THE GREAT GUN OF THE LANTERN

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In 1912, the Church Army, in a review about a mission by van with several open-air lantern lectures in Blackley, spoke of 'the great gun of the lantern'.[1] This military expression perfectly frames the aim of my PhD project – I wanted to find out how the Church Army and other organisations active in social work utilised the lantern as a 'weapon'. My main research question was: What was the role of lantern entertainments, organised for social purposes in Britain from 1875 to 1914, for the public?

The quoted review reveals, however, another striking point. In the non-commercial field of social care, lantern slides were obviously in common use until at least the early 1910s. They were probably – and continued to be – the preferred medium to fight poverty and to convince people in precarious circumstances of the social organisations' aims. Therefore, my research especially focused on the period after the introduction of cinema. My study also set out to counteract the commonly held view in media history of 'the lantern' as a precursor of cinema. I approach this fascinating period – a time when lanternists still considered the cinematograph and the lantern as two different forms of the same apparatus – through the concept of the 'screen' and its role in practice, culture and history.[2,3]

Unlike the few other studies about the non-commercial use of lantern slides, I investigated lantern practices beyond the local level, taking in Britain as a whole. Drawing upon a great variety of printed resources, I suggest that lantern shows for social purposes played a crucial role in establishing projection media as part of everyday life. Through extensive archival research, I assembled a large body of reports on events with lantern slide projections from the official organs of missionary, educative and temperance organisations of either religious or socio-political orientation: *The War Cry* (Salvation Army), *The Church Army Gazette* (Church Army), *The Sunday School Chronicle* (Sunday School Union), *The Band of Hope Chronicle* (Band of Hope Union), *The Church of England Temperance Chronicle* (Church of England Temperance Society), *The Co-operative News* (Co-operative Union) and *The Clarion* (Clarion Movement).

Reports in these journals, almanacs, local newspaper reports and the trade press, indicate that non-commercial lantern entertainments (mostly combined with other visual attractions and live performances) were immensely popular over time and space. Such events were organised well into the twentieth century, after the introduction of the cinematograph. In fact the years 1906 to 1908 mark a peak of these lantern performances, and until World War I, according to the reviews, there is no significant drop in their popularity. For me, this was very surprising and led me to the conclusion that social organisations relied on effective distribution strategies. The creation of professional lantern departments allowed social organisations to intensify and to control the use of lantern slides. Itinerant lantern lectures resulted in millions of people regularly viewing pictures projected on a screen. Through lantern lectures, social organisations attracted a 'mass' audience – a large proportion of Britain's population. The extent of distribution was probably comparable to that of commercial enterprises (eg Riley Brothers, W.C. Hughes, Noakes & Norman, Walter Tyler).

The actual use of the lantern was, however, central to my study. Even among the few researchers in this area, knowledge about the historic exhibition of lantern slides is still scarce. As the target groups and aims of these social organisations are known, I was able to find out more about this. Through the detailed analysis of a smaller number of single reports, I identified certain exhibition practices that social organisations used to attract, to impress and to (permanently) engage their au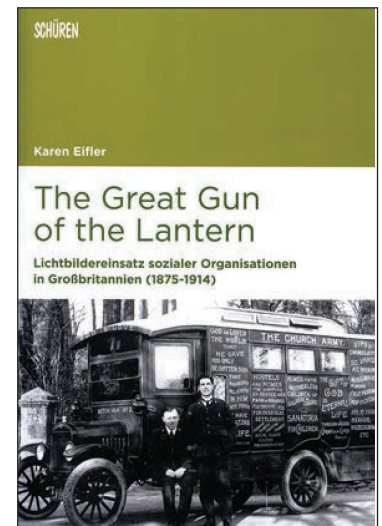diences. I assumed that their strategy was to provide them with sensory, intimate and interactive experiences. First, lantern performances were usually integrated into varied programmes with diverse attractions. Events in the open air, processions and exotic costumes often attracted much attention before the lantern shows. The projections were mostly combined with music and other live performances. These multi-sensory events created lasting impressions. Second, lantern slides were used to establish close relationships with audiences. Through using local views and honing their messages to reflect the audience's life experience, social organisations created cheerful, familiar get-togethers. The lantern lecturers were often popular figures and made contact with their audiences outside the lantern events as well – the social organisations' agents were 'approachable heroes'. Third, through sing-alongs, stage appearances and competitions, audiences actively participated in the events. For example, by appealing to patriotic feelings, social organisations were able to merge identities and in this way intensified feelings of shared identity. Last but not least, the 'great gun of the lantern' had a major effect because all these exhibition practices intertwined and were associated through images with social practices such as processions, church services, feasts and common singing.

Viewing the use of lantern slides in social work in a broader media-historical context, I came to the conclusion that the social organisations' use of the lantern as 'a great gun' contributed greatly to the establishment of the 'screen' as a centre for visual communication in Britain. Like contemporary food giants (such as Maggi in Switzerland and Stollwerck in Germany), they established practices which led audiences to participate emotionally using efficient, persuasive strategies. Especially through lantern lectures on patriotic subjects, they contributed to strengthening the British national identity. Perhaps the origins of visual political propaganda can be traced back to lantern performances for social purposes.[4] It is, however, certain that they boomed at about the time when cinematography was introduced and film evolved as an independent medium – in the 1890s and 1900s. However, social organisations continued to offer regular lantern performances to audiences until at least World War II. Probably they continued to enjoy great popularity because they fulfilled important entertainment and social needs.

The Great Gun of the Lantern – Lichtbildereinsatz sozialer Organisationen in Gro britannien (1875–1914) *by Karen Eifler, published by Schüren, 388pp, price: 44.00 Euros (in German)*

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REFERENCES
1. *Church Army Gazette*, 20 April 1912, p. 8.
2. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, Scribners, New York, 1990, pp. 17–20.
3. Charles Musser, 'Towards a History of Theatrical Culture: Imagining an Integrated History of Stage and Screen', in John Fullerton (ed.), *Screen Culture. History and Textuality* (Stockholm Studies in Cinema), John Libbey, Eastleigh, 2004, pp. 3–19.
4. See also Stephen Bottomore, 'The Lantern and Cinematograph for Political Persuasion before WWI: Towards an Introduction and Typology', in Richard Crangle, Ludwig Vogl-Bienek (eds), *Screen Culture and the Social Question 1880–1914*, New Barnet, 2014, pp. 21–33.