



Erkki Huhtamo. 2013. *Illusions in Motion. Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles.* MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. ISBN 978-0-262-01851-7. 438 pp., illustrated. \$45.00 (hardcover).

Erkki Huhtamo's new book on the history of the moving panorama is, quite simply, the best scholarly treatment of media archaeology published to date. The only comparable book is Richard Altick's classic *The Shows of London* (1978). Altick's book, however, belonged to an earlier era of scholarship, when authors had to painstakingly comb through archival material in museums and libraries to reconstruct the culture of an earlier era. Huhtamo, a member of our society, makes full use of such sources as well, but he also takes advantage of the more recent advent of many digital archives, from 19th century newspapers and magazines to Google Books. These sources, which provide the material for so-called "Digital Humanities," allow scholars to find, in a matter of weeks or months, material that would have taken an earlier generation of scholars decades to unearth. In fact, digital archives yield so much material that there is a real danger of resulting scholarship becoming little more than an annotated catalog of information. It takes a true scholar to convert such information into knowledge. This is where Huhtamo excels, weaving together information from many sources to bring to life the story of moving panoramas, a form of visual entertainment even less familiar to the general public than magic lanterns. The book is beautifully written, refreshingly free of the sort of academic jargon that

weighs down so many scholarly books. Readers who lack previous knowledge of moving panoramas (which will be most readers) will find an engaging story that brings to life a forgotten area of visual entertainment culture. The book is enhanced by abundant and carefully chosen illustrations, many of them from the author's personal collection of broadsides and other ephemera related to moving panoramas. To call this collection "museum quality" is superfluous, as there is no museum in the world with such a rich collection of visual material. Furthermore, the author makes full use of such sources. In many books of this type, illustrations of a few broadsides appear more or less as decorations. Huhtamo actually has read these broadsides and other printed material in great detail, allowing him to reconstruct the organization and content of moving panorama shows.

The moving panorama was a unique form of visual entertainment that became popular in the mid-19th century, especially in the United States. Traveling showmen crisscrossed the country by rail, bringing their moving panoramas to big cities and small towns. These panoramas were huge paintings on canvas, stored on rollers and unrolled before the audience, accompanied by sound and light effects and commentary from the showman, serving as a lecturer. The subjects were those suitable for spectacular presentation: Biblical scenes, Civil War battles, Arctic exploration, river voyages, and geological history, among others. In the first half of the 19th century, moving panorama showmen brought exciting visual entertainment to audiences who had little access to images of any kind. Eventually, the rather cumbersome moving panoramas disappeared, due in part to competition from magic lanterns, and particularly the advent of photography, which allowed for the mass production and dissemination of an almost infinite variety of images. Huhtamo devotes a full chapter to the interactions of magic lanterns and moving panoramas, including a clear introduction to magic lantern culture, especially in the United States.

A major accomplishment of this book is to place the history of moving panoramas in the broader context of other visual media, from peepshows, dioramas, and non-moving panoramas to magic lantern shows, dissolving views, and stereopticon lectures. There also is substantial discussion of the development of the moving panorama as a literary device in the writings of authors both famous and obscure. This book is a treasure-trove of detailed information, from the text to the figure captions to the chapter endnotes. Many of the endnotes are not just reference citations, but mini-essays and digressions on all sorts of interesting topics, from the technical aspects of panorama construction to the lives of previously unknown panorama showmen.

I can't really do justice to this book in such a short review; put it on your Christmas list.—The Editor.

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