

Reading “th’ hand-writing on the wall”: Projected Verse, Magic Lantern Slides, and the Emergence of Mass Culture

Dr. Mike Chasar
English Department

As far back as the 1670’s, when the first illustrations of rudimentary projection devices appeared in print, people imagined it was possible to project words as well as images. However, for the next two hundred years, projection—for the most part via the magic lantern, which was used to create immensely popular “phantasmagoria” shows—focused almost entirely on the image. Then, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, magic lanternists began projecting words for the first time, usually using poems or hymn lyrics printed on glass slides. In finding an alternative to the printed or written page that had been the primary site of Western reading for centuries, this moment inaugurated an age of screen-based and oftentimes time-based, producer-controlled, and group reading practices that would go on to include such phenomena as film subtitles, text crawlers, and any number of computer-based literacy activities today.

In studying the magic lantern as a precursor to film in a history of projected images, scholars have all but overlooked the lantern’s status as a new type of reading machine as well as the fact that the historical shift from page-based reading practices to screen-based ones was facilitated largely via poetry. My research interest for the summer of 2013, therefore, focuses on these gaps in scholarship: why poetry was central to this transitional moment, and what impact the leap from the page to the screen had on English language verse and the development of non-print mass culture in the long twentieth century more generally. As I hope to show, the cultural status of poetry and the specific content of the projected/remediated poems themselves were crucial to establishing the cultural The Age of Projection 3 legitimacy of non-print media forms and created new publics based in the activity of group reading that projected texts made possible.

My focus on magic lantern poetry is part of a new book studying the relationship between popular poetry and non-print media (magic lanterns, radio, television, film, and computer) in the long twentieth century. My first monograph, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (Columbia University Press, 2012), was largely limited to the history of print culture, so the next project extends and complicates an already successful research trajectory. With the support of a 2012 Atkinson Faculty Development grant, I have assembled much of the archive for Chapter One—about 60 lantern slide poems—and thus my summer will be spent analyzing and developing the chapter based on that archive.

I anticipate that the final chapter of this new book will need to focus on poetry in the digital age—a subject I have yet to explore in depth but that is clearly connected to the work I propose here. Therefore, the work that Amy Snodgrass proposes to pursue on screen-reading in the present day will not only help to prepare her for entry into a cutting edge line of inquiry in English Departments that she can continue and broaden for her thesis, but it will be invaluable for the progress of my own research as well.