

MIDI Controllers and magic lanterns: Contextualising a performative approach to media archaeology

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Disciplinary background A. Media Archaeology: Dr Martyn Jolly is an Honorary Associate Professor at the Australian National University's School of Art and Design and a magic lanternist. His collaborator and co-lanternist, Dr Elisa deCourcy, is a Research Fellow (DECRA) at the Australian National University's Research School of the Humanities. These two art historians were recently Lead Investigator and Research Fellow on the Australian Research Council Discovery Project Heritage in the Limelight: The Magic Lantern in Australia and the World, and co-edited the Routledge-published text 'The Magic Lantern at Work: Witnessing, Persuading, Experiencing and Connecting' (2020).

Disciplinary background B. Musical Theatre: Dr Charles Martin is a percussionist, electronic musician, and Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University School of Computing. Dr Alexander Hunter is the Composition Convenor at the Australian National University's School of Music. To date these two composer/performer/improvisers and others have collaborated on eight new magic lantern shows, in addition to their work with dance, interactive installations, experimental theatre, and other collaborative new music projects.

Abstract

This paper aims to both outline the activities of our magic lantern performances to date, as well as unpack and discuss the participatory performance practice which has developed as part of these contemporary creative reenactments.

The two approaches which we will bring together are Media Archaeology and Experimental Musical Theatre. As explored in the recent book *The Magic Lantern at Work: Witnessing, Persuading, Experiencing and Connecting* the magic lantern show — where music, voice and image projection interacted live with an audience — was an important part of popular culture from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, forming a media-archaeological substrata to many of today's 'Media, Virtual and Participatory' events.

We have developed an interdisciplinary performative methodology where practice-led photography and media historians directly interact with electronic and conventional musicians, composers, improvisers, and members of local communities, all with the participation of an audience. Authentic historical photographic and painted images are projected through vintage optical apparatuses, and optical effects are manually produced while a multimedia experience is created for the audience with the triggering of field audio recordings, samples and electronic loops, and instrumental improvisation based on popular historical songs, interacting with the projected images.

Through creative re-use and creative re-enactment, with the frequent direct participation of a contemporary audience with and among whom we perform, we are able to examine the intense affective experience of the magic lantern show as it was historically deployed to mobilise participants within various religious, political, propaganda, spectacular and theatrical contexts.

Our performances frequently engage histories local to our performance venues, and invite the participation of local musicians, poets, and other members of the public to bring these stories to life in an interactive and intimate performance setting.

The casual 'parlour' nature of these performances is maintained both through the intimate and small nature of the performance setting (small halls or marquees with the audience very close to the performers) as well as occasional comments from performers and audience and instructions for participation - no two performances are the same.

This praxis could not be possible without the integration of the acknowledgement of the physical presence of all involved. This embodied performance-led research is informed by a range of contemporary and recent research including Jennifer Walshe, Ashley Fure and Pauline Oliveros, as well as the work of authors Sara Ahmed, bell hooks and Audre Lorde. As our conversations and praxis develop more and more tentacular connections to other bodies of scholarship usually outside the context of music research appear and become generative.

Interdisciplinary implications. This exploration of the performative potential of the wider magic lantern project seeks to unpack and document the researchers' engagement in a dialogue with existing work on embodiment and participation, as well as practice-led research on interactive theatre, fields which tend to be largely separate from 'purely musical' performance research.

While there are a number of examples of reenactments and reimaginations of period media today, this collaborative practice between media archaeologists and musicians sets its sights not on the large-scale spectacle, but rather on the intimate entertainment of the parlour - one in which the audience and amateur performer are central to the realisation of the performance.

Through the real-time integration of historical performance models (domestic parlour entertainments and community theatre) with contemporary performance models (improvisation and dynamic live soundtracks) this project brings a media archaeology research project into the experience of diverse audiences. Examining the relationships between historical and contemporary media forms and musical events provides an engaging opportunity for site-specific community arts participation.

References

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