BOOK REVIEWS

A LANDMARK IN PRE-CINEMA KNOWLEDGE

Pre-Cinema History, An Encyclopaedia and Annotated Bibliography of the Moving Image Before 1896, Hermann Hecht, edited by Ann Hecht, Bowker Saur, in association with the British Film Institute, £99.

The publication of Hermann Hecht's documentation of a life-time of research is a landmark in the study of cinema pre-history and a fitting monument to one of the most distinguished founder-members of the Magic Lantern Society. An inestimable debt of gratitude is due to Ann Hecht, who undertook what at first seemed the insuperable task of editing the vast mass of index-cards and notes, and to Bowker Saur and the British Film Institute who had the faith to publish it. The price of £99 may seem high, but in terms of the mass of information collected in one place it represents wonderful value.

Pre-Cinema History was one of only three works nominated for the book prize of the year in the British Film Institute's annual awards in September.

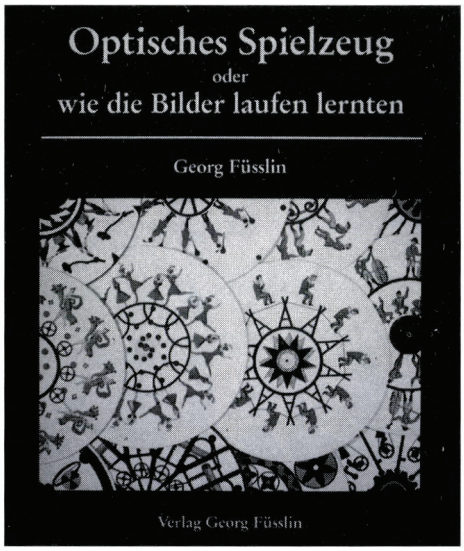
The Foreword by David Robinson sums up the book's qualities and importance. "It is," he says, "unique, because it represents the entirety of Hermann Hecht's research – every item that he noted and recorded and annotated in years of unceasing and diligent investigation. Ordinarily, scholars cautiously contain their research publications within precise and visible and controllable limits. Perhaps Hermann Hecht himself would have published something more confined and disciplined, had he been granted the time.

"In this form, though, there is much more sense of adventure. This remains a work in progress, always reaching out beyond the safely containable, to take in unconsidered ephemera, items reported and others still to be researched.

"The commentary has never the chill formality of a conventional bibliography. These are still Hermann's personal notes and reflections. The reader shares his enthusiasm and delight as well as the fruits of his scholarship. The annotations are often miniature essays. Referring to some specific item, you find yourself moving from one to the other, reading on. Even the contents summaries make good reading – livelier, very often, than the original work to which they refer. Then there are the titbits you had forgotten, or never knew – the lanternist in "The Cricket on the Hearth", and Dickens' own boyhood shows in the 1820s, or David Livingstone's biblical lantern projections in darkest Africa, terrifying the tribesmen with Abraham's dagger. 'It was the only mode of instruction,' he reflected sadly, 'I was ever asked to repeat.'"

HOW THE PICTURES LEARNED TO MOVE

Optisches Spielzeug, oder, wie die Bilder laufen lernten (Optical Toys, or, How the Pictures Learned to Move), Georg Füsslin, Stuttgart, published by the author, 1993.



This handsome hard-bound book by Georg Füsslin, a German member of the Magic Lantern Society, is a must for every collector, even those who cannot read the German text. The 110 illustrations, many of them in colour, illustrate numerous toys and objects never previously reproduced. Some come from the remarkable reserve collections of the great Technical Museum in Munich, which Mr Füsslin seems to be the first to explore; others are from museums and private collections throughout Europe.

The book deals exclusively with devices that use the "persistence of vision" principle to produce the illusion of movement; though an "Afterword" by David Robinson demonstrates how such devices were linked with the magic lantern and photography, to arrive at the Kinetoscope and the Cinematographe.

The book has separate chapters on the Thaumatrope, the Phenakistiscope, the Zoetrope, the Praxinoscope and the Mutoscope. It contains material from several publications on the thaumatrope hitherto overlooked by pre-cinema histories, including a particularly beautiful series by the Austrian publisher Trentsensky, who also published cut-out sheets of shadow figures, and, in 1833, the discs for Stampfer's Stroboscope, which came out simultaneously with Plateau's Phenakistiscope. Füsslin illustrates a little-known English edition of the Stampfer discs. Another famous phenakistiscope series that has rarely been illustrated before is that of Purkinje of Breslau. Mr Füsslin has also found a complete series of Newton's rare Anorthoscope discs.

The illustrations are as comprehensive for all the other optical devices. In particular we are shown every variant and imitation of Reynaud's Praxinoscope, including ravishing photographs of both the rare steam- and hot-air-driven models marketed by the German toy firm of Plank. Finally, this meticulously researched book gives a list of the world's major collections of pre-cinema artefacts.

The Afterword emphasises the particular quality of the illustrations in demonstrating how even "while the technology was still in its earliest, exploratory stages, artists used it with skills and ambitions that are in no way inferior to those of the present day. No modern animator has surpassed the three-dimensional movement achieved by Plateau in some of the earliest Phenakistiscope discs, or the characterisation of the figures in George Cruikshank's Zoetrope strips, or the subtleties of animation in every creation of Emile Reynaud."

Optisches Speilzeug may be ordered directly from the author.