

The Voice of the Lecturer: Image-Word Relations in Optical Lantern and Early Film Performances¹

The lecturer undoubtedly was an important sonic presence in many moving pictures presentations during the first decades of cinema history. At the time, the figure of the lecturer appeared under many different names, such as *conférencier*, *bonimenteur*, *crieur*, *Erklärer*, *Rezitator*, *explicateur*, *declareteur*, *illustrator* etc., not to forget the Japanese *benshi*, to list just a few of the designations that were used. Since the 1990s, this phenomenon has become the object of a number of studies in different countries, often in relation to other sonic elements of early film screenings.²

The practice of lecturing, in turn, is commonly considered to have its roots in magic lantern shows, which generally were presented by someone standing next to the screen, often with a pointing stick, and commented on the projected images.³ From a media historical perspective, both the emerging medium of cinema and the “historical art of projection” are part of the history of screen practice.⁴ As Martin Loiperdinger states: “When it was introduced, cinematograph shows and lantern shows shared the screen. [...] Furthermore, lantern and cinematograph shows shared sound: live music, imitations of noises and comments spoken by the lecturer or film narrator.”⁵

Yet, despite these obvious similarities between lantern and film lecturers, several authors have pointed out significant differences. Richard Crangle, in particular, critiqued the fact that “scholars of the early moving picture have tended to take for granted its formal and practical relationship with the magic lantern.”⁶

Acknowledging the similarities between both, Crangle also lists four fundamental differences:⁷

1. Lantern lecturers commented on a series of projected images that could be highly diverse, whereas a film presented “continuous pictures whose sequential logic did not necessarily depend on the accompanying commentary.”⁸
2. Lantern lectures were mostly pre-scripted, sometimes in the form of a lantern reading provided by the producer or distributor, whereas comments on films seem to have been generally improvised.
3. Lantern lecturers rather gave “an educative explanation of the views,”⁹ while moving pictures generally were presented as spectacle.¹⁰
4. Presentation contexts and audiences differed: lecture halls, auditoriums, public meeting-rooms etc. for the lantern, while films were predominantly shown in variety or vaudeville theatres, fairgrounds and later in movie theatres.

One could add that while the lantern lecturer stayed in command as to when a new slide was projected, the moving picture lecturer had to adapt the length of the comments to the length of the scenes as well as the film as a whole and could not elaborate at will on a particular aspect. In analogy with Philippe Marion’s distinction between temporalities of media reception one could characterize the relation between a film and a comment as “homochronic,” meaning that the comment ideally runs in parallel with the scenes or shots. In a lantern performance, this

relation is ‘heterochronic’ insofar as the timespan during which an image is projected is not pre-determined by the technology.¹¹

The relationship between lantern and film lecturers thus cannot be reduced to a simple genealogy, nor can both be separated simply along the lines of entertainment and education. In what follows, we would like to address firstly the diversity of lecture practices, which makes it difficult to find a single formula to characterize them. Subsequently, we will discuss various modes of image / word relations that can be found in contemporary sources.

The Figure of the Lecturer

It is important to understand that the term “lecturer” in English language publications at the time is not a homogenous concept. A spectacle such as the one advertised by “Professor Kœnig” in 1893 – “With Lecture, Music and Songs; introducing Original Effects, (reg.) — Village Blacksmith, Wrecked and Rescued, Vesuvius, Flying Dutchman, Niagara, Switzerland, Charming Scenery on the Thames, the Four Seasons with grand effects, concluding with refined Comic and Amusing subjects” – was obviously different from the nine popular lectures on travel subjects announced by the Beverley Photo Society in the same issue of the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, or a lecture given by someone who depended heavily on the printed reading accompanying a slide set.¹² While “Professor Kœnig” clearly presented himself as a showman whose performance included multiple types of projected images, ranging from melodramatic narratives to travelogues and comic scenes, the lecturer at the Beverly Photo Society would certainly have tried to entertain the audience, but without the kind of professional showmanship that was expected from the “Professor.” And someone who simply stuck to the reading supplied by the producer of a set would not even have been considered a proper lecturer by the professionals in this field.¹³

In 1895 an author signing his contribution as “The Showman” complained about audiences

*apparently being quite unable to distinguish between a lantern lecture, a lecture illustrated by lantern views, a variety entertainment “turn,” an exhibition of diapositives at a photographic society, a mission or other service at which the lantern is employed, or a show provided for the delectation of some Band of Hope children. None of these are in any sense lantern lectures [...].*¹⁴

Such distinctions between different types of lantern projections and the question whether or not they were to be considered lantern lectures from the point of view of a professional performer flag up another issue: when using the term “lecturer” as a historian, one designates a position within a performance context in a very general sense. Contemporaries such as “The Showman” and other contributors to the *Optical Magic Lantern Journal*, however, first and foremost referred to a specific professional category and excluded from this domain others who gave lectures in combination with slide projections but did not do so as performers.

Similarly, lecturing practices for early film projections differed in accordance with the performance context. As Martin Barnier points out, lecturers in cinemas, who knew the tastes of their audience and could anticipate their reactions, were not in the same position as their fairground counterparts.¹⁵ Also, lecturers in a neighborhood cinema and those performing in a high-class theater in the city center obviously would have addressed their audiences differently. Lecturers in a tent on a fairground admitting 200 spectators did not work under the same conditions as those in establishments with ten times this seating capacity.¹⁶ Films presented as part of a music hall, vaudeville or variety theater program demanded yet another type of

presentation. The traveling show-woman Madame Olinka, for instance, “had the habit of presenting each film from the stage of the theatre as it was shown, describing the images in stentorian tones that one reporter found ‘very original and strange’.”¹⁷ The individuality of Madame Olinka’s voice thus became an important feature of her cinematographic pictures act.

A category of performers that is often neglected in historical studies are itinerant town hall showmen, as Vanessa Toulmin calls them. Joseph Garncarz uses the term *Saalspieler* as a German equivalent, while Blaise Aurora distinguishes between *exploitants ambulants* and *exploitants itinérants*, using the latter term for exhibitors showing films on fairgrounds.¹⁸ Such showmen generally projected films at a venue that normally was used for other purposes. They had to provide an evening’s entertainment and thus developed specific presentational strategies for that purpose.

*The stand-alone film or town hall showmen created an audience for their exhibitions by combining a policy of mass advertisement with a film program that was tailored to each locality. A fairground show, for example, lasted no more than fifteen minutes, whereas a town hall exhibition lasted up to two hours.*¹⁹

Showmanship undoubtedly played an important part in their performances, which also means that in the combination of lecture and projected image either may have been foregrounded alternately, depending on the dramaturgy of the show, not to mention the foregrounding of the performers’ personalities themselves.

The lantern as well as the film lecturer, in other words, is a multiform figure. As an abstract category, the term refers to a specific activity – someone speaking to an audience, commenting on visual material – that can be considered as some sort of common grounding. Actual practices of lecturing, however, were extremely diverse and therefore need to be studied in their particular forms.

Temporal Relations between Word and Image

The default option for lecturing on both slides and films undoubtedly was to comment on the images while they were projected. Yet, other options were available. One lecturer, for instance, explained:

*I have sometimes found it answer well when lecturing on certain subjects, to give the lecture proper first, either from a complete manuscript, or from notes, and then to turn down the gas in the room and show the slides on the screen, as illustrations of what has been already said, with only a few words about each picture, pointing out what is especially noteworthy. Thus the audience gain first a general idea of the subject, and then when they know the outlines will more fully understand the details when they are pointed out.*²⁰

G.-Michel Coissac, author of handbooks for projectionists and chief editor of the film and lantern journal *Le Fascinateur*, compared this way of lecturing to a publisher putting all the illustrations at the end of a book.²¹ He was rather critical of this approach, because then the lecturer had to once more summarize the lecture and thus made it longer, but hardly more interesting.²² Subsequently, Coissac equated lecturing while the images were projected to illustrations integrated into the text of a book. This he deemed efficient, as the spectators listened to the comments while looking at the screen. Yet there was a drawback: because of the darkness in the hall, the audience was unable to see the gestures and facial expressions of the speaker, while the latter could not observe the spectators’ reactions.²³ Therefore Coissac

avored a third mode, which however depended on the possibility to easily dim the lights or switch them on and off. The lecturer would in that case present a section of the talk, then have a series of slides projected to illustrate the matter while giving additional comments, resume the lecture etc.²⁴

Coissac's reflections indicate that in configurations other than the default option, i.e. simultaneous presentation, the relation between the projected image and the verbal discourse could comprise several dimensions. The lecture as such potentially gained a certain autonomy with respect to the pictures, which in turn played a role other than simple illustrations, as were organized in units of their own that were related to, but not entirely integrated into, the oral performance.

In a slightly later article, published in September 1911 in *Ciné-Journal*, Coissac addressed the issue of moving pictures as part of a lecture. According to him, and despite the pervasive presence of cinema in France by that time, film still “has stayed some kind of distraction and curiosity,” and therefore “it would be vain to talk while animated pictures are being projected: all attention is claimed by them.” And he added: “Moreover, it seems that these views chop off the syllables of the words [*ces vues hachent les syllables des mots*] one would like to apply to them.”²⁵ So for Coissac, the attractional qualities of moving images were so powerful that a comment would not have much effect on the audience. His second remark seems to refer to the homochronic relation between the projected image and the words and suggests that a comment could not be developed sufficiently while the moving picture was on the screen, because it was as it were cut off by the following scene. By using the term “*conférence*” (lecture) Coissac evidently did not refer to the verbal explanations given by a lecturer in a movie theatre, whose practice indeed consisted in adapting the discourse to the length of the shots and the films, i.e. the “views”. Yet, his suggestions seem to not have referred exclusively to lectures on topics such as geography, biology, technology and the like. In the case of narrative films, too, Coissac deemed it preferable to let the moving pictures “speak for themselves:”

Perfection consists in knowing how to use still and moving projections in combination. While the former are integrated as illustrations into the text, as part of an uninterrupted narrative, the latter are like plates published in a separate section of a book [hors-texte], speaking for themselves, while the lecturer as well as the audience can catch their breath.

*There are topics that the cinematograph can cover entirely and thus facilitate the lecturer's task. [...] Such as the cinematographic and lyrical story of Joan of Arc, which can be preceded by a lecture. Then, with recitatives and chants, the cinematograph will constitute the second part.*²⁶

Coissac thus attributed to the cinematographic views the capacity to not only “speak for themselves” but also to “cover entirely” the topic at hand. Yet they were to be shown in combination with a lecture preceding them. They therefore did not simply provide illustrations of the lecture but rather were framed by it, while the lecturer still held the interpretative authority.

Such hybrid performances that included both slides and films were not a dominant form of exhibition and occurred more often than not in other than theatrical screenings. They may have been more likely to be presented in other kinds of halls, such as the ones used by the itinerant showmen, *Saalspieler* and *exploitants ambulants* we alluded to earlier. They were not, however, limited to the earliest years of film exhibition. Not only did Coissac discuss the format as late as 1911 in his article, but it can in fact be found much later still, in particular in lectures given by travelers who had documented their journeys or expeditions in still and moving images.

Among the various earlier examples one can refer to is Alfred John West's *Our Navy* show from 1898 onwards, which was a "thematic entertainment [that] employed a naval narrative to combine lantern slides, films, music, and sound effects with a 'descriptive commentary' by a lecturer in order to create a 'grand patriotic entertainment'."²⁷ Another example from the same period is Lyman Hakes Howe's *War-Graph* presentations. His program

*listed individual motion picture subjects and indicated the two points at which groups of lantern slides were shown. 'The display of pictures,' wrote one reviewer, 'is separated into groups with brief waits between groups for necessary explanations and to rest the eyes, thus affording a relief that is fully appreciated.'*²⁸

This comment suggests that in Howe's performance the verbal explanations did indeed precede the screening of the films and that the break also served to "rest the eyes." It is unclear, though, whether there was a lecture accompanying the lantern slide projections, but this seems very probable.

The various performance practices suggest that there was in fact a rather broad range of presentational modes and that the relation between still or moving images and oral discourse could depend on a number of factors. It is interesting, though, that in many of these non-theatrical screenings the films seem to not have been accompanied by the lecturers homochronically. Here, it seems, the necessity of providing information was difficult to align with the duration of the scenes. For the slides, as Coissac and other sources indicate, the simultaneous comment was apparently the default option, but other formats existed as well.

Lecture Soundscapes

Obviously, the lecturer's voice did not constitute the only type of sound that was present when projected images were shown. In his seminal study on the subject, Martin Barnier has mapped the soundscape of early film screenings with its variety of sonic practices, but also the parasitic noises that were part of audiences' experience.²⁹ There is no doubt that lantern projections, too, took place in a diverse and often multi-layered sound environment. Music and songs were part of many performances, as were sound effects. An often-reproduced illustration in William Isaac Chadwick's 1878 *Magic Lantern Manual*³⁰ depicts the sound effect instruments hidden behind the screen during a show. In an article discussing whether exploding saturators could cause a panic among the audience, Albert W. Scott dryly remarked: "Many lecturers do not scruple to fire off pistols on the platform as a means of giving additional force to dioramic effects such as the blowing up of steamboats, firing cannons, and the like, and nobody has ever heard of a panic caused thereby."³¹ This example shows that lecturers did not shy away from using quite drastic means to produce specific sound effects.

In a completely different register, public lectures on science, too, could include additional elements. The announcement of a series of illustrated lectures in Abbé Moigno's *Salle du progrès* in Paris in 1872 on subjects such as, for instance, anatomy specified that there would also be interludes with "music, chants, recitations or declamations."³²

The extent to which sonic elements were used and how they were integrated into, or added to the lecturer's discourse, however, always depended on the specific *dispositif* of the performance. The function of the sonic elements could vary immensely, and it is therefore hardly possible to generalize. The same goes for the lecturer, who was a protean figure indeed. The diversity of historical practices, however, should not discourage research, quite on the contrary. Only when trying to understand such practices in their specific manifestations we can

begin to realize the richness of media use and the multiple ways in which audiences could encounter them.

Conclusion

The emerging medium of cinema and the “historical art of projection” were both part of the history of screen practice. It may be correct to assume that the new form of entertainment borrowed from the older mass medium the convention of using the human voice, musical instruments and theatrical sound effects to accompany silent images. This may also have served in the beginning, as is sometimes supposed, to cover the noise produced by the added projection apparatus in front of the lens and its hand-cranked mechanism. However, the light source of the magic lantern was already quite noisy with its carbon arc or its limelight-system, which does not seem to have disturbed the audience very much.³³ In the years after 1900, cinematography had more or less found its specific way to entertain but was still keen on the *magic* lantern’s former audience, which was used to sound accompaniment. Adding sound to the images as a factor of attraction was also a sign of distinction, as it demanded an investment in one or more musicians and a speaker.

While cinematography insisted in its presentation on an acoustic accompaniment in which music gained in weight due to the introduction of intertitles and the increasing length of the films, the optical lantern, more than ever, gave the floor to the voice of the lecturer. Music was reserved for moments of recreation, destined to make the spectators relax before the next section in the program with verbal explanations commenting on the pictures on the screen.

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² For these different designations, see, for instance, Germain Lacasse, *Le Bonimenteur des vues animées*, Québec: Éd. Nota Bene, Québec / Méridiens Klincksieck, Paris 2000, pp. 67-104. For the Dutch terms “declarateur” and “illustrator”, see Ansje van Beusekom, “Louis Hartloper (1864-1922). Explicateur te Utrecht,” in *Jaarboek voor Mediageschiedenis*, no. 6, 1995, p. 183. Research in relevant journals published in other languages will certainly discover many other terms used for the person commenting on projected images.

Other important publications on the phenomenon of the lecturer include a seminal issue of *Iris*, no. 22, 1996 (“Le bonimenteur des vues animées / The Motion Picture Lecturer”); Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004, *passim*; Martin Barnier, *Bruits, cris, musiques de films. Les projections avant 1914*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2010, pp. 89-119 as well as contributions to Richard Abel, Rick Altman (eds.), *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2001 and Germain Lacasse, Vincent Bouchard, Gwenn Scheppeler (eds.), *Pratiques orales du cinéma*, L’Harmattan, Paris 2011.

We will not enter the debate on terminology here, which concerns in particular the French expression “bonimenteur,” which seems to have been used very little – if at all – at the time. The term “bonisseur” may have rather referred to the “barker,” i.e. a person trying to lure spectators to watch the show, than to the lecturer, who was generally called “conferencier.” See, among others, André Gaudreault (with Jean-Pierre Sirois-Trahan), “Le retour du [bonimenteur] refoulé... (ou serait-ce le bonisseur-conférencier, le commentateur, le conferencier, le presentateur ou le ‘speaker’?)” in *Iris* no. 22, 1996, 17-28.

³ See, for instance, Lacasse, *Le Bonimenteur des vues animées*, cit., pp. 49-66, and Barnier, *Bruits, cris, musiques de films. Les projections avant 1914*, cit., pp. 89-114.

⁴ For the concept of “historical art of projection,” see Ludwig Vogl-Bienek, “Die historische Projektionskunst. Eine offene geschichtliche Perspektive auf den Film,” in *KINtop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films*, no. 3, Stroemfeld Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, Basel 1994, pp. 11-32. For the concept of history of screen practice, see Charles Musser, “Toward a History of Screen Practice,” in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 9,

no. 1, 1984, pp. 59-69, and Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907. History of the American Cinema*, vol. 1, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1990, chapter 1. See also Martin Loiperdinger, "Screen History – Medienkulturen der Projektion um 1900," in *Augenblicke*, no. 52, 2011, 55-65.

⁵ Martin Loiperdinger, "Missing Believed Lost: The Film Narrator then and now", in Kaveh Askari *et al.* (eds.), *Performing New Media 1890-1915*, John Libbey Publishing, New Barnet 2014, p. 87.

⁶ Richard Crangle, "'Next Slide Please': The Lantern Lecturer in Britain 1890-1910," in: Richard Abel, Rick Altman (eds.), *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, cit., p. 39.

⁷ *Idem*, 46.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ In a similar perspective, André Gaudreault and Philippe Gauthier have argued that there are two different cultural series that need to be distinguished: the lecture-with-projection (*conférence-avec-projection* – a historically more adequate translation of their French term would simply be "illustrated lecture") and the "projection-with-commentary" (*projection-avec-boniment*). Contrary to Crangle's suggestion of a difference between lantern and film in this respect, the distinction proposed by Gaudreault and Gauthier cuts across both media. See André Gaudreault, Philippe Gauthier, "Les séries culturelles de la conférence-avec-projection et de la projection-avec-boniment: continuités et ruptures," in Marta Braun *et al.* (eds.), *Beyond the Screen. Institutions, Networks and Publics of Early Cinema*, John Libbey Publishing, New Barnet 2012, pp. 233-238.

¹¹ For the two concepts of "homochronic" and "heterochronic", see Philippe Marion, "Narratologie médiatique et médiagénie des récits," in *Recherches en communication*, no. 7, 1997, pp. 82-83.

¹² Advertisement in *The Optical and Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, no. 55, December 1893, vii. Announcement *idem*, 187.

¹³ See for instance T. Perkins, "Lantern Lectures. Is Their Popularity Declining?" in *The Optical and Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, no.59, April 1894, p. 76.

¹⁴ The Showman, "The Decline of the Lantern Lectures," in *The Optical and Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, no. 75, August 1895, p. 131.

¹⁵ See Martin Barnier, *Bruits, cris, musiques de films. Les projections avant 1914*, cit., pp. 106-112 *et passim*.

¹⁶ For the size of German fairground cinematographs, see Joseph Garncarz, *Maßlose Unterhaltung. Zur Etablierung des Films in Deutschland 1896-1914*, Stroemfeld Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, Basel 2010, p. 87. For Great Britain, see Vanessa Toulmin, "Cuckoo in the Next. Edwardian Itinerant Exhibition Practices and the Transition to Cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1906," in *The Moving Image*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2010, pp. 62-64.

¹⁷ Deac Rossell, "Madame Olinka," in Stephen Herbert, Luke McKernan (eds.), *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema*, British Film Institute, London 1996, p. 103.

¹⁸ See Vanessa Toulmin, "Cuckoo in the Next. Edwardian Itinerant Exhibition Practices and the Transition to Cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1906," cit., pp. 64-71; Joseph Garncarz, *Maßlose Unterhaltung. Zur Etablierung des Films in Deutschland 1896-1914*, cit., pp. 129-141; Blaise Aurora, *Histoire du cinéma en Lorraine. Du cinématographe au cinéma forain 1896-1914*. Éditions Serpenoise, Metz 1996, pp. 76-99.

¹⁹ Vanessa Toulmin, "Cuckoo in the Next. Edwardian Itinerant Exhibition Practices and the Transition to Cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1906," cit., p. 66.

²⁰ T. Perkins, "Lantern Lectures. Is Their Popularity Declining?" in *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic enlarger*, no. 59, April 1894, p. 77.

²¹ G.-Michel Coissac, *Manuel pratique du conférencier-projectionniste*, Maison de la Bonne Presse, Paris [1908], p. 178. This book is a condensed version of Coissac's voluminous book *La Théorie et pratique des projections*, Maison de la Bonne Presse, Paris [1906].

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Idem*, p. 179.

²⁴ *Idem*, pp. 179-180.

²⁵ G.-Michel Coissac, "La Conférence Cinématographique. Notes and Conseils d'un Professionnel," in *Ciné-Journal*, no. 161, 23 September 1911, p. 45.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 47.

²⁷ See Frank Gray, "Our Navy and Patriotic Entertainment in Brighton at the Start of the Boer War," in Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, Rob King (eds.), *Early Cinema and the "National"*, John Libbey Publishing, New Barnet 2008, pp. 79-89. The quote is on p. 85.

²⁸ Charles Musser, Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures. Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition 1880-1920*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991, pp. 87-88.

²⁹ See Barnier, *Bruits, cris, musiques de films*, cit.

³⁰ William Isaac Chadwick, *The Magic Lantern Manual*, Frederick Warne and Co., London 1878, p. 106 (fig. 73).

³¹ Albert W. Scott, "Safety with Saturators," in *The Optical and Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, no. 32, January 1892, p. 8.

³² Announcement in *La petite presse*, 17 October 1872, p. 3.

³³ See the numerous illustrations showing people sitting next to the lantern operator while listening to a lecture.