

# Life Models Theatricals: Sources of Cultural Heritage for Digital Storytelling

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At the end of 2016, the Museum of Cinema acquired four sets of Life Models magic lantern glass slides, bringing its collection to 77. This acquisition was made to enhance the Museum of Cinema's collection of magic lantern glass slides (currently consisting of more than 3,000 slides), in which this type was barely represented.

Life Models (or Theatrical Life Models) are a typology of magic lantern glass slides which tell stories, often of a melodramatic or moral nature, using various sequences of photographic images. This type of projection was very popular particularly between 1870 and 1914 in Victorian England.

The use of sequences of photographic images to tell stories, the staging, actors or characters and narrative techniques typical of audiovisual language, etc. make this type of projection one of the clearest forerunners of cinematographic art.

## The Life Models Show

The photographic images were taken of actors or characters, usually amateurs, and included appropriate set designs and stage props like those in theatre plays of the time.

This type of projection was very popular between 1870 and 1914, particularly in

Great Britain, where it became one of the most popular forms of art and entertainment. The height of their popularity was in the 1880s and 1890s. These Life Models projections could also be found outside Great Britain, most commonly in the United States. Beyond these two countries, projections of Life Models slides were much rarer and infrequent, generally performed within the context of sessions organised by workers' groups or charities.

Although photography was invented in 1839, it was not until the 1870s that the projection of photographic images began. Up to then, magic lanterns had only projected drawings, painted or printed on glass slides. This move from drawing to photography was a very important leap in the realistic quality of the images. Going from telling stories with pictures to doing so with photographed scenes significantly increased the realism of the show.

The Life Models projections, like most magic lantern sessions, were usually held in public places (theatres, auditoriums, schools, etc.). This type of slide could be projected in the context of a typical magic lantern showing, alongside other types of image, like city views, visual effects (chromatropes) or comic images. What is more, due to the moral nature of the stories, they were mainly projected at magic lantern



I call on Mr  
Dabberton for  
a Song



The Stranger  
sings a Song



Dan listening  
to the Bells



He entered  
the House



Dan opens the  
Case of the  
Clock



He sleeps! he  
sleeps!



The lantern projections  
of Life Models slides  
appeared 30 years  
before the first  
cinematographic  
screening

sessions organised by labour, religious  
or charitable organisations, with an aim  
to indoctrinate or inform the working or  
lower classes about the dangers of the vices  
of mankind and their bad habits.

**Life Models stories** are told by a set of ap-  
proximately 8 x 8 cm photographic slides.  
The set may include between 10 and 60  
photos. Each photograph represents a scene  
in the story. The lantern projects all the  
slides, one after the other, with a narrator  
and live music. Often the companies which  
produced the slides also published a pam-  
phlet containing the story that the narrator  
would read to the audience.

Sometimes, the lyrics of a song or a hymn  
appeared on the screen at the emotional  
climax of the story, so that the audience  
could sing along, accompanied by a piano  
or organ.

Techniques like flashback, attributed to the  
cinema, were already used in these stories.  
Some of these projections also included  
special effects (rain, storms, snow, fire, the  
appearance of angels, overlapping images,  
the re-enactment of dreams, etc.), which  
were performed using the technique of pro-  
jecting two images superimposed on the  
screen, using a dual or triple lens lantern.

**The themes** of this type of slide would usually be melodramatic and/or moral in general: the struggle of good against evil, or ruin and redemption.

Thus, for example, the most popular stories were dramatizations or adaptations on the magic lantern of sentimental poems, ballads or melodramas which had already been produced and published. Some stories by Dickens or Shakespeare were also adapted to this type of projection, using just 12 or 24 glass slides. Apart from these great literary figures, we know little of the authors of these stories. Perhaps one of the most famous of them was the British journalist and writer, George Sims. Some of his most popular ballads or poems, like *Christmas Day in the Workhouse* (1881), contained subliminal radical political messages, denouncing the social injustices suffered by the working class.

Mary Sewell was another English writer whose works were successfully adapted to lantern projections. Her most important success was *Mother's Last Words* (1860s), which tells the story of two working class boys, who become orphans following the death of their mother, and their fight against the temptations of the devil in their lives on the streets. Their final reward comes when the whole family is reunited... in heaven. However, most stories were by unknown

authors, who wrote for the working class of the time.

Various religious and/or charitable organisations, who considered lantern projections to be a powerful instrument of public persuasion, also used this type of story to provide information, above all to the working class and children. A particular example may be seen in the campaigns against alcoholism amongst the working class carried out by organisations like *The Band of Hope* or *The Salvation Army*. The story entitled *Slaves of Drink*, in which drinking is associated with poverty, violence and child abuse, is a clear example. A further example is *The Gin Fiend*, a bleak melodrama in which a woman commits suicide to escape from her alcoholic husband. Tortured by the memory of this event, he ends his days locked up in an asylum.

**The production of life model slides** was carried out by just a few companies, who specialised in the manufacture of magic lanterns and glass slides. The most significant ones were English.

York & Son of London was one of the pioneering firms in marketing this type of slide in the mid-1870s. However, the Holmfirth (West Yorkshire, Great Britain) company, set up by James Bamforth (Bamforth & Co.) became the most prominent in the sector. In



Our Father!



Mother and Son



Waiting for the Prodigal Son



Her Son comes Home



The Young Man at his Mother's Grave



The Lovers



the United States there were also companies dedicated to the production of Life Models, although production was on a lower scale than that of the British companies. Other European and Western countries scarcely produced this type of slide at all. It is estimated that the two leading producers of Life Models, the Bamforth and York companies, produced 850 Life Model series or stories, making up a total of approximately 12,750 photographic glass slides.

To take the photographs for the glass slides, these companies used studios resembling theatre stages of the time, with actors or characters who were usually amateurs, and extensive stocks of all kinds of costumes, set designs, stage props, painted backdrop curtains, etc. The photographs were usually taken during the summer months, to take advantage of better lighting conditions (these studios usually had glass roofs to capture natural light better), while the winter months were dedicated to the production of the slides and to planning and designing for the next season. However, although most photographs for Life Models were taken in these studios or at nearby outdoor locations, some scenes had to be photographed at specific locations (for example, a train station) to heighten the realism.

The actors in Life Models were all amateurs living in the vicinity of the studio. Some

companies even recruited people from the street who had no interest in acting, and so they just acted themselves (as teachers, farmers, police officers, students, etc.). Most characters appeared in just one story, although there were cases of actors appearing in several.

Child characters were also prominent stars of many of the Life Models melodramas. Companies recruited them from the schools in their neighbourhood.

The characters posed in front of backdrops consisting of fabrics painted as realistically as possible, sometimes even with perspective effects.

Normally, the black and white photography of each glass slide was hand-coloured at a specialist workshop. This meant that a colour image could be projected onto the screen, something very much appreciated by the audiences of the time. The vast majority of the Life Models images are well photographed, and the hand-colouring is delicate and very carefully done. There are images of great beauty and poetry.

Companies produced pamphlets—“lantern reading”—for each series of Life Models, so that the lantern operator could comment on each image in the story.

**Life Models and the Cinema.** The lantern projections of Life Models slides appeared 30 years before the first cinematographic screening (1895) and, even so, there were already typically cinematic features: a painted backdrop as the set design, narrative montage with ellipses, flashbacks, effects of chained pits, superimposed images, titles and subtitles, various frames, etc. If we add to all of this the photographic image and the complexity of the stories that were told, the relationship between Life Models as a direct antecedent of cinema is more than evident. We can't even rule out the influence of the narrative of Life Models on the audiovisual language of some films in the early years of cinema.

### The Cinema Museum acquisitions

At the end of 2016, the Cinema Museum acquired four sets of Life Models slides, which are the following:

- *A Terrible Christmas Eve* (24 slides) produced by W. Rider & Co. (Great Britain) 1894.
- *In the Snowdrift* (19 slides) produced by Bamforth & Co. (Great Britain) 1896. A story based on a song of the same title by M.S. Haycraft and Miss Spicer.



A Snug Little House



In comes the Young Woman's Husband



O Mother, I am so tired and hungry!



On one of the beds lies the body of a Middle-aged Woman



He was broad awake now



Mrs Dabberton and Nelly returned



- *The Land of Gold* (16 slides) produced by Bamforth & Co. (Great Britain) 1890. A story based on a poem of the same title by George Sims from 1888.
- *Dan Dabberton's Dream* (18 slides; Fig.), produced by York & Son. (Great Britain) 1885. Based on a text by Reverend Frederick Langbridge, it is the story of Dan Dabberton, a victim of alcoholism. On Christmas Eve, Dan Dabberton is celebrating in a pub with his friends. An unknown person sings a song that overwhelms him. When he is returning home, completely drunk, he imagines that the chiming church clock bells are reproaching his drunkenness. When he gets home, he silences the grandfather clock which seems to be repeating the phrase *Drunk again!*, and then he falls asleep. In his dream, Dan remembers the promises made to his wife when they got married and sees the terrible destiny that awaits their family. When he wakes up, Dan is full of remorse about his alcoholism and decides to face up to it.

## The Life Model in the Era of Digital Storytelling

The digitalisation of these materials acquired by the Museum of Cinema brings us to re-

flect on the reuse of cultural heritage in the digital domain, particularly regarding the broad concept of storytelling, which goes beyond the primary objective of its digitalisation to ensure universal access to cultural heritage for the common good of society.

As a basis for this, we have used the text published by the Committee of the Sages in the report *The New Renaissance* (2010), which reflects on the transfer of European cultural heritage to the Internet. Specifically, when the idea of *future* is considered, the following is explained: *Our cultural heritage is not only the legacy of the past, but is a body of knowledge, imagination and creativity which is constantly evolving and growing every day. Today's wealth of cultural expressions and knowledge will be our common cultural heritage tomorrow. Therefore, although the recommendations focus on digitisation and the cultural heritage from the past, they always include what is added in the present because the past and the present must be available to future generations. One of our core missions is to ensure full access to cultural expressions and knowledge of the past, the present and the future—to highlight the relevance of this legacy for the future, based on its impact on the past and the present, and the importance of creativity and imagination regarding this body of knowledge.*

This is precisely the approach that has been taken by the Museum of Cinema in the digitalisation process of materials created within the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century visual shows, and promoted by the appearance and evolution of this photographic technique—because the exhibition and public dissemination of these Life Models follows in the creative tradition that has characterised the Museum of Cinema's approach, in a careful combination of old stories with the potential and exponential service of new technologies.

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