

Phantasmagorical Wonders: The Magic Lantern Ghost Show in Nineteenth-Century America

by X. Theodore Barber

Abstract Etienne Gaspard Robertson's Phantasmagoria was the most influential magic lantern ghost show of the early nineteenth century. The article describes Robertson's exhibitions and the manner in which his effects were produced, including his use of projector movement to alter apparent screen size. The work of other ghost show lanternists in the United States over the years 1803 to 1839 is seen as clearly derivative of Robertson's exhibitions.

Current scholarship credits the Dutch scientist Christiaen Huygens with the invention of the magic lantern in the mid-seventeenth century. The predecessor to today's slide projector, the magic lantern used transparencies made of glass onto which the images to be projected were hand painted, photographic slides not being employed until the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, the magic lantern was the forerunner of the motion picture projector because it could screen moving images by means of special slides or adaptations of the lantern itself. Mechanical slides, which were in existence by 1713, were the most common way to convey a scene in motion. These mechanicals usually consisted of two pieces of glass, one placed over the other. Thus, for example, a windmill without its sails might be painted on the bottom, stationary piece of glass, and the sails themselves might appear on a movable glass disk placed on top of it. A hand-operated pulley wheel caused the disk, and hence the sails, to revolve.

Amusing and quaint images such as the windmill scene were commonly projected by the first part of the eighteenth century, when popular itinerant showmen began touring with the lantern throughout

Europe, giving public exhibitions in homes, halls, and taverns. The original developers of the lantern had apparently already exploited its "magical" potential, however, and slides of phantoms, devils, and other macabre subjects had been screened in front of the first private audiences, who were often members of the elite or royal classes. In fact, Huygens' device was referred to as "the lantern of fright,"¹ and Athanasius Kircher's description of the lantern in his *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* of 1671 was accompanied by illustrations showing projections of a soul in purgatory and a skeleton holding an hourglass and scythe.

In the last three decades of the eighteenth century, however, frightful and supernatural subject matter again became the style. This was the age of Romanticism, a movement that had an element of the bizarre and irrational, and the Gothic novel, with its atmosphere of mystery, madness, and darkness, was having its heyday. The time was ripe for the development of a type of magic lantern horror or ghost show. Thus audiences expecting to be frightened by the sight of apparitions attended the magic lantern "séances" held by Georg Schröpfer at his coffee house in Leipzig around 1770 as well as the specter shows of such magicians as Philidore and the American-born Jacob Philadelphia, who performed in various capitals of Europe in the latter part of the eighteenth century.² It was Etienne Gaspard Robertson, though, who refined the magic lantern ghost

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show into an elaborate, orchestrated event so successful that it spawned many imitations.

Born in Liège in 1763, Robertson established his exhibition in Paris by 1799, presenting it first at the Pavillon de l'Echiquier and then moving it to an abandoned chapel, which formerly held the skeletal remains of monks, at the Couvent des Capucines.³ Termed the Fantasmagorie (derived from the Greek for “phantasm assembly”), his show played for six years, and because it dealt with the mysterious and unknown it appealed to Parisians, who were themselves in an uncertain, transitional period, having experienced the upheavals of the French Revolution.

Robertson provided some details of the typical Fantasmagorie show in his memoirs.⁴ The audience entered a somber room painted or draped with black, decorated with gloomy images, and illuminated by a weak lamp. In this environment they became grave and spoke in whispers. When the show was ready to begin, Robertson stepped forward and delivered a speech that warned against superstition and impostors who have deceived the credulous, but

his words were ambiguously phrased and even open to the interpretation that the ghosts about to be seen were real. At the least, some people present were apparently so overwhelmed by the apparitions that they forgot that the show was based solely on tricks. This would account for the engravings showing audiences reacting with utter terror to the Fantasmagorie (depictions which seem to go beyond mere iconographic formula; see Figure 1) and for the fact that the show was temporarily halted by the police because it was thought that Robertson could bring Louis XVI back to life.

Having completed his speech, Robertson quickly extinguished the light so as to plunge the room in total darkness for the next hour and a half. This in itself was frightening, but to increase the terror he proceeded to lock the doors. The audience then heard the noise of rain, thunder, and a funereal bell calling forth phantoms from their tombs, and Franklin's Harmonica, a form of musical, water-filled glasses, provided a haunting sound which served both here and throughout the show to mask the noise

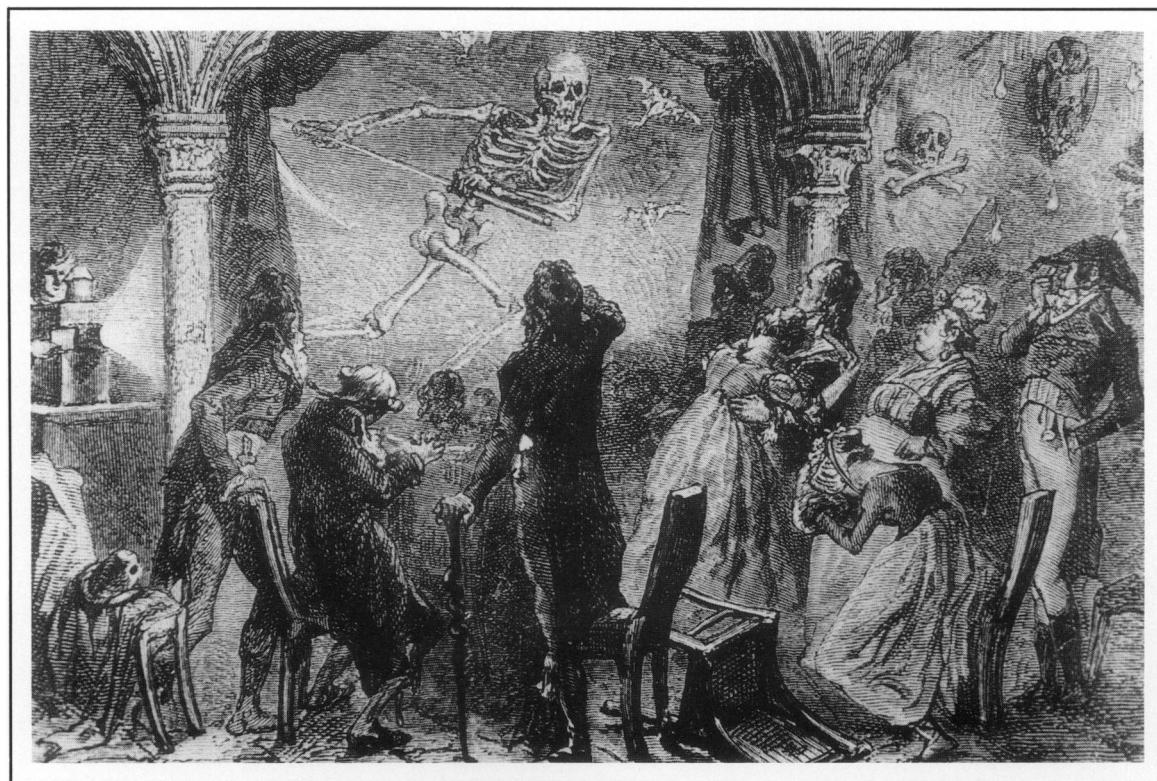
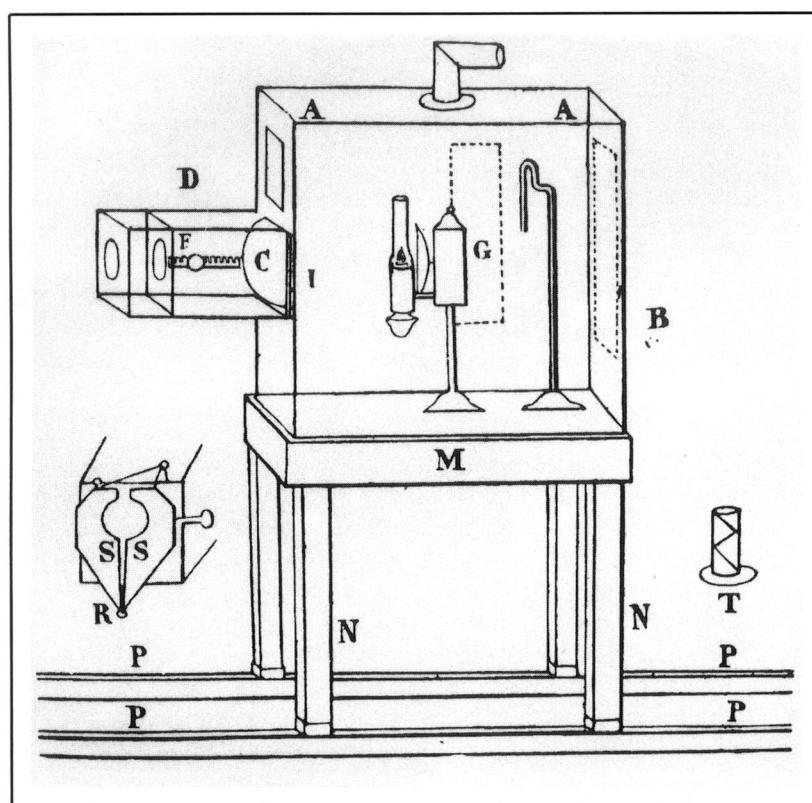


Figure 1. French engraving depicting Robertson's show at the Couvent des Capucines. Note Robertson projecting from behind the screen.

of the goings-on behind the scenes. During these sound effects, Robertson was setting up his magic lantern behind the screen, rear projection being in fact a key to his performance. The audience could see the slides on a cambric screen that had been made slightly diaphanous by coating it with a varnish of white starch and gum arabic, but the lanternist and the actual workings of the show remained hidden. Another brilliant touch was that he sometimes rear projected his slides onto smoke, creating an eerie effect.

Robertson called his ingeniously devised magic lantern a fantascope. This lantern was one of the first to feature an Argand oil lamp, a significant improvement in artificial lighting that made use of a tubular wick (Figure 2). The projection power of earlier lanterns had been severely limited by the weak illuminants used in those devices—typically candles or

simple oil-burning lamps. The increased illumination provided by the Argand lamp allowed Robertson and the later exhibitors who used it to give shows in larger venues than had previously been possible. The lantern was also equipped to present the illusion of a phantom appearing as a small figure at a distance and then gradually approaching and growing to an immense size before suddenly disappearing. A table with casters at its feet held the lantern and could be moved forward and back on two parallel wooden rails nailed to the floor directly behind the screen. Thus when the lantern was close to the cambric the transparent image was small, but when the device was moved back the projection grew in size (see Figure 3). While moving the lantern, Robertson not only had to be careful to adjust the focus so that the picture would always be clear but also had to manipulate a special shutter mechanism over the lens that



*Figure 2. Robertson's Fantascope, with its Argand lamp (G), adjustable focus (F), and shutter mechanism (SS), which attaches to the end of tube (D). From Etienne Gaspard Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdotiques d'un physicien-aéronaute*, 2 vols. (Paris: Etienne Gaspard Robertson, 1831–33).*

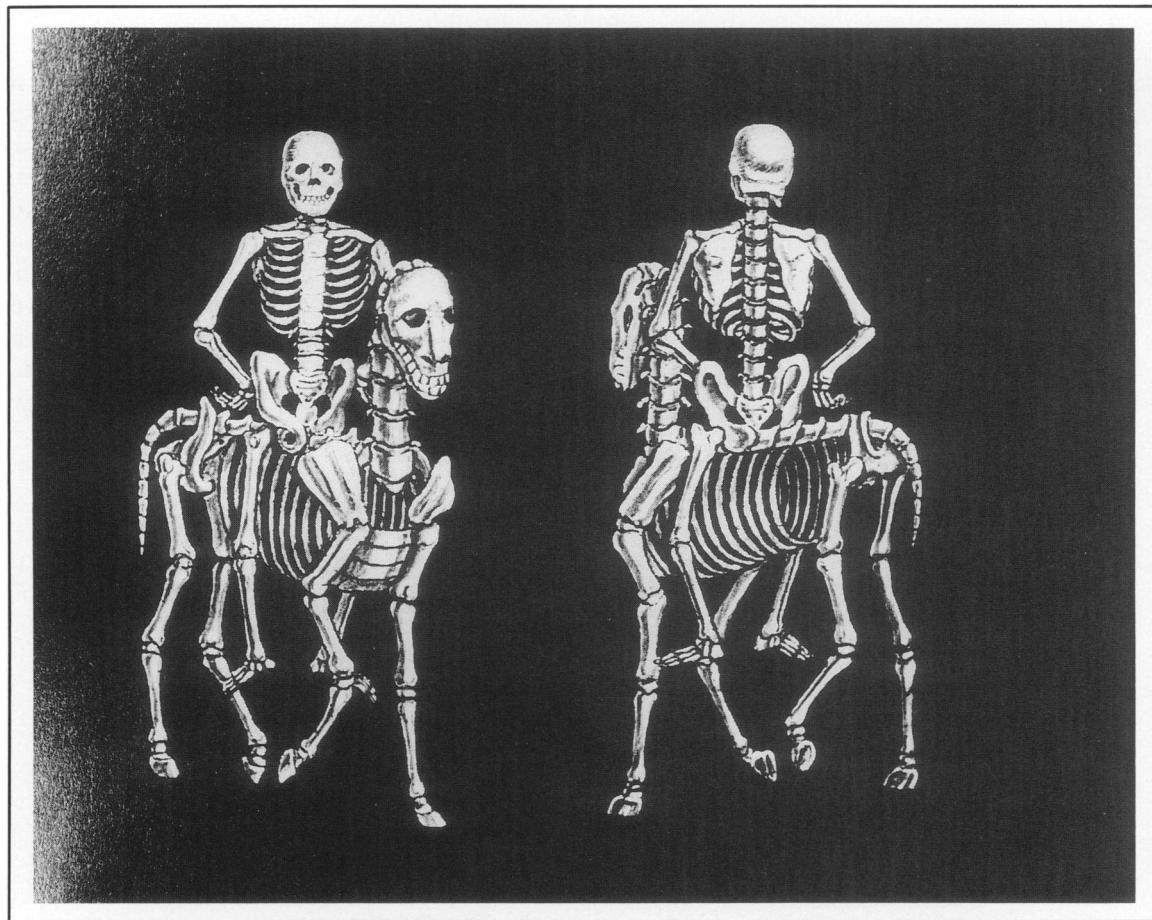


Figure 3. *Phantasmagoria* slides depicting skeleton on horse, attributed to Robertson. A frontal view was projected when the phantom appeared to be approaching the spectators; a rear view was projected when it appeared to be receding. Collection of Jac Remise. Reproduced by permission.

controlled the amount of light passing through the slide. Because the lantern had to be close to the screen to create a small, seemingly distant figure, the image produced was bright, contrary to the optic expectation that a far object would be faint. Therefore, Robertson had to cut down the light in this instance, and as the picture grew he had to increase the illumination. Closing the shutter altogether made the apparition disappear.

Robertson also used mechanical slides to give a sense of motion to his phantoms, and one of these survives among a small collection of his transparencies at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers in Paris. It is a two-piece slip slide, one glass showing the face of a specter, the other glass, placed over it, showing the eyes. Moving the latter glass back and forth made the eyes roll.⁵

In general, Robertson's slides were painted with

transparent oils, and careful attention was paid to shading and detail that would show up fairly well when projected with the Argand lamp. An essential element to his slides was that each image was surrounded by blackness, so that, when screened, it seemed to float free in the air without any background or unnecessary light around it. In some cases, though, Robertson wanted to provide an environment for his projected figure. This he did by using a second lantern located in front of the screen but hidden from the view of the spectators. For example, a front, stationary projector threw the image of a cloister on the screen, while a rear, mobile lantern displayed the approaching phantom known as the Bleeding Nun, an image derived from the Gothic novel *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis. This set-up allowed for the successful superimposition of images coming from multiple lanterns.

The first projection that the audience saw at the Fantasmagorie was a lightning-filled sky; this projection probably made use of the two-lantern technique, one lantern displaying the sky and the other the bolts of lightning. Then ghosts and skeletons were seen to approach and recede. Transformations occurred when a figure dwindled in size and disappeared but then gradually reappeared in another form. In this way the Three Graces, for example, were changed into skeletons. Sometimes the phantoms emerged from a tomb, and other times they could be seen crowding around a boat waiting to pass over the river Styx. On occasion they spoke, Robertson or one of his assistants providing the voice. Additional terrifying scenes included the Preparation for the Witches' Sabbath, Medusa's Head (Figure 4), and the Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul. Usually the slides concerned either death or the satanic (see Figure 5), but Robertson also presented a few allegories, myths, and legends, such as the popular History of Cupid, which did not deal with these topics;

like many other early lanternists he made no effort to be fully consistent in his subject matter.

Robertson was actually more than a lanternist, and the Fantasmagorie could be called a true multimedia event. Besides the fantascope with its transparencies, an opaque projector called a "megascope" was employed to project the images of solid objects, including live actors costumed as apparitions. Shadow projection also played a role in the display. The scene known as the Dance of the Witches was an elaborate form of shadow show that made use of multiple, moving light sources to create a crowd of dancing figures. "Ambulant phantoms" that roamed through the audience were masks fixed to a plank and appropriately draped and lit. Finally, Robertson used three-dimensional statues, such as one depicting a skeleton on a pedestal that frequently closed the show.

Robertson's imitators usually did not stage such elaborate ghost shows and tended to rely more exclusively on slide projection. One of the first of these

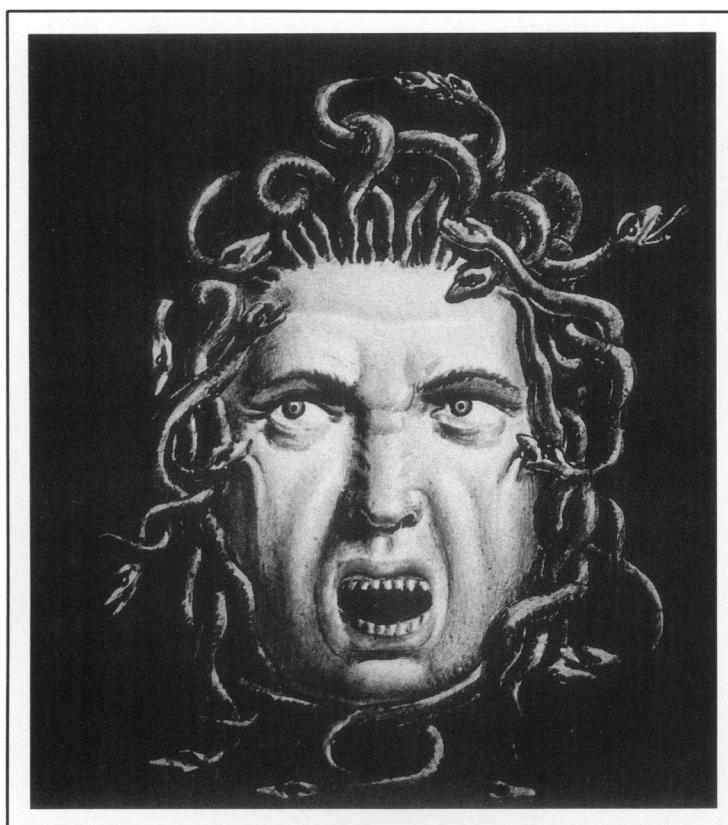


Figure 4. Phantasmagoria slide depicting Medusa's Head, attributed to Robertson. Collection of Jac Remise. Reproduced by permission.

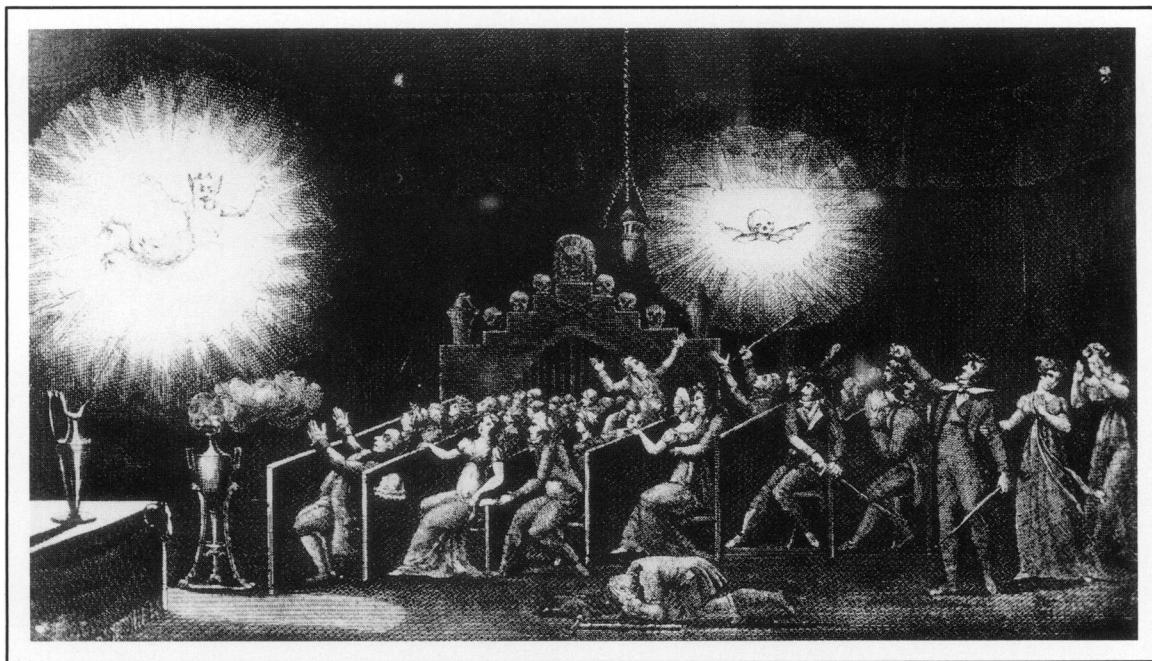


Figure 5. Robertson's Fantasmagorie, as depicted in his Mémoires.

imitators was Paul de Philipsthal, whose entertainment, now termed the Phantasmagoria, was seen at the Lyceum in London late in 1801. To judge from his playbill (Figure 6), Philipsthal modified the entertainment in several ways that came to influence later exhibitors. His bill announced that the Phantasmagoria "Will introduce the Phantoms or Apparitions of the DEAD or ABSENT, in a way more completely illusive than has ever been offered to the Eye in a public Theatre, as the Objects freely originate in the Air, . . . occasionally assuming the Figure and most perfect Resemblance of the Heroes and other distinguished Characters of past and present Times." Although Robertson had occasionally shown portraits of living figures in his show, Napoleon being one example, Philipsthal featured such portraits in his presentation, cleverly referring to them as Phantoms of the Absent. The playbill then went on to explain, in more explicit terms than Robertson had used, that the specters to be conjured up were in no way real and were meant to be an elucidating amusement: "This SPECTROLOGY, which professes to expose the Practices of artful Impostors and pretended Exorcists, and to open the Eyes of those who still foster an absurd Belief in Ghosts or Disembodied Spirits, will, it is presumed, afford also to the Spectator an interesting and pleasing Entertainment."⁶

The Phantasmagoria show took root in the United States by 1803 and flourished until about 1839. It suited the Romantic spirit that was developing in this country at the time and expressed an underlying mood of fear and uncertainty of a nation growing rapidly and exploring its frontiers. It also played on people's anxieties about death and the afterlife; in this regard it can be seen as a predecessor to the Spiritualist séance, which was to become a common form of American religious performance in the second half of the nineteenth century. Undoubtedly some Spiritualist mediums even used a magic lantern to summon ghosts, but their purpose was to deceive whereas the American Phantasmagoria showmen, like Philipsthal before them, stressed that their exhibition was rational and mechanically derived, a declaration in keeping with the growth of popular fascination with science. In fact, the Phantasmagoria represented a unique blend of both the irrational and the scientific, each of which was a prevalent interest among the general American public.

The advertisement for the "tremendous spectacle of Phantasmagory" to be seen at a covered rotunda on the grounds of Mount Vernon Garden, New York from late May and into July, 1803 specified that the object of the display was to show that ghosts were nothing but deceptions and thus "to destroy the ab-



Figure 6. Paul de Philipsthal's showbill, London, 1802. From Dates and Sources (London: The Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain, 18).

surd opinions which prevailed in the last ages.⁷ Although this announcement did not provide the name of the showman,⁸ it did indicate that the display would present both “horrible” and “pleasing” phantoms that would “appear at a great distance, and become gradually larger, and at last disappear from the spectator.” Presented every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday evening at eight o’clock for an admission of eight shillings (box seat) or six shillings (pit), this performance also included musical interludes and hydraulic experiments. Most Phantasmagoria

shows in America were in fact the last featured item on a bill with other entertainments that varied from scientific demonstrations to Chinese fireworks to magic tricks.⁹

A shadow show was on the bill with Bologna and Tomlinson’s Phantasmagoria, which opened at the City Hotel, New York on November 7, 1803.¹⁰ Inaccurately advertised as the first Phantasmagoria ever presented in America, the production could be seen on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings for one dollar, a typical admission fee for many Phantas-

magoria shows in the years to come, although some could be seen for as little as the twenty-five cents that was sometimes charged for rear or gallery seats. Bologna must have been Jack Bologna, a member of a famed European family of clowns and acrobats and a star of pantomime who gave ghost shows in Europe. According to an 1805 bill for his Phantasmagoria presented in London, his apparatus had been constructed by "M. DUMUTIER, under the direction of Professor ROBERTSON, of Paris."¹¹ In addition to his ties to Robertson, he was also clearly influenced by Philipsthal because his American newspaper advertisements reproduced that showman's playbill description of the Phantasmagoria, including the references to "Apparitions of the Dead or Absent" and "Spectrology."

Bologna's premiere in New York suffered from "inaccuracies in consequence of part of the Machinery having been badly constructed, through the hurry of a first representation," as the managers explained in the *New York Post* of November 9, 1803. The second show was more successful, though, and the *New York Daily Advertiser* of November 11 noted that it attracted "a very respectable company, all of whom appeared perfectly satisfied with the representation, which was executed with the utmost neatness and attention. . . . The astonishment produced in the scenes of the ghosts and apparitions was very great." The entertainment continued into December but moved to the Union Hotel, where it was given every evening except Sunday.¹² In early January, 1804 it was being presented in New Brunswick, New Jersey.¹³ Whether or not Bologna made further appearances in America in later years is not known, but he did sell equipment or the rights to perform his show to John Durang, the American-born dancer and actor, who produced a Phantasmagoria "purchased of Sig. Bologno" at the New Theatre, Philadelphia, on April 9, 1808.¹⁴

William Bates, a comic performer, took up Phantasmagoria showmanship in 1804 and gave Boston its first entertainment of this kind on June 18, 1804 in the "commodious Hall" of the Columbian Museum,¹⁵ such museums at the time being important centers for popular entertainments that educated as well as amused. Here again, Philipsthal's description of the Phantasmagoria was used in the advertising. After a seemingly incongruous presentation of comic routines, Bates gave an introduction to the Phantasmagoria and then showed slides of ghostly subjects such as the Aerial Progression of Old Father Time; a Female Spirit, rising from the tomb; the King of Terror; and the Ghost and Hamlet. A particularly intriguing image was An Egyptian Pigmy Idol, which

instantaneously changes to a Human Skull; this might have been accomplished by means of a mechanical slide or by Robertson's transformation technique described above. The portraits projected included Bonaparte and Shakespeare as well as the American figures Washington, Franklin, and the President, Jefferson.¹⁶ A reviewer for the *Independent Chronicle* was impressed with the way the "objects diminish on the eye of the spectator" but noted that "Some of the figures, indeed, did not seem so perfect as others."¹⁷ On September 30, 1804, Bates also introduced the Phantasmagoria to Providence, Rhode Island, where a reviewer mentioned that the head of Washington was greeted with rapturous applause, whereas "an emphatic hiss of contempt and detestation spontaneously rose to salute the shade of the bloody usurper Bonaparte."¹⁸ This was a change from the depiction of Napoleon as heroic peacemaker in Robertson's first shows.

From December 4, 1806 through mid-January, 1807, Boston's Columbian Museum housed another Phantasmagoria, this time put on by Mr. Martin, a Parisian showman.¹⁹ Martin was actually Martin Aubée, one of a pair of brothers who were probably the first of Robertson's imitators. The brothers had served as Robertson's assistants at the Pavillon de l'Echiquier, Martin being hired as a carpenter, but they stole his production and staged it in Paris when he left briefly for Bordeaux.²⁰ Martin also toured Europe with the show; Madrid, for example, saw his spectacle from January to May, 1806, the same year he brought it to America.²¹

Martin's Boston advertisements declared that the "spacious hall" of the Museum was "decorated," presumably in the foreboding style of Robertson, and provided with foot stoves for the ladies. It also would be "illuminated and darkened instantaneously, in a very surprising manner." This effect was explained in the autobiography of another Phantasmagoria showman, Andrew Oehler, who was performing in Mexico City in 1806: he masked rather than stifled his candlelight so that he could make it appear to go on and off magically.²²

Martin's show, as could be expected, was highly reminiscent of Robertson's. He began with a tempest with thunder and lightning. This was followed by various ghosts appearing in different directions and by the phantoms of celebrities. A scene depicting Charon's ferry was included, as was the image of the giant Goliath, who also appeared in Robertson's show. Martin specified that his Goliath would "enter-

tain the audience by smiling, making faces, etc.,” so this slide must have been mechanical; another transparency of this type was used to create the effect of a phantom who would “change his head six times.” Other scenes included Romeo and Juliet shown dying, the Tomb of the Dives, the Tomb of Mary Stuart, and a subject designed to appeal to the American audience by mythologizing its own history, the Apotheosis of Washington. One reviewer found these transparencies to be “superior to any thing of the kind, ever exhibited in this country.”²³ Martin did more than show slides, however; he also presented shadows depicting the Dance of the Witches, and at one point in the evening a three-dimensional skeleton went “through the theatre so naturally as if he were animated.”²⁴ Martin’s Boston run was brought to an abrupt end on January 19, 1807, when he accidentally set fire to the Columbian Museum’s second-story hall, where he had been performing. An explosion resulting from his preparations for fireworks that were to be exhibited with the Phantasmagoria was probably the cause.²⁵

Although his equipment was lost in the fire, Martin managed to acquire a new projector by May 18, 1808, when he began to present the Phantasmagoria at the Lyceum in New York. An advertisement for this show called attention to the scene of Mary Stuart rising from her tomb and to Goliath whose head would be shown “about 10 feet wide”; this last detail is an indication of the size of Martin’s screen. Then, on June 15, the production acquired some notoriety when the *Commercial Advertiser* printed an article decrying the Lyceum as “a place converted from a church into a place of amusement, for vulgar minds, such as tricks of legerdemain, and where the devil dances on stilts to the tune of a hand-organ.” Whether or not this satanic dance really appeared in the show is uncertain, but there probably was some musical accompaniment to the production. In any case, Martin’s business increased as a result of this negative publicity, and he wrote to the same newspaper on June 20: “Since that publication, more ladies and gentleman than before have come to see” the show, so “Mr. Martin, who was ready to leave the city this week, will continue till the 4th of July, to show as many devils as they may desire to see, and in doing this he hopes to keep the devil from his pocket.”

In May and June, 1809, Martin brought the Phantasmagoria to Philadelphia. A noteworthy feature of this exhibition was that an “Orchestra of Italian Music” was in attendance; this no doubt was the orchestra associated with Falcone’s Ball Room, which served as the venue for the show.²⁶ Savannah,

Georgia saw his Phantasmagoria in February, 1810. Staged at the “house of Citizen Smith” and featuring Robertson’s famous image of the Bleeding Nun, this was, however, not Savannah’s first ghost show. Another, unspecified exhibitor had reached this far south in July, 1806 and produced the Phantasmagoria in one of the city’s theaters, admitting “colored people” to the back of the upper boxes.²⁷ By January, 1811 Martin seemed to be finished touring the United States, for he took out an advertisement in Baltimore stating that all his equipment was for sale and that he would instruct the purchaser in its use.²⁸

By March, 1807 the New York museums were taking advantage of the Phantasmagoria rage and presenting their own shows. E. Savage staged a ghost show at the museum of which he was proprietor, located at 166 Greenwich Street, before moving the production to the Shakespeare Gallery of D. Longworth, the bookseller, on July 18 and then to the Lyceum (which previously held Martin’s show) on October 27, 1808 for a run to conclude the following month.²⁹ Savage’s spectacle featured megascope projections such as “a bloody hand grasping a steel dagger” as well as “appropriate music on the piano by Miss Riley.” His newspaper announcements described the Tomb of the Dives slide scene, which also had been part of Martin’s repertoire: amidst thunder and lightning a wicked rich man rose from his tomb and lifted his hands to heaven as if imploring mercy but was overwhelmed by flames and a tremendous shower of fire.³⁰ Given the complexity of this scene, it must have involved several projectors and a number of slides, some of which were mechanical.

Another New York museum, this one at the corner of Greenwich and Dey Streets, hosted the Phantasmagoria from March 10 through May 1, 1808. This show was rather theatrical in that it featured the portraits of actors and was structured in acts. A breakdown of the content of each act, however, reveals how the Phantasmagoria could have a variety format so typical of popular entertainments of the time, jumping from image to image without any clear reason or connecting thread and even including musical interludes. The spectacle also could incorporate subjects that did not pertain directly to the central theme of the macabre, for as the years went by the term Phantasmagoria was increasingly associated with the showing of any slides of any topic, so long as they were projected by Robertson’s methods. Act I presented Hamlet and the Ghost; Macbeth and the Witches in a thunderstorm; the Magician who commands Ghosts to rise and disappear at

pleasure; Garrick as Richard III; Kemble as Rolla, bearing off the child; Mrs. Siddons as the Grecian Daughter; and the Death of General Wolfe. Act II featured the Vision of the Night Mare; an American Rattlesnake; the Cock of France; the Beggar's Petition; Fifteen Likenesses of Distinguished Persons, such as Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hancock, Robert Morris, Frederick III of Prussia, the Emperor of Russia, and Mrs. Jones, late of the New York theatre; and a Song. In Act III the spectator saw the Eruption of Mount Vesuvius (probably achieved by projection onto smoke); the Flying Furies, Spirits which fly all around the room; and Twenty or Thirty Likenesses of Celebrated Characters. The Battle of Prague, rendered on the organ, concluded that section. Chinese fireworks and a Dance of Characters (i.e., Robertson's Dance of Witches) made up Act IV.³¹

Numerous other showmen took up the Phantasmagoria. Some of these were established stage magicians such as John Rannie, whose ghost show could be seen in New York and Philadelphia in 1810³²; Falconi, who at New York's Tammany Hall in 1817 presented complex scenes depicting Charon and the Styx, the Tomb of J. J. Rousseau, Danae and the Brazen Tower, and the Conquest of the Golden Fleece³³; and Adrien, the "elegant" French performer whose exhibition played such cities as Baltimore in 1825 and Philadelphia ten years later.³⁴ Even amateur actors put on a Phantasmagoria show. In 1811 the Thespian Corps of Cincinnati, Ohio followed a performance of the play *The Poor Gentleman* with ghostly projections advertised as "scientific, rational, and astounding."³⁵ Little is known, however, about the background of other Phantasmagoria showmen such as Maffey, whose 1818 exhibition in Boston welcomed children at half price, an indication that the ghost show by then had become so popularized that it was considered appropriate for all ages.³⁶ An exhibitor by the name of Massonneau, billing himself as a "scholar" of Robertson, brought the Phantasmagoria to Philadelphia and Lancaster, Pennsylvania around 1819³⁷; Snell put on the show in Lexington, Kentucky in 1821³⁸; and Le Claire appeared in Brooklyn, New York in 1823.³⁹

One of the most famous Phantasmagoria exhibitors did not stage his spectacle in the United States until 1825, however. This was the aeronaut and physicist Eugene Robertson, son of the inventor of the show. After touring Europe he arrived in New York, where he displayed the Phantasmagoria at the Lafayette Circus in August, 1825.⁴⁰ Bostonians also witnessed the show at the Circus in Washington Gardens from October 26 through November 22 of

that same year; the advertisements for that run noted that the display, accompanied by music, presented the likenesses of the world's heroes as well as scenes from history, fiction, and mythology. They also pointed out that show was not terrifying and did not demand a total absence of light.⁴¹ In an effort to reach a broad audience who might otherwise hesitate to attend an eerie demonstration, Eugene Robertson seemed to compromise his father's original principles. By May, 1827 he was giving the show, which now featured some megascope projections, at the Camp Street Theatre in New Orleans, but after this he made his way to Cuba and eventually went back to Europe.⁴²

Eugene Robertson, however, did return to the United States for a few months in 1834, presenting the Phantasmagoria at New York's Euterpean Hall in July and September of that year.⁴³ An extant showbill for the event lists hydraulic and other experiments to be followed by the Phantasmagoria (Figure 7); the bill was meant to convince all, including children (who were to sit in the front seats), that apparitions were nothing but optical illusions. Mr. Louis Major presided at the pianoforte during the projections. These included some that seemed frightful despite the showman's protestations to the contrary: the Thunderstorm, the Drum of the Eumenides, the Visions, His Satanic Majesty, Medusa's Head, the Shade of a Departed Hero, and Doctor Young Interring his Daughter. This last probably referred to Edward Young, the Englishman who authored the melancholy meditation on death titled *The Complaint: or, Night Thoughts* (1742–45), after his stepdaughter and a number of other relatives died. Devised by Etienne Robertson and used in his shows, the Young slide scene was described in his memoirs: Young was seen carrying the body of his daughter in a moonlit cemetery. He entered a vault and attempted to find an empty tomb, but each was occupied by a skeleton that refused to give up its place. Finally, one ghost, after speaking to Young, let him have a tomb. Once interred, the daughter was seen to rise to Heaven, which caused Young to prostrate himself. Other scenes, such as the Balloon and the Parachute, Frederick the Great at Spandaw, and French Brandy/Jamaica Rum/English Gin were no doubt less grim, as was Rose of Love, an allegory that was also detailed in Etienne's memoirs (a rose tree was planted by a village girl and watered by a shepherd; after emerging from a rose, Eros united the two young lovers).⁴⁴

Although Eugene Robertson's show presented a number of remarkable images, audiences of the 1830s were probably growing tired of the Phantasmagoria. In fact, when Adrien presented a ghost

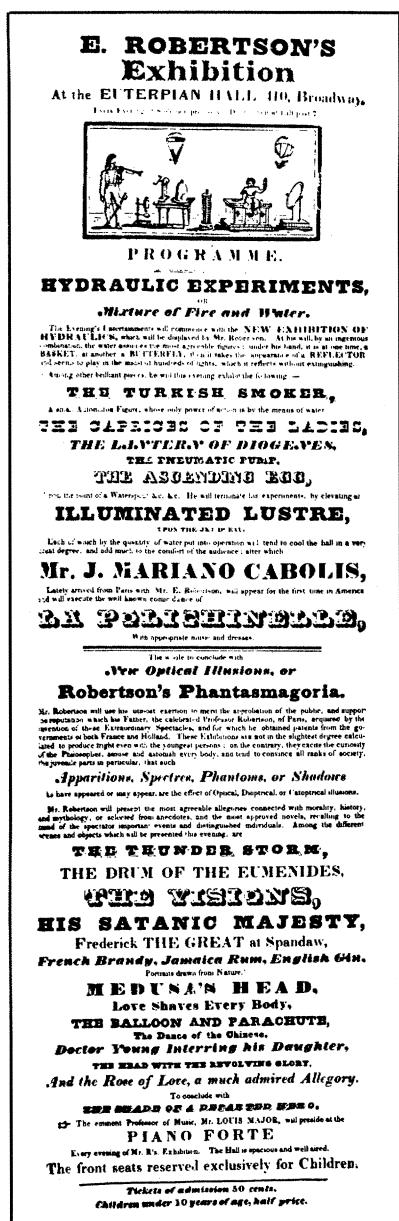


Figure 7. Eugene Robertson's handbill, New York, 1834. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Courtesy of Françoise Levie, Brussels.

show on July 29, 1839 in Boston (see Figure 8), he called it a Phantoscope presentation (after the name of Etienne Robertson's projector) to convince audiences that they were seeing something new.⁴⁵ After 1840 touring showmen for the most part no longer presented Phantasmagoria shows and considered ghost slides outmoded. For many years to come, however, magic lantern manuals and catalogs contained directions for how to mount a Phantasmagoria, including the convenient suggestion that the lantern could be carried by hand or strapped around the waist rather than rolled on a table⁴⁶; occasionally

these techniques were used to project subjects other than supernatural ones. Indeed, in a complete turnaround from the original nature of the Phantasmagoria, Robertson's special lantern effects were even used by American scientists of the late-nineteenth century to demonstrate scientific principles. In a lecture on acoustics delivered by Prof. Edwin J. Houston at the Philadelphia Academy of Music around 1879, a lantern wheeled back and forth behind the screen projected the face of a bugler whose cheeks were distended in the act of blowing. A hidden musician concurrently played an actual

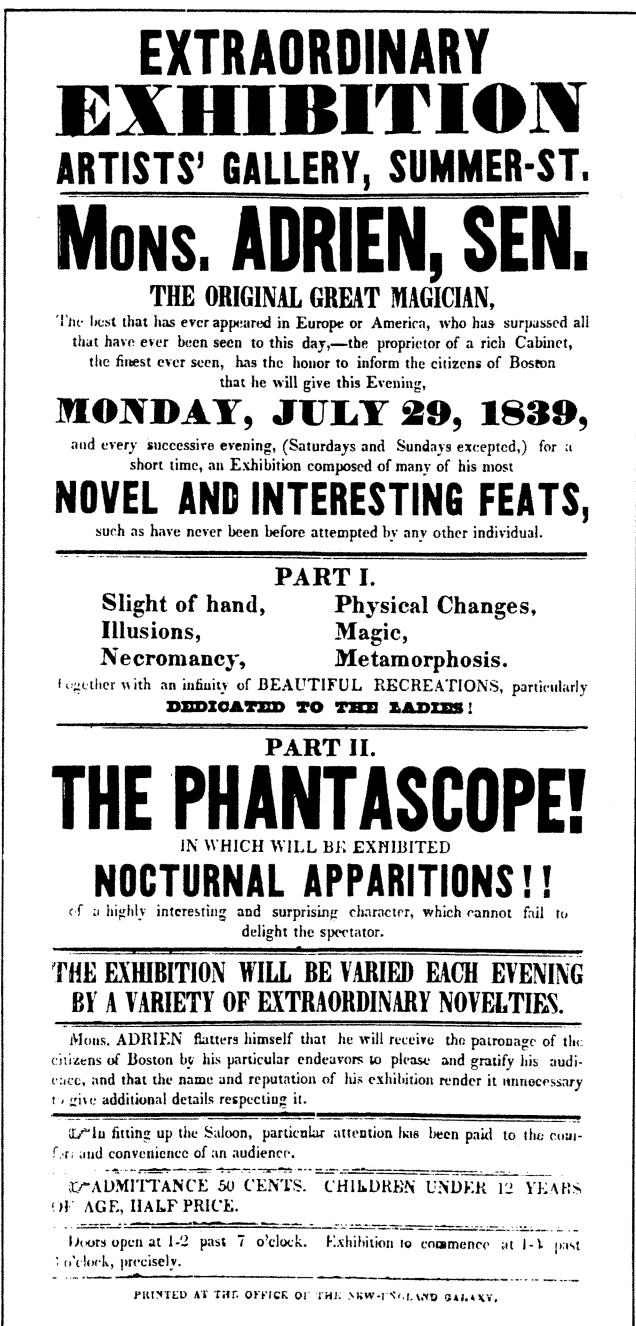


Figure 8. Adrien's handbill, Boston, 1839.

bugle, and the music was made to grow louder and quieter in harmony with the size of the projected image to illustrate how distance could affect the perception of sound.⁴⁷

Another interesting survival of the Phantasmagoria is its currency as a word in the English language, signifying a changing series of things seen or

imagined. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for one, used the word frequently in his writings. To cite an example, a character in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) had a propensity “to hang over Maule’s well, and look at the constantly shifting phantasmagoria of figures produced by the agitation of the water over the mosaic work of colored pebbles at the bottom.”⁴⁸

In discussing the survival of the Phantasmagoria, it should also be mentioned that another form of specter entertainment did become fashionable in America in the 1860s and 1870s. Known as Pepper’s Ghost after its English popularizer John H. Pepper, this effect presented moving images of phantoms on a sheet of glass that were actually reflections of costumed actors hidden from the audience’s view.⁴⁹ Thus the occasional late-nineteenth-century production of a ghost show may have used either Robertson’s or Pepper’s techniques or a combination of both. In 1889, for instance, Frank Hoffman, a showman with the Barnum and Bailey Circus, presented “supernatural illusions and visions exhibiting a series of startling, theosophical delusions and ethereal phantoms by modern scientific means” in a “black tent” darkened to keep out light.⁵⁰ Nothing is known, however, of Hoffman’s production methods.

Needless to say, the Phantasmagoria was a cinematic event with its projection of moving images by means of mechanical slides and wheeled projectors. In other ways, too, it (along with magic lantern practice in general) resembled film, especially the early motion pictures screened around the turn of this century. Designed to appeal to popular audiences, the Phantasmagoria made use of music, sound effects, and the commentary of a narrator to enliven the otherwise silent imagery. In some cases, the spectators may have even been caught up in the spectacle to the extent that they believed in the reality of the images before them. As with early film, distribution was dependent on touring exhibitors who brought the show to rented halls and other venues throughout the country. The projectionist or showman played a role in selecting the sequence of the images to be screened, just as short films could be presented in any order, but a variety format that went from subject to subject without a clear connecting thread was typical projection practice. One Phantasmagoria showman often copied the successful themes and images presented by another, and likewise early filmmakers duplicated or imitated the work of their competitors. In addition, some of the techniques used in the Phantasmagoria eventually found their way into film; the looming heads of

phantoms or celebrities, for example, were precine-matic close-ups. It was the early trick films, however, that most clearly paralleled the Phantasmagoria, which in itself was part of the magic tradition. Many of these films included transformations, superimpositions, and rear projections, not to mention frequent appearances of ghosts, skeletons, and the like.⁵¹ With horror films later taking up these same techniques and motifs, the Phantasmagoria could be said to survive, but in a new form, to the present day. ●

NOTES

1. S. I. van Nooten, "Contributions of Dutchmen in the Beginnings of Film Technology," *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers* 81 (February 1972): 119.
2. Hermann Hecht, "The History of Projecting Phantoms, Ghosts and Apparitions, Part 2," *New Magic Lantern Journal* (Great Britain) 3, no. 2 (December 1984): 3–5; Franz Paul Liesegang, *Dates and Sources: A Contribution to the Art of Projection and to Cinematography*, trans. and ed. Hermann Hecht (London: The Magic Lantern Society of Great Britain, 1986), 18.
3. Françoise Levie, who is preparing a book about Robertson, claims that he did not give shows in Paris until 1799, although earlier dates have often been cited (Françoise Levie to author, March 19, 1985). The best sources of information about Robertson's Fantasmagorie show available in English include David Robinson, "Robinson on Robertson," *New Magic Lantern Journal* 4, nos. 1-2-3 (April 1986): 4–13; William Tebra, "Robertson and His Phantasmagoria," *Magic Lantern Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (March 1986): 3–9; and J. E. Varey, "Robertson's Phantasmagoria in Madrid, 1821 (Part I)," *Theatre Notebook* 9 (July 1955): 89–95 and "Robertson's Phantasmagoria in Madrid, 1821 (Part II)," *Theatre Notebook* 11 (April 1957): 82–91.
4. Etienne Gaspard Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdotiques d'un physicien-aéronaute*, 2 vols. (Paris: Etienne Gaspard Robertson, 1831–33). Excerpts relating to the Fantasmagorie show are translated in Robinson, "Robinson on Robertson."
5. Varey, "Robertson's Phantasmagoria (Part II)," 82–83. Jac Remise also owns some slides attributed to Robertson. One of these is mechanical and depicts a death's head with movable wings. Jac Remise, Pascale Remise, and Regis van de Walle, *Magie lumineuse: Du théâtre d'ombres à la lanterne magique* (Paris: Balland, 1979), 47.
6. Paul de Philipsthal, playbill for show at Lyceum, London, 1802; quoted in Hermann Hecht, "Some English Magic Lantern Patents," *New Magic Lantern Journal* 2, no. 2 (January 1982): 2.
7. *New York Chronicle Express*, 30 June 1803.
8. According to George C. D. Odell (*Annals of the New York Stage*, vol. 2 [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1927–49], 183), a Monsieur Martin was performing in New York in late 1802. If this was the same Martin who was later to stage a number of Phantasmagoria shows in America, then he was in New York at this early date and may have put on the Mount Vernon Garden exhibition.
9. The Phantasmagoria was in itself a type of magic act, but it was also frequently presented in conjunction with other forms of deception and illusion. An important account of the American Phantasmagoria show in the context of the history of stage magic can be found in Charles Joseph Pecor, "The Magician on the American Stage: 1752–1874" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1976), 163–73, 249–51. Pecor's work was also published as *The Magician on the American Stage 1752–1874* (Washington, D.C.: Emerson and West, 1977). The role of magic, including the Phantasmagoria, in the development of cinema is discussed in Erik Barnouw, *The Magician and the Cinema* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981).
10. *New York Evening Post*, 5 November 1803.
11. Bologna, bill for show at Lower Theatre, Lyceum, London, 1 February 1805, British Museum; reproduced in Varey, "Robertson's Phantasmagoria (Part II)," 90. Dumutier was probably a variant (or incorrect) spelling of Dumortiez, who with his brother Jules Molteni was a leading French lantern maker. Laurent Mannoni, "The Magic Lantern Makers of France," *New Magic Lantern Journal* 5, no. 2 (August 1987): 4.
12. Odell, *Annals*, vol. 2, 207.
13. *New Brunswick Guardian*, 5 January 1804.
14. *Philadelphia Aurora General Advertiser*, 9 April 1808.
15. *Boston Columbian Centinel and Massachusetts Federalist*, 16 June 1804.
16. *Boston Gazette*, 28 June 1804.
17. *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 21 June 1804.
18. George O. Willard, *History of the Providence Stage: 1762–1891* (Providence: Rhode Island News Co., 1891), 32.
19. *Boston Gazette*, 4 December 1806–15 January 1807.
20. Levie; Robinson, "Robinson on Robertson," 6.
21. Varey, "Robertson's Phantasmagoria (Part I)," 93.
22. Oehler never presented the Phantasmagoria in the United States, but he did settle in New Jersey. Erik Barnouw, "The Fantasms of Andrew Oehler," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9 (Winter 1984): 40–44.
23. *Boston Gazette*, 1 January 1807.
24. Descriptions of Martins's Boston show appeared in the *Boston Gazette*, 29 December 1806 and 12 January 1807 and in the *Columbian Centinel and Massachusetts Federalist*, 24 December 1806.
25. *Boston Gazette*, 19 January 1807. See Pecor, "The Magician," 171 for further details about the fire.
26. *Philadelphia Aurora*, 1 May–27 June 1809.
27. J. Max Patrick, *Savannah's Pioneer Theater from Its Origins to 1810* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1953), 69, 74.
28. Milbourne Christopher, "Seeming Impossibilities," *Sphinx* 42 (April 1943): 39. Similarly, when Martin was leaving Madrid in 1806, he advertised that his equipment was for sale. Varey, "Robertson's Phantasmagoria (Part I)," 93.
29. Odell, *Annals*, vol. 2, 287, 321.
30. *New York Evening Post*, 18 July 1807.
31. Odell, *Annals*, vol. 2, 302–303.
32. *New York Post*, 6 March 1810; *Philadelphia Aurora*, 14 April 1810.
33. *New York Post*, 17 and 23 June 1817.

34. *Baltimore American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, 17 January 1825; Adrien, programme for show at Masonic Hall, Philadelphia, 4 November [1835], Theatre Collection , New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, New York.
35. West T. Hill, *The Theatre in Early Kentucky 1790–1820* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1971), 68.
36. *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 23 September 1818.
37. *Philadelphia Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, 14 May–1 June 1819; Felix Reichmann, "Amusements in Lancaster 1750–1940," *Historical Papers and Addresses of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 45, no. 2 (1941): 46.
38. *Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 1 February 1821.
39. Odell, *Annals*, vol. 3, 84.
40. Ibid., 164; *New York Post*, 29 August 1825.
41. *Boston Columbian Centinel*, 26 October 1825.
42. Levie; John S. Kendall, *The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theater* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1952), 45.
43. Odell, *Annals*, vol. 3, 697; vol. 4, 43.
44. Eugene Robertson, handbill for exhibition at Euterpean [sic] Hall, New York [1834], Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; courtesy of Françoise Levie. The exact nature of several additional scenes on the bill (Love Shaves Every Body and the Head with the Revolving Glory) remains unclear. The Dance of the Chinese was probably a variation on the Dance of the Witches.
45. Adrien, Senior, handbill for show at Artists' Gallery, Boston, 29 July 1839; reproduced in H. J. Moulton, *Houdini's History of Magic in Boston 1792–1915* (Glenwood, Ill.: Meyerbooks, 1983), opposite 27.
46. See, for example, Benjamin Pike, Jr., *Pike's Illustrated Descriptive Catalogue of Optical, Mathematical, and Philosophical Instruments*, vol. 2 (New York: Benjamin Pike, Jr., 1848 and 1856), 207–11.
47. "The Phantasmagoria Effect," *Exhibitor*, no.8 (August 1879): 59.
48. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: Airmont Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), 142.
49. For details about the effect, see George Speaight, "Professor Pepper's Ghost," *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, vol. 15 (January–March 1963), 48–56.
50. *Barnum and Bailey Show Route Book of the Season of 1889* (N.p.: Joe Meyer, P. T. Barnum, and sole owners of the Greatest Show on Earth, 1889), 14.
51. See Barnouw, *The Magician*, 85–105 for a discussion of some of these trick films and their techniques.