

Going to the Movies in the Eighteenth Century: A Spectacle by Collaboration at the ANU

On 26 February 1781, in a house adjoining London's Leicester Square, an artist-scenographer, Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, opened a show described by the *Public Advertiser* as 'various imitations of Natural Phenomena, represented by moving pictures'.

The show featured a glamorous specially-built theatre called an 'Eidophusikon' which seated around 130 people paying three to five shillings each. Inside, a type of giant peephole or miniature stage about 2 metres wide, 1 metre high and 2.7 metres deep, showed five scenes of picturesque landscapes in phases of transition. Each scene ran for around three minutes, using controlled lighting, magic lantern slides, coloured silk filters, clockwork automata, three-dimensional models, painted transparencies and an accompanying sound system. Within a darkened auditorium, viewers saw dawn creep through the mist over the Thames at Greenwich, a view of Gibraltar at noon shimmering beside the hot port of Tangier, a scarlet sun flushing over the bay of Naples, a vivid moon rising over the Mediterranean, and a torrential storm wrecking a ship at sea. In between each scene, painted transparencies served as curtain drops, and viewers were entertained with music and song. Within the first ever moving-picture theatre, Philippe had created the first ever moving-picture show.

The curtain rises. A ship sails along serenely in gentle waves with clouds scudding in the background. But as the wind rises the ship begins to show signs of distress. A torrential storm breaks. Lightning cracks and thunder detonates through the room. The sky is black, except for a pallid moon which illuminates careering clouds. Vast, broiling waves batter the ship. A distress is fired from the deck but the explosion is swallowed by the storm. At this moment, one of the audience, a young artist called William Pyne, feels he is actually there: he later says he has to stop himself from crying out hoarsely in terror.

Pyne knows what's going to happen because he's watching a true story that has already been a newspaper sensation. At the door of the theatre he's also bought a short printed account taken from the

words of an actual survivor. Soon the ship is driven onto a shoreline of jagged granite cliffs. Sailors are jolted from the disintegrating decks to be pounded to pulp on the rocks or sucked under the swirling water. In the forward roundhouse, eight people crouch arm-in-arm. Seven are young girls, stylishly dressed. They were bound for India, all with romance on their minds. Now, however, they are white-faced with terror; several weep piteously. A middle-aged man tries to comfort them, speaking soothingly, his arms around two of the girls who are his daughters. Suddenly there is a cracking of wood and metal, and seawater spurts through the decking. A few sailors who've managed to cling to a thin ledge at the base of the cliffs swear that they hear 'terrible shrieks' as the roundhouse breaks off and sinks into the sea. At the top of the cliffs, leaning into sheets of wind and rain, some colliers are trying to lower ropes down to the sailors whose numbers dwindle as waves and exhaustion wash them off the ledge and into the sea, one by one.

Pyne was watching a simulated re-enactment of the sinking off the Dorset coast of a new East Indies merchant ship, the *Halsewell*, now forgotten, but as famous in its day as the *Titanic* is in ours. The story was the leading English weepie of 1786. It gave rise to newspaper articles, paintings, engravings, books, pamphlets, songs and poems, as well as this first ever disaster movie and newsreel, called *The Shipwreck of the Halsewell*. Short as it was, the movie became a London sensation, and it was shown around half a century before the invention of photography and more than two centuries before James Cameron's blockbuster, *The Titanic*. The maker of *The Shipwreck of the Halsewell* — in the most literal sense — was an Alsatian-born, English-based artist called Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg. This show of 1786 — simultaneously a disaster movie, a newsreel, a multi-media re-enactment and an experiment with virtual reality — was only one of his most extraordinary artistic achievements.

As part of my Federation Fellowship, I'm writing a book about de Loutherbourg and his shows. It's called *Technomancer: Moving Pictures and Virtual Realities in the Age of Wonders*. What you'll see

tonight, however, is the first attempt by a small collaboration of enthusiasts to produce a working model of what de Louthembourg's 'Eidophusikon' show might have looked like. We have created this little model prototype in less than three months, part-time, and for a cost of only \$10,000. We're showing it to you conscious that it's a first and humble proof of concept. But we're also convinced that with time and money it could be scaled up to become a compelling permanent museum exhibit and much else. Our approach has been to produce a deliberate convergence and interaction between technologies of the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries, to try to capture something of the wonders of both the past and the present.

Our collaboration has happened more than anything because of the incredible skill, enthusiasm and energy of Darran Edmundson, whom ANU's VizLab generously loaned to us for a short while. In the deepest sense of the term he undertook a journey without maps and with very little time or money. He in turn has been supported by the generosity and brilliance of his brother Andrew, who has been working with us on line from EDU studios in Calgary, Canada.

But even these two are only the tip of the iceberg of what has comprised an extraordinarily diverse team that has had to improvise a myriad of bygone skills. Linda Davy produced the paintings, waves, rocks, our leather drive belt and much else. Kaoru Alfonso of the NGA designed and built the brilliant de Louthembourg-style lighting. Ian Gilmour and Damien Cassidy of the Australian Film Commission provided the complex sound expertise.

Georgina Fitzpatrick of the HRC did the picture research. Kim McKenzie of CRIO has advised us and filmed our undertaking, not only tonight but throughout the making of our prototype. ANU PhD student, Lachlan McCalman, together with his brother Andrew, helped with computer visualizations and sundry other matters. At almost the last minute, when we were being plagued by technical problems driving our ship, John Chappell, friend, ANU scientist and Canberra artiste extraordinaire came to the rescue. I truly believe he can do anything: he is the de Louthembourg of our time. Across the waves on the other side of the world we have been advised by two experts on various aspects of de Louthembourg's art and scenography, Professors Ann Bermingham from the University of California at Santa Barbara and Chris Baugh from the University of Kent, in the UK.

Invaluable assistance was also given by: Andrey Bliznyuk, Paul Bourke, Steve Brooks, Mark Chatburn, Ben Cory, Ron Cruikshank, Tony Cullen, Rob Davy, Eve Fortnum, Kate Fullagar, Peter Fullagar, Dennis Gibson, Rhys Hawkins, Dan Henne, Margaret Kahn, Gerhard 'Kim' Kimenkowski, Michael Maloney, Tom McGuinness, Robert Poulter, Alison Scott, Paul Warren, and John Wilson. The fact that it has taken this large and wonderfully creative mob to bring you this small and partial simulation of one of de Louthembourg's spectacles suggests something of the man's genius.

Iain McCalman, Australian National University

3D Projection Technology graciously provided by Jumbovision International Pty (www.jumbovision.com.au)
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