Consuming illusions: the magic lantern in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand 1850-1910

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Description
The magic lantern never found any serious use in the scientific community which was its first circle of users and makers, but over the ensuing 250 years it became the principal apparatus for visual storytelling and for reproducing the illusion of movement, while also finding widespread application in education and moral instruction. Pierre Petit, who saw Walgensten’s lantern in 1664, promptly called the new optical device “laterne de peur”, or “lantern of fear.” Beginning around 1850, the already flourishing lantern culture of storytelling, instruction, and the purely visual display of “artificial fireworks” and dissolving views was wholly transformed by the marriage of the magic lantern and the new medium of photography.

Abstract
This thesis maps the existence, extent and diverse applications of the magic lantern in the Australasian colonies and brings to light a cultural practice that had remained largely invisible in histories of photography, cinema, and popular culture in nineteenth century Australasia. The thesis demonstrates that the magic lantern was popular as entertainment on both a private, domestic and a public scale. It traces its widespread adoption in two broad institutional contexts, the educational and the religious, and shows how this wide-ranging practice and consumption was supported by developing social and commercial infrastructure in the colonies and a network of touring lanternists. It argues that the magic lantern located the Australasian colonial culture within a global one centred around the consumption of visual technology and an international exchange of images. Colonial audiences were not, however, merely the passive recipients of a globalised imagery or culture. They were active contributors to it, constructing their own meanings in response to imported images. The thesis argues that, while the magic lantern functioned to affirm a sense of imperial identity in both colonisers and the colonised, it was adapted locally to the creation of colonial, intercolonial and regional identities, as an alternative to a dominant Eurocentric mass-mediated world view. Colonial practitioners applied this powerful medium to the generation of images at a local level that reveal an enthusiasm for colonial events and stories, a sense of place, and a celebration of local identity on the big screen.

Keywords
lantern projection; projectors; Australia-history; New Zealand-history; lantern slides; pictorial works

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