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Eugène Frey: Inventeur des célèbres décors lumineux à transformations du Théâtre de Monte-Carlo appliqués pour la première fois à l'Exposition universelle de Paris 1900

EDITED BY JOÃO MARIA GUSMÃO
NOUVEAU MUSÉE NATIONAL DE MONACO, 2020

Nico de Klerk

Eugène Frey is a lavishly illustrated, bilingual (French and English) exhibition catalog on the career of this Belgian painter, lanternist, and set designer (1846–1942). It was published on the occasion of a show of his innovative work at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, February 7–August 30, 2020. The many illustrations consist, on one hand, of a generous selection of his artwork and glass plates and, on the other, of a selective record of the imagery projected by the installations that Portuguese exhibition creators João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva designed to both evoke and reflect on Frey's projections. The visuals are complemented by three essays and a story on

more or less relevant contexts of the exhibition and on Frey's work.

Work, of course, is a thorny term in this case. Obviously, the artistic legacy of Eugène Frey consists only partly of objects (brought together from a number of repositories) that can be seen directly, such as his studies in graphite, ink, gouache, photographs, and models as well as the paintings and painted glass plates used in shadow theater and sets in various other performing arts (variety, cabaret, dance, opera). But although he was a painter, and called himself such, Frey did more than design and paint these objects: he projected them too, either as stand-alone stories or as light sets (*décors lumineux*), notably at the 1900 Paris Exposition and at the operas of Paris and, most famously, Monte Carlo. There, for twenty years, he cooperated with chief set designer Alphonse Visconti. And although he was regarded by some as mere “chief electrician” (which he certainly was too), in realizing Visconti's designs, he combined his engineering skills and artistry to accomplish unprecedented visual screen spectacle.

However, apart even from the fact that some of these performing arts are extinct, reconstructions of these projections in situ, that is, in actual performances, would have been practically impossible and possibly disappointing after the lapse of a century. Still, today's set designers are indebted, wittingly or unwittingly, to Frey's accomplishments. His pioneering, electricity-based, changeable scenographies through light projection and superimposition predominantly define his legacy. In fact, Frey's legacy—his foresight (“un homme clairvoyant”) and the significance of his light sets—was already noted at the time, the early twentieth century, for instance, in the cited reviews of French film and music critic Émile Vuillermoz. *Eugène Frey*, the exhibition and the book, mark the *re-discovery* of an artist and a theatrical projection practice.

At first sight, it may seem somewhat strange to read that a lanternist was called clairvoyant. After all, the emergence of film technology and the subsequent rise of a cinema industry all but eclipsed the popular lantern show in contemporary entertainment. These developments were nonetheless coincident

with the high point of Frey's career at the Opéra de Monte-Carlo between 1904 and 1924, pointing up that a "progressive" or even a purposive perspective tends to overlook other, persistent manifestations of lantern culture—a tendency screen-based entertainment studies have not quite overcome yet. Besides Frey's career, one can point to the lantern's widespread educational use in the shape of the illustrated lecture, which continued well into the second half of the twentieth century. Conversely, whatever stuff the dreams and expectations of early twentieth-century entertainment practitioners were made of, a scenography by means of projection—what Loie Fuller had called the "theatre of light"—didn't necessarily need to be filmic. Indeed, stage design did not turn out to be a cinematographic growth industry.

As for Frey, Swiss film scholar Stéphane Tralongo argues in his essay that he "resisted" film. His approach, he writes, "was a way to reassert the artistic dimension of the elements of scenery." Or, in Frey's own words, taken from a lecture on February 20, 1925, in the Belgian town of Liège,

light sets are paintings on glass, executed *by hand*, which are then projected through the transparent glass onto a white screen using powerful machines. The screen stands alone in a dark area, while the stage is lit by the usual devices, whose manner of use, or more precisely position, has been modified. (215, my emphasis)

The quote strengthens Tralongo's argument, partly based on this excerpt, that "the physical qualities of painting [were] reinforced by the co-presence on stage of pictures projected on a 'screen' and painted scenery mounted on 'frames.'" Citing Swiss film scholar Laurent Guido, he concludes that Frey's light set designs "still relied on a value of 'authenticity' guaranteed by the presence of performers on stage, and more generally, the presence of the human body" (110). This included, most importantly, the offstage crew, under Frey's direction, whose skills and meticulousness were critical to a show's success (as Frey said in the quoted lecture, "I think the crew members

would like me to go to hell, as my innovations disturb all their comfortable well-established habits" [224]).

The book's first illustration, a photograph of Frey and crew amid a bank of slide projectors, foretells Frey's position, literally and conceptually. It is a position, too, to heed when we think of the history of modern media, more specifically of screen practices. It is for this reason that the essay contributed by French media historian and archivist Laurent Mannoni rather grates with Tralongo's argument. Instead of a reasoned account of the use of the lantern in a specific artistic niche in the latter, one gets a sweeping statement or two in the former, such as "*féerie* became popular as a means of forgetting the catastrophic end of the second Empire" in 1870 (while on the same page, it was first described as being "hugely popular . . . *during* the Second Empire" [55, my emphasis]). But how, where, and for whom was this forgetting attained, one would ask. Surely the example of the performance of "certain scenes" of a stage production of *Le voyage dans la lune*, in 1875, is insufficient to account for *féerie*'s alleged power to consign an entire era to oblivion. Nor, incidentally, do we learn why, "during the 1890s *féerie* gradually went out of fashion" again (56). And instead of Tralongo's approach to Frey as a specific instance of projection practices, one gets teleology. In what seems like a précis of his 1994 book *Le grand art de la lumière et de l'ombre*, Mannoni's long run-up, from 1659 to be precise, spends itself at the moment, in the early twentieth century, when "plates whose large size and complexity indicate why the time was ripe for the cinematograph to appear" (61). Hence the exclusive focus on cinema in the last section of his essay, as if all theatrical lantern entertainment had been conjured away. Notwithstanding the announced topic of the piece—an exploration of "magic lanterns in theatre"—the quoted statement not merely narrows the emergence of film to "improvements" in theatrical technology (while it conveniently bypasses the many innovations in plates, light sources, and projectors that Frey—*inventeur*—made himself); it also obfuscates the fact that the development of a technology and its applications are two different, even quite contingent things.¹ Given Frey's

major work in opera, one would have settled for a well-researched essay on the history of moving light sets in this performing art alone; recent studies demonstrate that up-to-date, expert knowledge is sufficiently available.²

The other two texts deal, in one way or another, with the exhibition. The first, a story by João Maria Gusmão, the exhibition's co-creator and editor of the book, is to my mind a case of self-indulgence. It is well known that artists consider a show without a catalog—functionally alike to a CV—as nonexistent, but this feels overdone. While the story is meant to illustrate the curators' intention to “bring together scientific and literary personalities from Frey's era” (287), its “what would happen if . . . ?” approach, by combining a Faustian story with Plato's allegory of the cave, is too far removed from the exhibition's subject. Closing this conceptual gap seems to have been left to Célia Bernasconi, then head curator of the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, in the final essay. It may be the reason that her text reads like an extended audio guide, providing background to Gusmão and Paiva's curatorial work and their research for this exhibition and commenting on the installations they designed for their exhibition.

Much more instructive and exhilarating are the book's many illustrations, of both Frey's work and the two curators' response to it. In fact, the *raisonné* order of the visuals makes Gusmão's and Bernasconi's texts to a certain extent superfluous. The chronological presentation of the works by Frey, beginning with shadow theater (although not all his) through his light sets for the Palais de la Danse at the 1900 Paris Exposition, the simulated movement for the opera *La damnation de Faust* in Monte Carlo in 1905, and subsequent productions, is matched by the spatial order of the exhibition, the curators' installations especially. The latter reflect on a number of aspects and technologies of Frey's creations by allusion. The “denuded,” either abstract or simplified projected images—sometimes next to Frey's original studies—simulate the processes and procedures Frey used in his own projections; although one can no longer see the original projected works, one is allowed to see their working. And although the illustrations are stills, some of these pages fold out to suggest

the phases of a movement (e.g., sunrise to sunset) or the additive color synthesis, the basis of Frey's manifold superimpositions.

All in all, *Eugène Frey* is a partly successful attempt to inform its readers about the origins of a way of creating set designs that we nowadays take for granted. Given that, as noted, the materials Frey made came from a number of archives and other repositories, the many illustrations may ease the disappointment of those who were not able to visit the exhibition—what with the Covid-19 pandemic. But one would have wished for a well-advised concept and more illuminating information that offer a fuller sense of a particularly dynamic period in the history of screen practices in a variety of performative settings.

Nico de Klerk has a BA in English (Leiden University, 1983) and an MA in discourse analysis (University of Amsterdam, 1986). In 2015, he completed his PhD at Utrecht University, published in 2017 as *Showing and Telling: Film Heritage Institutes and Their Performance of Public Accountability*, partly based on his experience as a film historical researcher and curator at the then Nederlands Filmmuseum. He is currently a postdoc researcher for the project “Projecting Knowledge: The Magic Lantern as a Tool for Mediated Science Communication in the Netherlands, 1880–1940” at Utrecht University. Recently, he coedited and contributed to *Films That Sell: Moving Pictures and Advertising* (2016) and coauthored the website *Mapping Colin Ross* (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Digital History, 2017). He is on the editorial board of *The Moving Image*.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Wiebe E. Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Towards a Theory of Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).
2. See Gabriela Cruz, *Grand Illusion: Phantasmagoria in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), and Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).