

The Long Journey of the Icononaut

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Article abstract

This article attempts to establish a preliminary topology and to formulate a few hypotheses based on research into the mechanisms, forms, sites and cultural and iconographic configurations that led to the birth of the Icononaut, the Visionary, the traveller in the iconosphere. Having carried out research in the 1980s into the spread and characteristics of the image industry and market from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, including travelling and folk representations and the constitution of a lexicon of popular images, the author aims to show how this immense system, unifying and transforming the mental "geography" of millions in Europe and elsewhere, can be seen as the habitat and birthplace of cinematic representations.

The Long Journey of the Icononaut

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RÉSUMÉ

L'article essaie d'établir une première topologie et de formuler quelques hypothèses à partir d'une recherche en cours sur les mécanismes, les formes, les lieux et le tissu culturel et iconographique qui ont mené à la genèse de l'Icononaute, ou de l'Homme visionnaire, du voyageur de l'iconosphère. Après avoir étudié au cours des années 1980-1990 la diffusion et les caractéristiques de l'industrie et du marché des images du dix-septième au dix-neuvième, les formes de représentation ambulantes et populaires, la constitution d'un lexique des images populaires, l'auteur se propose de montrer comment cet immense système qui réunit et transforme la «géographie» mentale de millions de personnes en Europe et dans le monde peut être considéré comme habitat et lieu de naissance des représentations cinématographiques.

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to establish a preliminary topology and to formulate a few hypotheses based on research into the mechanisms, forms, sites and cultural and iconographic configurations that led to the birth of the Icononaut, the Visionary, the traveller in the iconosphere. Having carried out research in the 1980s into the spread and characteristics of the image industry and market from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, including travelling and folk representations and the constitution of a lexicon of popular images, the author aims to show how this immense system, unifying and transforming the mental "geography"

of millions in Europe and elsewhere, can be seen as the habitat and birthplace of cinematic representations.

From the beginning of the '80s, that is, when I finished drafting my *Storia del cinema italiano* (*History of the Italian cinema*), I started a very long and ambitious study of the ways and means that led to the birth and spread, on a worldwide-level, of a new human species, the *visionary being*.

Starting from the Lumière brothers' invention, I went back over the span of some centuries, trying to focus my attention, not on the history of vision-making machines, already partly known and explored, but rather on a wider history with much more uncertain limits: that of the popular visual-image and of the forms of optical performances, that after some centuries, led to the Lumière brothers' invention of cinema.

Shifting and broadening the range of my interests from the area of cinema to an area where heterogeneous forms and problems, and very complex methodological necessities cross, I tried to acquire, among my other instruments of study, competence in visual anthropology, iconology, iconography and models of macrohistory. Above all I tried to establish some strong starting hypotheses from which I organized the different phases of my work.

In the course of recent years and in particular in 1988, I conceived and coordinated two exhibitions, in Padua and Bassano, which in a certain sense, defined the limits of the research field and offered the first mature results of the work developed in these years.

The subject that we wanted to identify falls perfectly well within the field of art history — research has been carried out by Gombrich, Baltrusaitis, Panofsky, Lea Ritter, Santini, Ruggero Pierantoni which I used as a guide and for initial points of reference — but as a matter of fact it was never considered by art historians as a subject that was part, by right, of their range of competence.

Ways, forms, diffusion and creation of a market of images, connections between cultured iconography and the iconography of optical performances, still constitute a sort of black hole in the

history of art which the research I intend to conduct will try, not to fill, but rather to explore in its fullness and complexity of sources and problems.

During the last ten years I have tried to study the following problems: the typologies and morphologies of popular, optical shows in Europe from the eighteenth to the twentieth century; the diffusion and characteristics of the image industry and market with particular attention to the *Vues d'optique* and to the Pantoscope performances of the eighteenth century; the forms of popular, itinerant performance which constitute the cradle and original habitat of cinema performances; and the memories of the cinema auditorium in literature.



Vue d'optique représentant Venise

Much has still to be done and, above all, in order to obtain a complete view of the development of the relations and evolution of the different phenomena, it is necessary to study the genesis of discoveries in the field of vision, and to consider both the first theories formulated by the Jesuits and the first forms of optical performance going back to 1500 from which, in the following centuries, the great highways of popular vision were started.

However, the first studies concerning magic lanterns show the starting point of this research into the *Optical Journey* which leads to the Lumière brothers' discovery, to be in the eleventh century, fixed in Leonardo da Vinci's drawings and writings in the Atlantic Manuscript.

Leonardo's description of a dark-room inside which images of objects and living beings of every species were projected through a little round aperture, appears to us as the materialization of a centuries-old dream and the discovery of a *Viewing Machine*.

Practically, it is thanks to Leonardo, *omo senza lettere* (man without letters), that an attempt was seriously started to understand the laws which rule the mechanisms of vision and their application to particular optical machines able to trap *le spetie di oggetti alluminati* (every kind of illuminated object). The first steps were taken towards the creation of an *universal visual language*.

The machines of vision opened up possibilities of spreading the same knowledge and emotions like rain on all the people of the world, favouring the universal dissemination of identical images of near and far, and of real and imaginary worlds. Leonardo worked in perfect solitude, but luckily the time was ripe to push other scholars to conduct research in the same direction, who following the ways of light, imagining optical boxes which, as real and true metaphors for the eye, would be able to receive and fix the images of the world and to narrate them in a visual discourse, and not only, as before, verbally.

The names of these scholars and of their inventions are known and were available to those who, in the past, worked on the pre-cinema along a Darwinian evolutionary chain: Gerolamo, Cardano, Cesare Cesarino, Egnazio Danti, Daniele Barbaro, Giovan Battista della Porta, Johannes Scheider, Athanasius Kircher... and all the subsequent scholars who, step by step and often following divergent routes, opened the way to the invention of the cinema.

Up until now, as has been said, the machines and their history have been studied, but nobody has looked at the audience, at the effects caused by the images during the performances in squares, churches, palaces, inns, schools, private houses, theatres and universities. A lot is known about the history of patents, but we are completely unaware of the alterations produced by images on

the mental, emotional and imaginative geography of audiences socially and culturally heterogeneous. Nobody has described the transformation and effects on the chemistry of passions of a popular audience at the end of a magic lantern performance. Nobody has studied the genesis and growth of a lexis, an alphabet or a visual dictionary, nor has anybody been preoccupied with studying the systems of diffusion on a large scale through space and time.

Although, already, at the end of the 1500s, Giovan Battista della Porta, ideal follower and interpreter of Paracelsus's spirit, was able to prophesy the advent of a "time of the people" in which all linguistic, social and cultural barriers would have been broken, it was not clear yet, that this time was going to be characterized by the machines of vision which were being invented and improved.

Since towards the end of the seventeenth century, thanks to Athanasius Kircher, the magic lantern performances started to spread, the field of the research widens to include the itinerant characters who spread the new visual word, becoming sellers of popular images, of Saints, of playing cards, of trees of life, of lands of Cockaigne, of steps of the Saints' lives.

We want to examine carefully the characteristics and developmental procedures of this history, which have been little studied by art historians. An iconographic system of high density and viscosity, based on an extensive, though definable and classifiable, number of images expanded in the space and time, and spread thoroughly, almost metre by metre, over the whole surface of the earth inhabited by humankind — or at least over a great part of it — an identical visual language.

The bearers of optical machines — the impresarios of the magic lantern or pantoscope — drew on the enormous popular iconosphere, and, at the same time, drew from the adjacent fields of painting, architecture and stage design.

Thanks to these people *sans feu ni lieu*, who barely left any traces of their passages in the course of history, the dream of giving life to an universal language — which, during the seventeenth century many people such as Leibniz, Delgarno, Wilkins, Kircher, Cartesio and Comenio, had thought about — took off and seems to have come true.



Vetri da proiezione per spettacoli di fantasmagoria

As in a game of Chinese boxes, the sellers of images (and dreams) became important pawns in the giant game started by these scholars. It was they who, with missionary spirit, spread the Esperanto of visual communication which allows the direct reception of a message and its translation into one's mother-tongue without effort. The images on the plate of the magic lantern, or those of the *Vues d'optique*, formed the lexis, morphology, and syntax of this language and created the first forms of diffuse literacy.

This language was made stable and justified by the progressive creation of a real and true European Common Market of images which developed particularly in four centres, Augsburg, Bassano, Paris and London, and was able to cover very quickly both Europe

and America. This language acted over a long period and in depth, contributing to change the capacity of perception and representation of the world, of a collective imagination which moves from states of disorder and disharmony to states of order and gradual homogeneity.

Utopia by Kircher, projected in time, seems to compare and oppose itself to the second principle of thermodynamics, to reverse it and to cast a long shadow over the Lumière era, until computer civilization and synthesized images.

From the pages of *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* by Kircher of 1645 it is possible to see the light of one of the first magic lanterns rise towards all the cardinal points and corners of the Earth. In the space of some decades the apostles of the visual word became hundreds. The spread and circulation of images acted deeply on the spectator almost modifying his or her genetic code. The *visionary being* presents different characteristics compared to medieval being, but also compared to the being of the Renaissance. Their mental and imaginative spaces have changed and enlarged. They are able — from when they are children — to carry out with ease, mental journeys of discovery of distant lands which would be unthinkable without a rich basic nourishment of real and imaginary images.

After the eighteenth century when the lanternists worked, the impresarios of the *Viewing Machine* and *Pantoscope* appeared with their optical views, organized in series, which allowed long-range journeys.

The ways followed by the lanternists and impresarios of the *Viewing Machine* preserve few traces of their passing, whereas the iconographic documents of the characteristics, of the places and of the audience of their performances, are considerable. In the paintings of the eighteenth century, beyond the famous frescos by Tiepolo, it will be sufficient to remember the engravings by Hogarth, Maggiotto and Pinelli, and the hundreds of popular images which show performances of the *Magic Lantern* and the *Viewing Machine*. The people who prepare the performances are seen at work with their audiences in a very wide area and over the span of two centuries.

One of the hypotheses and aims of my research is to document the whole international iconography — or to start a first great exploration — of optical performances. An iconography which

must be searched for, not only in paintings or engravings, but also in applied arts, in lacquered boxes, in pieces of pottery, in illustrated books and magazines, and on fans. Besides these materials, I intend to study the documents that make these activities less nebulous and indistinct from the economic and physical point of view. From the treatises in physics and optics, to the catalogues of the producers of prints, to the posters of performances, to the diaries of itinerant-sellers, the research intends to reconstruct an economic and cultural fabric in all its documentary aspects and from this fabric to start also to decipher or identify the scheme of the dreams and by-ways of the collective imagination.

For the first time — as far as I know — a plane will be developed which tries to give the reasons, proposing a model of total history, for the places of the performances, for the characteristics and active role of the audience, for the transformations of the iconographic forms and for modern civilisation's imaginative geography.

The hypothesis of enclosing the visible world, though far-flung and inaccessible, in a lexis and a series of images which should answer to a certain ideal and cultural web, is the fundamental scenario also of the factories of the optical view in Bassano, Augsburg, London and Paris.

These factories were able to produce hundreds of thousands of images and to entrust their spreading to thousands of itinerant-sellers who moved rapidly along all the highways of at least three continents.

Of these factories — studying the catalogues, typologies and morphologies of the prints — I want to define sales strategies, cultural plans, productivity, ability to cover a certain territory, and declared or implicit ideology in the choice of a particular subject.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, alongside the creation of an image market and industry, the production of machines of vision also increased. Lanterns with names ever more enchanting and odd — lampophone, lamposcope, megascope — offered performances beside the dioramas, panoramas and phantasmagories. The iconosphere underwent a farther dilation and a technological transformation which seemed to push it ever more towards spasmodic research into the reproduction of reality

and movement.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, with the invention of more complex and sophisticated mechanisms and instruments, to the end of the century with electric light, plates and magic lanterns were used ever more intensely for teaching and scientific purposes.

The catalogues of the specialized firms — which we intend to study systematically — offer thousands of subjects of every kind; there is not a field of knowledge, whether it be scientific, literary or artistic, which is not represented.

The magic lanterns, the performances of the *Viewing Machine* and the discoveries that precede the Lumière brothers' invention, created and improved the spreading of the demand for images from an audience of every age where very different social and cultural conditions were present.

With the supply and demand for images, the memory and evidence of the role played by them in the formation of affective and cultural life increased.

This is also a field as yet unexplored where my research intends to bring light. As much as I could, I have worked during these years to reconstruct — through literary evidence and autobiographical memories — a biography of cinematic humanity in the auditorium during the whole century.

But to understand how much these images leave deep and enduring traces in the individual and collective life it is sufficient to think of the description of the magic lantern performances by Marcel Proust (or Ingmar Bergman) on the walls of their bedrooms.

In those few images of Sir Golo and Elisabeth of Barbante, Proust is able to deliver to the scholar of popular vision a kind of genetic cell containing, in an exemplary way, some characteristics and principles which regulate the formation and development of the collective vision.

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