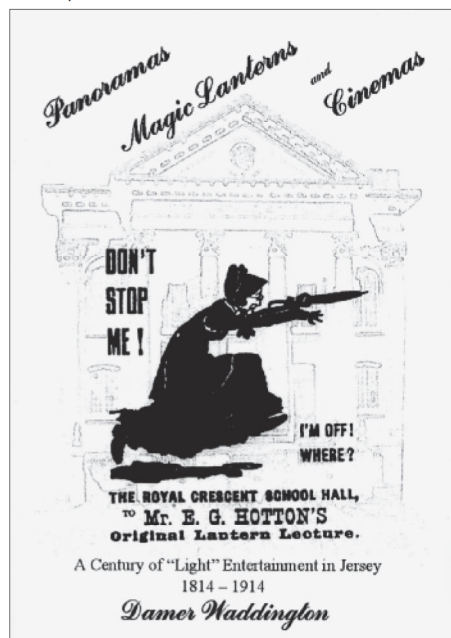
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WHEN I FIRST READ DICKENS 'PROPERLY' – that is, not in the force-fed, painful way that tended to feature in secondary school – I was struck by how often I found myself wanting to use the word 'cinematic' to describe his writing. But hang on, I found myself also thinking, how can it have been 'cinematic' when there was no cinema? That, if I may reduce it to those simplistic terms, is the premise the eminent Dickens scholar Grahame Smith uses for his carefully constructed argument: Dickens's writing, as a central pillar of the nineteenth century, somehow anticipated or 'dreamed' ways of telling stories which really needed the cinema to tell them, and this influenced the development of Western culture, nudging it into the orbit that would eventually give us *Citizen Kane*.

Historians and literary scholars often generalise like this, and generalisation arrives with a suitcase full of problems: for instance, the idea that there was such a thing as 'the' nineteenth century, in the sense of a coherent body of views and ideas that can be neatly summarised in a single phrase. But the notion that a great swathe of varied historical culture was capable of 'dreaming' some future concept, something it could not yet quantify or describe but subconsciously wanted, pushes it a little too far for me.

My difficulties arise partly from the implied assumption that there is, or ever has been, a single useful generalisation for 'cinema' itself. At the 'Dickens' end of Smith's connections, his sharp insights do succeed in convincing that the great man's wide, inventive and visual descriptive style works in a 'cinematic' way. But at the 'cinema' end, his comparisons are mainly to the canon of great works of narrative film-making of the mid twentieth century: what about all the cinema that *doesn't* obviously echo Dickens? Most films by Griffith, Wells or Hitchcock do not, on the whole, offer overwhelming similarities to (say) a *Carry-On* comedy, a special-effects spectacular or a Bollywood musical.

There is something just as simplified in the handling of the precursors of 'cinema': the way in which complex media like the magic lantern and panorama are thrown into Smith's comparisons suggests a shortage of deeper understanding of the histories and interactions of those media. This part of his argument seems to run along these lines: Dickens makes interesting references to visual media in his writing (true); the media he refers to are 'pre-cinema' (maybe); therefore Dickens dreams 'the cinema' (not proven). In the least kind way of reading this, it could feel a bit gratuitous – a few odd-sounding media used to spice up a fairly straight lit-crit reading of works that continue to be analysed and re-analysed long after the proverbial cows have come home.

That, though, *would* be unkind. This isn't a bad book at all, and if it opens up some new avenues of Dickens scholarship and alerts a few more scholars to the interesting world of nineteenth-century visual media, so much the better. But if it does so by letting go the richness, variety and social reach of those media and clinging to their traditional subsidiary role as 'pre-cinema', the new avenues are not as wide or attractive as they might be. It would indeed be interesting to read an in-depth and informed analysis of Dickens's uses of optical references, without the insistence on tying everything to 'cinema'. We still know so relatively little about the media that Dickens uses as metaphors that, until we have a better grasp of what the media really meant in their true context (that is, not just 'pre-cinema'), brilliant exposition of the metaphors doesn't tell us as much as it could, whether about the media themselves or about Dickens's writing.

IN OTHER WORDS, there is still groundwork to be done in finding out about the media in their original contexts. We need, I suggest, a few more (or a few hundred more) pieces of work like the labour of love represented by Damer Waddington's recent book. We all have specialist areas of interest, and most of us probably have something that, if we turned our minds to it (and were confident that anyone else would be interested!), we could produce 'the definitive work on ...'. But very few of these best intentions ever come to fruition.

Panoramas, Magic Lanterns and Cinemas sets out its aims in its title, and delivers them very well. It doesn't have an argument or story to tell as such; it's a report of research done and largely expresses itself through the words of the research sources themselves. But somehow it manages to avoid seeming like a dull catalogue of what happened when, and what happened next, and so on. Even though the greatest proportion of its content consists of reprinted reviews and other contemporary accounts, with little analysis or commentary other than factual linking text between the reprints, the passages selected are full of such rich detail and circumstantial evidence that it is quite possible to read this book for pleasure. With a generous level of illustration, and a professional eye to page design which packs a lot of information in but doesn't seem crowded, this book is an example to all of us of just what can be achieved by small-scale private publishing when it's done with skill and care.

These are two such different books that any direct comparison is hardly worth making: which is better, an apple or an orange? a sweeping, academic, grand theory or a tightly focused collection of materials presented at face value? I won't attempt to answer, but if I had to take just one of these two books to a desert island, I know which I would choose. For all its intellectual elegance, Smith's reading (or viewing) of Dickens eventually leaves me with the paradoxical sense that its subject has somehow been closed off, not opened up; while Waddington's collection of material gives me the sense of a (small, self-contained) world of personalities and events, a factual foundation on which I could start to build using my own imagination. Only one of these two books left me really wanting to read some more.