

A CATALOGUE OF ERRORS

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One's first reservations about this book arise on seeing its cover (1), where one notes the slackness which allows the subtitle – *magic lanterns & other transforming images* – to imply that the magic lantern is itself a variety of transforming image. Did ever, one wonders, a book get off to a worse start – managing to misinform by its very title? It is surely not just fanciful to see a similar slackness in the choice of a cover illustration showing a *peepshow* labelled *La Lanterne Magique*. While this apparent contradiction, which is subsequently acknowledged, is readily understandable by the hardened lantern enthusiast, will not the beginner – those members of that 'wider public' to whom this catalogue is said to be addressed – find this a confusing start? – being told now that the poor magic lantern is a kind of peepshow, whereas it was previously a type of transforming image? And is this not particularly unhelpful for all readers, since, as we know, both descriptions are false?

On turning to the body of the book, we are dismayed to see these reservations amply confirmed – finding everywhere errors, both on the large and small scale, which reflect a carelessness which, alas, turns out to be the book's chief characteristic.

As a starting point, consider the following, from the book's opening section:

The magic lantern was first fully described in 1646 by Athanasius Kircher in *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* and later illustrated in the 1671 second edition of his book.

One would have thought it impossible that this classic howler could be repeated in 1987 by an author at the centre of the lantern world. It is particularly sad as this is not just a mistake but *the* mistake – one which has been corrected (*ad nauseam*, one would have thought) by a wide variety of authors. For example, John Barnes in the *Barnes Museum Catalogue*, a work which Richard Balzer himself singles out in his foreword as a particularly valuable source:

In the first edition of *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* there is nothing to suggest that Kircher invented or was even aware of the magic lantern. . .

David Robinson's introduction to *Dates & Sources*, a work also cited by the author, elaborates the point: . . . until (and even since) John Barnes's history of optical projection in the *Barnes Museum Catalogue*, there have generally been three versions of the story of the magic lantern: the most careless write that it was invented by the Jesuit Father Athanasius Kircher in 1646. The more careful get their edition right at least and tell us he invented it in 1671. The most scholarly correctly say that Kircher in 1671 described a device that had evidently existed for a considerable time before him.

The author further tells us that 'an argument still simmers over the true inventor of the magic lantern' and that Kircher (!) is one of three possible candidates for that honour. This, however, is an argument, he coolly tells us, that he does not intend to enter into – beyond, that is, limiting for us the field to three contenders and providing us with a date for Kircher's imagined contribution, which, if true, would immediately destroy the claims of his rivals!

Turning from this failure to consult sources (though

citing them), consider, as an example of the author's use of sources, the caption to the illustration shown (2). What are we to make of this? Following the maker/place convention used elsewhere in the book the author presumably is inviting us to read *Frankreich* as the name of the lantern's maker and *Delagrave*, near Paris, as its place of manufacture. Fortunately, however, we recognise *Frankreich* as the German word for France and imagine that the description should read – *Delagrave, Paris, France*, where Delagrave is actually the name of the maker. So far so good – but why the use of German? – and why, if it is to be used, are we not also given *Laterna Magica* (or, for that matter, *lanterne magique*, since it is, after all, a French lantern!) rather than something apparently in neither German, French or English?

The answer to all this comes with our identification of the source from which the author has taken this information: the caption to an illustration of a similar lantern in Ernst Hrabalek's book *Laterna Magica*, which he has copied for us *without translation*! Or, rather which he has *tried* to copy, for he has rendered the original *Laterna* as *Lanterna* (an error he also repeats in both the title of Hrabalek's book, and that by Hoffman & Junker, in his bibliography) and, worst of all, we see that he has the very name of the lantern itself wrong – which, as Hrabalek's illustration of its name plate makes clear, is actually *Lampadorama* – not *Lampatorama* at all! We are further let down by this caption in that it fails to identify for us the reason for the lantern's characteristic shape – i.e., that it is designed for episcopic projection – which would, for example, have allowed us to make the connection with the related toy lantern *aphengscope* by Jean Schoenner illustrated on the following page (though, characteristically, described there as an *aphenascope* by John Schoenner).

So densely are the book's errors packed that, alerted by examples like those above, we then begin to see them wherever we look. For example, turning to the bibliography, we see C.W. Ceram – the author of *Archaeology of the cinema* – listed as C.W. Cream! While this, particularly in Ron Morris's reference to 'another anagram' is amusing – it can also be said to be rather insulting to an author whose book, for all its faults, has provided the starting point for many people's interest in the precinema and could have been helpful to readers of this book, were it not for the fact that, on the basis of the information provided here, they will have the greatest difficulty in locating copies of it.

The bibliography also includes two other author's names which are incorrectly given and mistakes in three book titles; altogether a total of nine errors in a list of only eighteen books – the greatest concentration of these occurring in the description of Detlev Hoffmann's book *Laterna magica*, in which both parts of the author's name are misspelt, as are the book's title, as already noted, and the name of its publisher. Bibliographic references in the body of the text fare equally poorly; *Wilson's lantern journeys*, correctly cited in the bibliography, is referred to as his *journals* and there are four mistakes in citing the well-known books by Zahn &

de Vallemont in the caption to the illustrations taken from them on page 3.

Turning to the chronology we find, in statements like '1868 – J.B. Linnert invests the *FLICK BOOK* (pocket cinematograph)', both the basis for Ron Morris's *investing* joke (*invest* for *invents*, in fact, occurring several times) and also see, in the misspelling of *cinematograph*, a continuation of the uncertainty about names of devices that we have noted earlier. Also – in the contradictory statement given on page 64 that the flick-book was invented in 1860 by Edward Linnert – we see an uncertainty about dates and names of people too – which, of a piece with the bibliographic uncertainties already seen, leave us finally in no doubt that this is a book whose contents, to say the least, need to be treated with considerable caution. (For the record, the first quoted name & date above are, in fact, correct.)

Similar uncertainties occur in relation to the date when the Langenheim brothers began marketing photographic slides (given as 1859 on page 4 and 1849 on page 78 – the latter being correct) and the date when the *mutoscope* was invented (given as 1884 on page 64 and 1894 on page 76 – the latter, again, being correct). Errors in dates also occur in the caption to the shadow puppet plate (19th Century, not 9th); to the illustration of the American publication *The Magic Lantern* (1878, not 1876) and to the poster on page 30 (1890 not 1980).

Concerning the names of devices, the following are some of the misspellings, in addition to those already noted, we are offered – a somewhat horrific list when one remembers that the stated purpose of the catalogue is to introduce these devices to a public imagined to be entirely unfamiliar with them: *Stereoscope* (for stereoscope); *lithopane* (for lithophone); *polyrama* (for polyorama); *phenakistascope* (for phenakistoscope); *stroboscope* (for stroboscope); *praxinascope & praxinescope* (for praxinoscope); *mutagraph & mutascope* (for mutograph & mutoscope); *zogroscope* (for zogrscope); *chromotrope* (for chromatrope); *thaumotrope* (for thaumatrope); *megalethascope* (for megalethoscope).

The provision of this listing is unfortunately necessary as a corrective to the possible seductiveness of some of the mistakes – especially given the number of times they are repeated. For example, reading some eight times about *phenakistascope* one begins to wonder whether it is wrong after all! Fortunately in this case, and that of the alleged *mutascope* and *polyrama*, one has only to refer to the illustrations of these devices – each of which show them proudly bearing their correct names, the errors in the accompanying captions notwithstanding!

Similarly, with the same purpose in mind and also the belief that we ought to show some respect, literally, for the names of the pioneers in our field of interest, we provide the following list of names of people which are incorrectly given – in addition to those already mentioned.

Langston (for Langdon) Childe; *Augustin* (for Auguste) Lapiere; *George* (for Georges) Carette; *John Ayston* (for Ayrton) Paris; *Claude Francois Milliet* (for Claude François Milliet **DECHALES**); *L.O.* (for J.) Marcy; *Edward* (for Eadweard) Muybridge; *Giovanni Battista Porter* (for della Porta); *A.* (for James) Gillray; *Chatham Paxton* (for Pexton – and, incidentally, is the triple lantern illustrated on page 10 made by this firm, rather than the unfamiliar maker 'Chatham' as described?).

It may be objected that such a listing, and those offered above, is mere pedantry, serving no useful purpose; but, as this deplorable book is already widely in the hands of Society members, it seems that, unless we force ourselves to make such efforts to recognise these errors, we will inevitably find ourselves accepting and repeating them.