

## **The Travelling Lantern: The Courtois and Grandsart-Courtois Family Theatres as Transcultural Mediators at the Nineteenth-Century Fair**

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### Abstract

This article discusses the lantern at the nineteenth-century fairground as a mobile but hidden technology and elucidates the role of this optical medium in the transnational circulation of visual culture by focussing on one particular but exemplary case: the Théâtre Courtois and the Théâtre Grandsart-Courtois. This Belgian fairground family travelled during five generations around European fairgrounds from the early nineteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century. Their programmes were very diverse, combining magic with science and technology, music, dance and acrobatics. On their travels they picked up new technological developments and ideas that were particularly suited for show business and introduced them in their shows: from projection with lanterns, through the use of electric light to the introduction of the cinematograph at Belgian and French fairs. Relying on international fairground networks, they thus contributed to the circulation of visual culture between European cities and at annual fairs in smaller towns and villages. By considering these family theatres as actors of cultural transfer, and the lantern as a transcultural mediator, this article illustrates the variety and complexity of their mediating roles.

Keywords: fairground; magic lantern; itinerant theatre; science popularization; phantasmagoria

## Science and technology at the fair

Many of the technological, scientific and cultural developments of the past 150 years have been exploited by travelling fairground families and exhibited at fairs in villages and towns. The fair has always been an attraction for everything that was new, topical or unusual. On the annual fair, the locals came into contact, often for the first time, with the latest innovations in technology and science. The only condition for success was that it appealed to the public's imagination. On the one hand, various kinds of useful and curious automata were exhibited alongside experiments with microscopy, photography and telegraphy. Anatomical cabinets, on the other hand, informed visitors about hotly debated diseases such as syphilis and the consequences of alcoholism. And showpeople who called themselves professors or physicists gave spectacular demonstrations of electricity, magnetism and X-rays.

Especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, before the development of mechanical attractions, such theatrical shows on the intersection of science and magic were perhaps the most important part of the fairground. These ambulant theatres were set up alongside anatomical and ethnographic museums, cabinets, panoramas and dioramas. Between the events, the fairground visitor could visit the smaller booths, with a waffle or a bag of french fries in their hands, and be amazed by freak shows or small illusions, presented as 'miracles' or 'wonders of life'. The desire for the spectacular, so characteristic of this place of entertainment, offered both rich and poor a popular introduction to the world of physics, anatomy, mechanics and technology.

In this context it should not come as a surprise that the magic lantern was also a popular and widely used technology at the fairground. Many of the traveling entertainments indeed made use of magic lantern technology, developed in the middle of the seventeenth century but particularly popular as a mass-medium in the long nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not always clear from the newspaper announcements and advertising posters. Nor is it clear which particular lantern slide series were shown.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the uses of lantern technology at the fairground has remained surprisingly under-researched. However, upon closer examination, we see that the magic lantern recurs in many fairground programmes throughout the long nineteenth century. In most cases the magic lantern was a hidden technology used to create optical

illusions, evoke ghosts or take the audience to distant, exotic locations. Only occasionally was the lantern a specific attraction, as we can see on an advertising poster for a Flemish fair (*Kermesse Flamande*) from 1883 in Tournai, a Belgian town near the French border (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** *Grande Kermesse Flamande*, 8 January 1883. Collection Patrice Guérin. Note the illustration on the upper right showing a magic lantern in use.

This article will discuss the lantern at the nineteenth century fairground and elucidate the role of this optical medium in the transnational circulation of visual culture by focussing on one particular but exemplary case: the Théâtre Courtois and the Théâtre Grandsart-Courtois. This itinerant Belgian family travelled during four generations through Western European fairgrounds from the early nineteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century. Their programmes were tremendously diverse, combining magic with science and technology, music, dance and acrobatics. On their travels they picked up new technological developments and ideas that were particularly suited for show business and introduced them to their programmes: from projection with lanterns through the use of electric light to the introduction of the cinematograph at Belgian, Dutch and French fairs. Relying on international fairground networks, they thus contributed to a circulation of visual culture between West European cities and at annual fairs in smaller towns and villages.

### **Fairground culture in Western Europe**

Originally, the fairground was an annual trade fair where artists took advantage of the large crowds. According to the fairground literature the fair has a threefold origin.<sup>3</sup> The roots of the fair or *fête foraine* go back to ancient traditions of religious harvest festivals, organized around important fairs that marked the rise of trade since the end of the Middle Ages and were embedded by the church in the religious calendar. These early popular festivals already combined religious celebrations with trade and entertainment. The triple dynamic of the fair is clearly reflected in international terminology: the French *foire*, the English *fair* and the Flemish *foor* are derived from the Latin *feriam*, which means ‘celebrating’. At the same time, these words all mean ‘market’. The Flemish word *fookramer* and the French *forain* derive from the Latin

word *foras*, which means ‘stranger’, or ‘someone who comes from elsewhere’. For the fair, *forains* came indeed often from afar and offered unknown goods or showed living curiosities. The etymology of the word *kermis*, a contamination of the Dutch word for church (*kerk*) and mass (*mis*), in turn points to the religious origin of the feast. The French word *kermesse* and the English *kermis* are directly derived from Dutch and, like the German *Kirmes* and *Messe*, underline its religious origin.

The fair or carnival<sup>4</sup> as we know it today, however, is mainly a product of the industrial revolution and the mechanization of entertainment since the middle of the nineteenth century. This moment was an important turning point in the history of the fair. With the arrival of the first warehouses around the 1850s, most of the commercial activities moved to shops (Fontaine 1993). From then on, with the exception of a few toy and food stalls, the annual fair was mainly fun. The fair’s religious origins had also quietly disappeared into the background in favour of popular entertainment. Gradually the fair had evolved into a place of pleasure, a fun fair, where old rural traditions were combined with transformations as a result of the technological revolutions. New scientific and technological developments were integrated into older cultural rituals. A fairground experience is thus situated on the threshold between tradition and progress.

The tipping point of this history of the fair was also linked to industrialization and an unbridled belief in progress and modernization so characteristic of this era. The industrialization of the art of printing also made it possible for a broad readership to become acquainted with the many scientific breakthroughs of that time through newspapers and books (Bensaude-Vincent and Rasmussen 1997; Lightman 2009; Kemperinck 2011). But the involvement of the lay public in science also grew in other areas. In museums, zoos and botanical gardens, but also during public lectures and theatre performances, science presented its latest results to an audience with a very heterogeneous level of education (Fyfe & Lightman, eds, 2007; Kember 2009; Kember et al., eds, 2012; Raichvarg & Jacques, eds, 1991; Vanhoutte & Wynants 2017). This was part of a general and politically motivated effort to bridge the growing gap between professional scientists and lay audiences. The municipal authorities therefore strongly stimulated the popularization of science and a visit to the observatory, a scientific demonstration in the theatre or a world exhibition became a popular public pastime in the nineteenth century.

It is no coincidence that the first world exhibitions were organized during the same period. The first World Fair – literally ‘world market’ – opened in 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London. Paris, which refused to be left behind, organized its first Exposition Universelle in 1855. Berlin (1879), Antwerp (1887) and Amsterdam (1883) followed suit in the following decades. These international exhibitions demonstrated the latest scientific findings and technological developments from all over the world. Large crowds gathered for these events; the majority were the wealthy bourgeoisie and international elite since entrance tickets were not cheap.<sup>5</sup> Among them, however, were many fairground people who found inspiration in the inventions on display for the development of new spectacular fairground attractions. For them, the entrance fee was a well-considered investment. In order to meet the eager expectations of the fairground visitors who wanted to experience something new every year, showpeople had to keep up with the times and constantly adapt their attraction to the latest fashions and developments.

Stimulated by local authorities, the fair provided an ideal platform for travelling artists and magicians to promote the latest scientific and technological developments, especially when these were of a spectacular nature. The sensation- and information-seeking public has thus demanded a constant stream of new ideas and inventions at the fair, where every novelty that appealed to the imagination was enthusiastically received. The fairs also attracted spectators who could not afford a seat in a regular theatre or an entrance ticket to the World Fairs. It was at the fairground that visitors could admire, often for the first time, scientific demonstrations, images from faraway countries or representations of native inhabitants of colonised regions.

In Europe, the tradition of entertainment at the fair or *Jahrmarkt* is rooted in West European regions, an area encompassing what is now Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Belgium, in the heart of Europe, marks a specific case. It was already in the nineteenth century densely populated, with hundreds of small and large fairs at a short distance from each other and with a well-developed rail network for its time (Verbeurgt, van Meerten & van der Hertten 2001). Hence, it was a prosperous area for itinerant showpeople. Also, in the urban industrial centres around cities such as Liège, Charleroi, Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, a class of well-paid workers and a wealthy middle class developed rapidly. As a

consequence, many international showpeople settled in Belgium; from there they could also easily reach carnivals in the neighbouring countries, which was obviously also the case for Belgian fairground families (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** A map of the fairs in Belgium, the Netherlands and France (between 10 and 30 days), based on data from: *Le Guide Forain, Guide des Foires, Fêtes, Marchés, etc. de toutes les principales Villes et Communes de la Belgique, de France et de la Hollande*, 1897 (Charleroi: Imprimerie Deforeit) and *La Comète Belge, seul organe des Industriels et Artistes forains de la Belgique*, 1-15 July 1905 (first edition). Map created with Geographic Information System (GIS) technology by Iason Jongepier (University of Antwerp) and Nele Wynants.

Considering the mobility of these theatres and more particularly their transnational networks, the multilingual dynamics and the transcultural exchanges of itinerant showpeople, this article discusses the lantern as a mobile and networked medium that requires an approach that goes beyond a nation-state, mono-linguistic perspective. As go-betweens, crossing borders between different geographic spaces, languages and cultures, itinerant entertainers can thus be considered as ‘cultural mediators’, or actors of cultural transfer (Verschaffel et al. 2017). This concept is borrowed from Cultural Transfer Studies and Translation studies, two disciplines dealing with forms of intercultural interaction and transfer between geocultural spaces, thereby focusing on agents such as translators, publishers, critics, art dealers and collectors (Charle et al. 2004; De Vries 2008). Both disciplines provide interesting concepts and methods but are limited to literature and text on the one hand and high culture networks on the other (art houses, societies, academies, salons, publishing houses etc.), revealing a persistent underestimation of the role of popular culture in general, and itinerant entertainers in particular, in the shaping of a common European visual culture.

However, if we consider the inherently multilingual nature of travelling entertainments, their high mobility and flexibility to adapt to any new context, it is possible to shed new light on the way our visual culture developed in those early years. Fairground culture was indeed inherently multilingual, whether due to specific spatial features, such as multilingualism in border areas or specific regions (between France

and Flanders, Luxembourg, Switzerland) or because of sociocultural motives (French as the *lingua franca* in nineteenth-century Belgium). Such a transnational<sup>6</sup> perspective more particularly enables us to highlight the cross-cultural nature of the magic lantern and the fairgrounds' functioning as a platform for the dynamic interplay of different types of discourse, cultures and languages. In the remainder of this article, I will discuss these processes of transcultural mediation in more detail, by focussing on the role of the lantern as a medium for transferring visual culture and knowledge.

### **The Courtois theatre as a family business**

One of the extraordinary itinerant fairground patriarchs was the renowned magician Louis Courtois (1785-1859). His show was a precursor of the modern art of prestidigitation: notably he was one of the first to wear a dress suit on the stage, long before Robert-Houdin became known for it (Figure 3). Louis Courtois was a master of card tricks, which he, if we believe his promotional advertisements, demonstrated in front of the crowned heads of Europe. Louis was born on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1785 in Waasmunster, a small town in East Flanders between Ghent and Antwerp, and his baptism certificate was countersigned by his father and his paternal grandfather, both ambulant showmen on the roads of the Austrian Netherlands. Louis' father, Jacques-François Courtois, who was, according to the baptismal registers, born in Antwerp as the son of French 'vagabonds' (Bollaert 2001, 83), presented himself as a 'mechanic and physician'; his grandfather Mathieu-Louis Courtois identified himself as 'painter and travelling artist'<sup>7</sup> (Courtois 2019, 4).

**Figure 3.** Portrait of Louis Courtois, Belgian Prestidigitator. Born: Waasmunster, 1784. Died: Paris, 1859. Courtesy Didier Morax.

In good fairground tradition, Louis' father Jacques-François Courtois passed the craft on to his son and his daughters Reine Isabelle (1793-1870) and Eléonore-Jeanne (1799-1864). The first was also known as a 'physicienne prestidigitatrice' on the roads of France and Belgium;<sup>8</sup> the latter stayed in the business by marrying Jean Joseph Devin, a less famous French 'physician'. Indeed, fairground theatres were often family businesses, and this was important for their economic viability. As with other travelling theatre and fairground families, marriage with other showpeople was not unusual, and

this helped ensure the continuity of the business. Furthermore, it avoided the inevitable conflict between settled and nomadic ways of life. Travelling relatives were related through strong family connections and the family business was passed down from generation to generation. In this particular example, the tradition remained in the family for at least five generations of very large households.

The size of Louis' family is indeed impressive to say the least. Together with Marie-Jeanne Van Gele (1788-1862), the daughter of a Flemish sacristan who changed her sedentary life in the countryside for a nomadic and international adventure, he reportedly brought no less than 18 children into the world – hence Louis' nickname 'Papa Courtois' (Figure 4).<sup>9</sup> They were born on the routes between different fairs and most of them inherited the stage talent and nomadic blood from their father. As we can deduce from a poster from 1851, they each had their own talent and stage act (Figure 5). This 'Théâtre de la Famille Courtois' travelled through the Dutch-, French- and German-speaking regions of Western Europe to end up in Paris where Papa Courtois died at the age of 74. By then he was widely known and well-respected, as illustrated by the various newspaper articles that announced his death in 1859.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 4.** Family tree of The "papa Courtois" Theatre (1818-1859) based on the data assembled by Laurent Courtois on Geneanet, a family history website based in France (<https://gw.geneanet.org/>).

**Figure 5.** Advertisement for "Theatre de la famille Courtois", *Courrier du Grand-Duché du Luxembourg*, August 1851. Source: Laurent Courtois.

Although Louis Courtois was mainly known as an agile card player, as he was portrayed in the few surviving photographs, we can infer from many archive sources that the family performed a diverse and regularly updated programme. The Courtois family had a good nose for novelties and spectacle and they were also in possession of a magic lantern. When and where the family bought a lantern and a set of glass slides is unknown, but the earliest implicit reference to a lantern performance dates from 1818, in an announcement referring to the 'renowned physicist' on the Ghent fair, whose well-known and appreciated 'cabinet physique et mécanique' culminated in 'splendid night



views or fireworks'.<sup>11</sup> The following year we find a similar announcement; this time it responded to the exotic appetite of the audience by characterizing the night views as 'Italian'. With the 'famous Nightly Visions', the Courtois theatre toured Flanders in 1819<sup>12</sup> and they also attracted attention during a tour of Holland in 1822 at the fairs of Breda, Leyden, Utrecht, Amsterdam and Rotterdam.<sup>13</sup> The newspapers were filled with superlatives and encouraged their readers to take a look because, it was said, there had never been such a thing before in the area. A contributor to the *'s-Gravenhaagsche Courant* of 6 May 1822 wrote that the 'wonderful images' were 4 feet high, an aspect which had clearly made an impression on the journalist.

When, two years later, Louis Courtois travelled to Paris with his family (already including nine children) and his fellow countryman Jean-Baptiste Van Hoestenbergh (1767-1840), the repertoire now included a phantasmagoria.<sup>14</sup> Following in the footsteps of their compatriot Robertson (the stage name of Liege-born Étienne-Gaspard Robert), they used the magic lantern to conjure ghosts.<sup>15</sup>

With their 'cabinet de physique et mécanique', the two Flemish magicians performed in the passage Montesquieu and gave entertaining 'séances de physiques amusantes'.<sup>16</sup> The Parisian press was impressed by the Flemish duo, even though the journalist on duty in *Le Diable Boiteux* noted that Courtois' 'Gascon vivacity' – Gascon is a dialect of Occitan mostly spoken in southwestern France – contrasted with his Dutch accent. In this frank remark it becomes clear that language was an issue and that itinerant artists who crossed language borders had to deal with this limitation in a creative way. Even though French was the lingua franca of the region, posters show that the family skilfully switched between French and Dutch. The letters preserved in city archives in which the Courtois family requested a spot at the annual fair are also in French and Dutch. The Swiss newspaper *Le Jura* of 13 December 1855 depicts Courtois' linguistic virtuosity as follows: 'tout en faisant ses opérations, il trouve dans un langage demi français, demi patois des Flandres, de ces expressions qui provoquent la gaieté de son auditoire [during his interventions, he uses expressions in a language half French, half Flemish patois, which provoke the gaiety of his audience]'. This is probably the reason why, as far as I know, the route of the Courtois family barely runs through German-speaking areas. Their geographical scope was probably defined more by language than by national boundaries.

When the family toured Zeeland in 1830 – the moment that Belgium became independent from the Netherlands – they took up their lantern again, by which time their magic lantern slide collection had been expanded with a new series of ‘Historical Pieces of the Four Seasons of the World’<sup>17</sup> and ‘brilliant historical tableaux of Paris, Rome and London’, a series – or a variation on it – which remained regularly on the bill until the last years of Louis Courtois’ life.<sup>18</sup> The most extensive reference to this lantern performance can be found in the Ypres newspaper *Le Propageur* of 6 May 1843:

La [...] séance sera terminée par des Tableaux Historiques à l’instar du grand Diorama de Paris, Présentant des Eglises, des Parcs, Rome et Londres, des points de vue admirables, par de célèbres peintres de la capitale [The [...] show will end with Historical Tableaux following the example of the great Diorama of Paris, presenting churches, parks, Rome and London, admirable points of view, by famous painters of the capital].

The fact that a showman kept images of Paris, Rome and London on the programme for 25 years is significant. This means that the nineteenth-century fairground visitor was either not accustomed to seeing such images, or at least found them spectacular or interesting enough to pay an admission ticket for them – and possibly even went back to see the same show year after year.<sup>19</sup> The projection of images brought the wider world a little closer, particularly to those without the means to travel. The more privileged citizens also enjoyed magic lantern images from other parts of the world because it enabled them to get a picture of other regions, cultures and faraway places. The Courtois family theatre attracted indeed a broad audience: especially from announcements in Dutch newspapers, we can ascertain that the theatre used four different price categories. The Courtois booth was therefore large enough to permit a degree of social differentiation and could accommodate both wealthy and less fortunate audience members.

The ability to transport people imaginatively to other places is inherent to the history of the lantern. According to Jens Ruchatz in his chapter “Travelling by Slide” this connection even goes back to a form of projection that preceded the magic lantern. He refers to an experiment executed by Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) in which

projection was used to illustrate a travel tale. Within the lifetime of its inventor, the magic lantern already embodied ‘the logic of the travel story’ according to Ruchatz (2005, 35), since the succession of images mirrored the sequences of a travel experience. At the same time, landscapes and natural views benefited from enlarged projection with light and were thus much more impressive than, say, a printed image or painting. In the impressively large projection, the landscape appeared in front of the public as if they were transported to the place itself. Courtois’ 1830 series has not survived, as far as I know, but in any case, it pre-dates the photographic slides and must have been hand-painted and, as we can deduce from the above quotation, inspired by existing paintings.

With their latest acquisitions, the Courtois family stayed in their area of origin for several years and with their large booth they were regular guests at the fairs of Ghent, Bruges and Kortrijk. In 1836, the family once again prepared for a larger foreign tour in France with stops in Rennes, Caen, Nantes, Paris, Le Havre, Corbeil and Reims.<sup>20</sup> Only after a few years did they return to Belgium via Switzerland (Lausanne and Geneva) and Luxembourg. A small announcement in the *Journal du Grand-Duché du Luxembourg* of 1 August 1840 mentions that at least 10 children of ‘papa Courtois’ appear on stage. It was not until 1843 that they were again signalled in Ghent where, during the winter months, daddy Courtois offered private séances at home at a ‘reasonable price’ (those interested could drop in to the Café du Nord to book a session).<sup>21</sup> The press articles of the time also mention incursions into Germany and Italy, although no evidence of these shows has yet been found.

During the above-mentioned long tour in France, it is not unlikely that when the family were in Paris in 1837 the young Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin was in the audience. Robert-Houdin, at the time just Jean-Eugène Robert and still a watchmaker in the shop of his future father-in-law, Jacques Houdin, closely followed the prestigious magicians of that time, developing the fundamentals of his magic repertoire, as well as his creations in watchmaking and mechanisms (Fechner 2002; Lachapelle 2015). Or did the Courtois family pay a visit to Robert-Houdin’s workshop? This is highly plausible since the mechanician’s workshop was regularly frequented by both amateur and professional conjurers as well as wealthy collectors of mechanical objects (Fechner 2002). In any case, 9 years later Robert-Houdin came to the aid of the Courtois family

when they were in need of money and, during his first tour abroad, gave a benefit performance in Liège in which he shared the stage with Courtois. Several articles published in *La Tribune de Liège* during the summer of 1846 allow us to reconstruct the ‘magical’ events that took place there. Christian Fechner, in his impressively detailed publication on Robert-Houdin (2002), also describes in detail the encounter between the great French magician and his Belgian colleague.

This generous gesture helped the Courtois family out of an awkward situation by covering the expenses related to their business. It demonstrates the strong network between these international showbusiness colleagues and the importance of such professional networks for the precarious existence of itinerant showpeople. After all, Robert-Houdin knew better than anyone how important collegial support was for itinerant artists. After the bankruptcy of his father-in-law, he had experienced for himself how difficult it was to financially make ends meet and support a family, and he may have realized that he owed his own career to the continued support and stimulation of some loyal fans with wealthy backgrounds (Fechner 2002).

To be a showman and head of a successful fairground attraction, one needed not only a good feeling for spectacle, but also a keen sense of business and a propensity for mutual support in case of an emergency. A rainy fairground season could bring the bookkeeping seriously out of balance. It was not uncommon for the fair stall holders to join forces to make a collective request to the city council to extend the duration of the fair in order to compensate part of the losses, or to reclaim part of the fees that they had paid for permits.<sup>22</sup> In addition, showpeople had to be able to plan properly. During the winter months Courtois had to map out the route for the next season and write a series of letters to the mayor or the city council to ask for a spot at the next fair (see Figure 6). The acceptance or refusal of such a permit and the amount to be paid for it presupposed not only an arithmetical puzzle but also a geographical travel puzzle for the showman required to weigh up the various factors properly.

**Figure 6.** Letter from Louis Courtois to the mayor of Ghent dated 1850 in which Courtois asks for a place for his booth of 28 meters in length and 12 meters in width. Zwarte doos, city archive, Ghent (MA V177).

### **Julie as head of the Grandsart-Courtois theatre**

Legend has it that during the same tour through France in 1837, with the above-mentioned stop in Paris where the family probably met Robert-Houdin, Louis' eldest daughter, the clever Julie, fell in love with the handsome André-Joseph Grandsart (1813-1882). Both young stage artists had a lot in common. Born as Julienne-Reine Courtois in Bruges on 16 May 1813, the young Julie grew up on stage and became a respected physicist and conjurer herself (Figure 7). André-Joseph was the son of travelling musicians on the roads of Belgium and Northern France and, like Julie was born in Bruges in the year 1813, exactly six months later (Figure 8). Grandsart became the Courtois family apprentice and, together with the Courtois children, formed an orchestra to play various musical interludes between each act of the Belgian patriarch. A few years after their marriage in Paris in 1838, Julie and André founded their own touring theatre specialising in 'physiques amusantes'. Over the years, competition developed between Papa Courtois and his apprentice, and the creation of the Grandsart-Courtois Theatre around 1840 allowed the happy couple to take a different route from Louis and build a distinct reputation to differentiate between these two 'physicists', both well-known in the early nineteenth century. We find the earliest reference to the Grandsart-Courtois theatre in 1842 at the fair of Amiens and in Valenciennes.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 7.** Portrait of Julie Courtois, detail poster Amsterdam 1858. Courtesy Laurent Courtois.

**Figure 8.** Portrait of André-Joseph Grandsart stating his birth year. Courtesy Didier Morax.

After the separation from Papa Courtois, Julie performed together with her husbands and sons in front of all the royal courts and high families of Western Europe –if we believe the information on their promotional broadcasts (Figure 9) – as well as at many fairs in small towns and villages. Whether or not it is true that the artists demonstrated their talent before Napoleon III, they took the title of 'Physicien et Physicienne de l'Empereur Napoléon III'. Although the playbills generally announced the family as a whole, and fairground history books mostly focus on the handsome André-Joseph Grandsart and his sons (Garnier 1968, 281-285; Vanden Berghe 2003, 42-43) we learn

from contemporary newspaper announcements and reviews that Madame Grandsart-Courtois played a key role in the family business. She was ‘in magic acts matched by no one’ and ‘assisted by her husband and an eleven-year-old boy, her son, who can now already be called a professor in the Indian parade’, reported the *Nieuw Amsterdamsch handels- en effectenblad* on 9 September 1858. Julie was announced as the only woman who became famous as a ‘Physicienne and Prestidigitatrice’. Every member of the family had their own particular talent: Julie was a celebrated magician, as was her husband, who was also a violin virtuoso. Their son Jules was known as an acrobat, juggler and equilibrist and their oldest son Emile was also a prestidigitator.

**Figure 9.** Portrait of Julie Courtois on leaflet for the Ghent fair, around 1854. Felix Archive Antwerp (MA#504/2 Foires).

Little is known about the countless different acts performed by the Grandsart-Courtois family, but browsing through the many leaflets and announcements that have survived the past 150 years, it becomes clear that projections with a lantern were an established part of the programme. Long before the existence of cinema, these itinerant theatres already introduced moving images using mechanical slides or dissolving views, the effect of a gradual transition from one image to another.<sup>24</sup> For instance, in 1859 *L'Industrie du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais* announced a new element in their show, with ‘chromatropes or dissolving Views, PollisRama [sic] or Disappearing views’. A similar show was announced at the Ghent Fair in April 1867 where the act was entitled ‘Tableaux Diaphanoramas’ and what was reportedly shown must have been a feast for the eyes: chromatropes showing fireworks in a thousand colours, light bombs, golden rain sprays, diamond suns, waterfalls and garlands.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the colourful moving images produced with mechanical slides (chromatropes with rackwork mechanisms) and dissolving news, the family also had travel slides in their repertoire, continuing the family tradition but also adding also a journey to an ‘ideal world’ to the programme.<sup>26</sup> In the early 1860s they introduced a series of magic lantern projections of ‘Tableaux Pittoresques et Monumentaux’ representing ‘the most beautiful sites and panoramas known worldwide’, as was reported by *Le Courrier De L'Escaut* of 13 September 1860 (Figure 10). According to

this Tournai newspaper, the repertoire consisted of ‘130 new experiences’ created by the ‘combination of optics, mechanics and gas-hydro-oxygen light’ and was, according to the journalist, enthusiastically received at the fair in Brussels one year earlier, running for more than 80 performances. If those 130 experiences relate to 130 scenes and hence the amount of lantern slides, it was indeed remarkable at this time. This is confirmed by newspaper reports in Liège where the audience was equally ‘amazed by this truly extraordinary experience’, as reported by *La Meuse* on 18 November 1862:

Les représentations de M. Grandsart se terminent par les tableaux agioscope ou tableaux fondants, d’une beauté extraordinaire. Ces tableaux font chaque soir l’admiration du public nombreux et choisi qui se rencontre dans cette loge. [Mr. Grandsart’s representations end with agioscope tableaux or merging tableaux, of extraordinary beauty. These tableaux are admired each evening by a numerous and distinguished audience who meet in this gallery.]

With their beautifully decorated and luxuriously equipped ‘magic palace’, the Grandsart-Courtois Theatre was a welcome and regular returning guest at the annual fairgrounds of Amsterdam, Bruges, Brussels, Liège, Verviers, Lille and Roubaix, amongst others, with Brussels as their geographical base. Illuminated with 200 gaslights, their travelling theatre could host 600 fairground visitors for a three-hour performance.<sup>27</sup> Especially during the rainy autumn months the comfort of the booth was emphasized; it was heated and sheltered the public from harsh weather conditions (*La Meuse*, 16 November 1864).

**Figure 10.** Extract from *Le Courrier De L’Escaut*, 13 September 1860, announcing a performance by the Grandsart-Courtois theatre in Tournai (Doornik).

The geographical scope of the Grandsart-Courtois theatre was much smaller than that of the Courtois theatre, which was taken over by Julie’s brother Antoine-Léonard Courtois (1823-1901) after the death of Louis ‘papa’ Courtois (Figure 11). The former stayed mostly in the northern regions and took more or less the same route every year along Belgian and northern French fairs (and theatres, in the coldest winter months), with an occasional passage in Amsterdam in 1852 and 1858. Was Julie’s

luxurious booth too big for long journeys? Or did the French law of 27 July 1849, which placed ‘colporteurs’ under the authority of the prefect and required migrants to be in possession of a permit (Fontaine 1993, 181), make travelling much more bureaucratic? Or did she deliberately choose a different route from that of her brother, who was more oriented towards central and southern France in order to avoid competition? Or did she opt for the security of well-known fairs where she could receive a loyal audience? The truth is perhaps in the middle: a well-considered compromise between pragmatic, social and commercial considerations.

**Figure 11.** Comparative mapping itineraries Grandsart-Courtois theatre directed by Julie Courtois and her husband André Grandsart (1831-1879) and the Courtois theatre directed by Antoine-Léonard Courtois (1860-1910). Iason Jongepier & Nele Wynants (forthcoming).

### **Jules Grandsart and the emergence of photographic infotainment**

When Julie died in 1880, the family theatre, including the lantern, had already passed on to their youngest son Jules (1845-1905) (Figure 12). Jules was probably the most ambitious of the two brothers, and under his direction the theatre acquired great fame with spectacles in which illusionism and the projection of images were at the forefront. He married Adrienne Boesnach (1850-?), the daughter of a Dutch photographer, which partly explains the gradual evolution of the theatre towards more visual projections and cinematographic spectacles from 1898 onwards. In his parents’ theatre Jules had performed as an acrobat, but as head of the booth he revealed himself as a director of a large ‘Pantomime lumineuse’ or ‘Pantomime féerie’ with ‘completely new tricks, sets, costumes, machinations’ and an ‘electric light’ show as apotheosis. In the tradition of his grandfather ‘papa Courtois’ Jules announced ‘travels by projection’ to Switzerland and with ‘Un Voyage en Zig Zag’ he revived a popular slide show of his parents that took visitors on a journey through the universe (see Figure 13).

**Figure 12.** Family tree of The Grandsart-Courtois Theatre (1842-1879) based on the data assembled by Laurent Courtois on Geneanet, a family history website based in France (<https://gw.geneanet.org/>).



**Figure 13.** Posters for the Grandsart-Courtois theatre with lantern performance announcements, fair Calais, 1882, City archive Brussels (IPII 250, 1883). Posters for the fair Liège, 1894 and 1895, Musée de la Vie wallonne (25 E 3 - 25 E 7).

Jules was also known as a magician who dealt with topical events in an inventive way. He brought local and international news to the regional cities. At the 1892 fair in Kortrijk, for instance, he projected images of the Paris World Fair of 1889 with the enchantingly lit fountains. In September 1894 a trip to the Chicago Exposition of 1893 was on the programme in Tournai<sup>28</sup> and only one month later images of the Antwerp World Exposition of that same year were shown in Liège.<sup>29</sup> In all cases the booth was packed for several successive days. It is clear that Jules put a lot of variation in his shows and that he closely followed political news events and developments. In 1882 he performed a representation of France's conquest of Tunisia one year earlier, when French troops entered the territory of the Tunis Regency ('l'armée Française chez les KROUMIR') and in 1897 he reported on the President's trip to Russia.<sup>30</sup>

From 1894 onwards the programme also included a Serpentine dance act by Jules's daughter Julie, who was named after her grandmother, the reason why she probably chose 'Miss Walter' as a stage name and why many historians of magic confuse the two show women (Figure 14). Julie Grandsart, the youngest of the two, must have been one of the earliest adepts of the American dancer Loïe Fuller, often referred to as the mother of modern dance. Fuller performed her famous dance for the first time in New York City in 1892 and brought it only one year later to Paris, where it caused a major sensation at the Folies-Bergère and, in subsequent years, attracted many imitators (Gunning 2003; Doran 2015). To what extent Miss Walter stayed true to her great example is still a question, but most probably the family used their lantern for her 'Danse du Feu' to project coloured light onto the swirling robe of the dancing Julie. It is indeed known that Fuller herself arranged mobile magic lanterns with circular gels containing various colours that shone on her from a variety of angles (Gunning 2003, 82).<sup>31</sup> Sometimes, the magic lanterns also projected images of stars, moons, and flowers onto Fuller and her fan-shaped robe that served as a screen. For other dances she employed mirrors to multiply her image or placed a pane of glass between herself and the audience to create additional reflection effects.

**Figure 14.** Julie Grandsart in Serpentine costume. Courtesy Christ and Kobe Van Herwegen.

As with the work of his parents and grandparents, Jules' theatre left written traces everywhere and, on that basis, we can trace his itineraries. With his daughter Julie, his stepson Guillaume Clement ('O. William') and his youngest son Emile ('the French Fregoli') as main protagonists, Jules once again undertook larger and longer tours to the south of France, and reportedly to Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna as well (Figures 15 and 16). After the death of Jules in 1905, his wife Adrienne Boesnach-Grandsart took over the helm of what by then had become an itinerant film theatre. It was indeed the Grandsart-Courtois theatre that put on the first film screenings in some cities in southeastern France.

**Figure 15:** Postcard souvenir Grandsart-Courtois theatre, around 1900. Courtesy Didier Morax.

**Figure 16:** Grandsart-Courtois theatre in Brest, Champs de Mars, around 1910. Courtesy Didier Morax.

A parallel history can be found in the story of Jules' brother Emile, but on Flemish and northern French territory. Emile Grandsart (1843-1891) was married in 1864 to Clémence Consael, the daughter of Max Consael, owner of a Ghent waffle stand.<sup>32</sup> The two young people had often met during their travels, and according to a portrait of 'Madame Veuve Grandsart-Consael' in *La Comète Belge*, the fairground union newspaper of 1 November 1912, they felt a great friendship and affection for each other from an early age. Together they had 14 children (of which 9 reached adulthood; most of these married and worked in the fairground circuit). In the first years of the marriage, the happy couple travelled around with a panopticon-diorama museum, until they accidentally discovered a phenomenon that gained world fame thanks to the vigorous promotion of Emile: the exhibition of 'Princess Paulina', a girl 37 cm tall and weighing 2.75 kg, turned out to be a goldmine, but after eight years Paulina's parents terminated the collaboration with the Grandsart-Consael family.

Attracted by the comfort of the sedentary life, the couple put up their suitcases and took on instead the Café du Compte de Flandre on Sint-Pietersplein in Ghent, the

centre of the annual fair. However, in spring the first rays of sunshine reawakened the attraction of traveling life. Emile repaired the wood of his booth, had it repainted and returned to the road, leaving the management of his café to his wife. Emile re-launched himself in the spectacle of great illusions, until he died prematurely in 1891, barely 48 years old. Clémence, now single-handedly taking care of the large Grandsart-Consael family, had enough experience in the business to maintain its prestige. In 1897 she remarried another *forain*, invested in the latest item on the market, the cinematograph, and until her old age she remained with ‘The Royal Cinematograph Parlant’ at Belgian fairs (Convents 2000, 165, 171).

From 1898 onwards, the new *cinématographe Lumière* became one of the major attractions of itinerant theatre. Given their strong tradition of illusion and spectacle, it is not surprising that the Courtois and Grandsart families were the first to introduce the cinematograph to the fairground in Belgium, the Netherlands and France, long before there were permanent film theatres (Convents 2000).

### **The fair as platform for intercultural mediation and transfer**

The case of the Courtois and Grandsart-Courtois family demonstrates how the nineteenth-century fairground functioned as platform for cultural transfer and a dynamic interplay of different cultures and languages. Itinerant showpeople indeed transgressed linguistic, artistic and spatial boundaries and combined different roles and activities, being artists, multilingual entrepreneurs and migrants. As such they were cultural mediators, circulating, adapting, translating, and transforming the meaning of the objects and technologies they appropriated. The discussed case moreover reveals the agency of the lantern that was used by the Courtois/Grandsart-Courtois family as a medium for transferring visual culture and knowledge amongst ordinary people from across the social spectrum. The lantern was indeed a permanent protagonist in the family’s highly mobile and dynamic network. It performed different roles and functions: it was used for projecting images of ghosts and spirits, for illustrating travel stories, and in the second half of the nineteenth century also to spread news images or illustrate topical events. These uses of the lantern at the fair have been commonly underestimated and therefore, until now, underexposed. As I have shown, the lantern

remained an important pole of attraction until the turn of the century and was passed on from generation to generation. Only with the advent of the cinematograph did the lantern gradually disappear from the fairground.

The trajectory of the other children of ‘papa Courtois’ – Julie’s siblings – is the subject of another article (Wynants & Jongepier, forthcoming), but at this point it is particularly relevant to mention that they travelled in various family constellations, especially in France, with, respectively, the ‘théâtre des frères Courtois’ (Louis and Léandre Courtois), the ‘Théâtre des féeries fantastiques’ (Antoine-Léonard, accompanied by his little brother Jules and sisters Martine and Rosine) and the ‘Palladium theatre’ (science shows by two sons of Antoine-Léonard) (Figure 17). Some of them even brought the name Courtois to Italy. They all inherited from their grandfather and great-grandfather the sense of illusion and spectacle, a taste for science and technology and a travel spirit that took them from Brussels to Paris, Amsterdam to Marseille.

**Figure 17.** Poster “Grand théâtre psycico-spectro- féerie sous la direction de la famille Courtois de Bruxelles” directed by Antoine-Léonard Courtois. Printed by Herbin in Montluçon, 1875. Wikimedia Commons.

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<sup>1</sup> The last decades have seen a growing scholarly interest in the history of the magic lantern as a component of various cultural and media histories; see Kember 2019 and Jolly & deCourcy, eds, 2020 for an overview of the latest research on the lantern. Important monographs and edited volumes are Brooker 2013, Crangle, van Dooren & Heard, eds, 2005 and Vogl-Bienek & Crangle, eds, 2016. For a methodological discussion of methods to trace media history through material objects that build on archival practices, see Dellmann 2016.

<sup>2</sup> When I devised a lantern programme for the Fairground conference in Brussels in April 2019 and asked the members of the Magic Lantern Society whether they had 'fairground slides' in their collections, most of them answered 'We do not know if slides in our collection have been shown at the fair' simply because in most cases they did not know where the slides in collections were shown. In some cases, we can well imagine that they were shown at the fair, but just as well that they served in a convent school.

<sup>3</sup> On fairground culture in Belgium see Van Genechten et al. 1986 and Mardaga 1989. On fairground culture in the Netherlands see Jansen 1987; in Germany, see Szabo 2007. In the UK it originates from the network of chartered and prescriptive fairs installed between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries: 'The granting of charters did not necessarily initiate the right to hold a fair; it was in effect a means of controlling the revenues for the crown. The control and organization of the fair was then granted to the particular town.' (Toulmin 2003, p.5). See also Toulmin 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Although the fair and the carnival are related events, the terms refer to different historical traditions, both in continental Europe and in the UK. In the UK the word 'carnival' is used relatively rarely until 1850, and on most occasions it refers to folkloristic celebrations in cities across continental Europe employing masquerade or similar traditions ('carnaval' in Dutch or French, 'Karneval' in German). By the 1870s and 1880s, though, it is being used more regularly to describe specific British celebrations, for example around Christmas or at certain venues. The word seems to describe relatively upper-class events and sets of attractions, still including masquerades. By the 1890s, however, it has broadened to include big events at, for example, skating rinks or any kind of public celebration involving fun attractions. In the US 'carnival' carries the sense of the travelling 'Carny', a meaning sometimes employed in the UK, particularly when the term used is 'funfair': small touring groups of fair professionals (a profession that developed out of the 'winter business' secured by major fairground outfits from the 1880s in town centres). I thank Joe Kember for this clarification.

<sup>5</sup> For the world exhibitions in Antwerp in 1885 and 1894 and the one in Brussels in 1910 visitors had to pay a silver coin of 1 franc; a subscription cost a gold coin of 20 francs and was therefore mainly intended for the local upper bourgeoisie with sufficient means and free time for a daily visit. A skilled industrial worker then earned about 2.50 francs a day (Terry 1993).

<sup>6</sup> See Dellmann and Kessler 2016 for a productive conceptual distinction between the concepts 'transnational' and 'international'.

<sup>7</sup> A *baladin*, derived from 'ballader', means, according to the French dictionary Larousse, a 'wandering player, travelling artist'.

<sup>8</sup> As indicated by her death certificate found in the small commune of Brissy-Hamégicourt in Aisne in northern France (Courtois 2019, 8).

<sup>9</sup> This is according to Robelly (1949), but only 11 of them have actually been identified. It is likely that some of them may not have lived long. Unfortunately, the archives of the city of Paris disappeared completely during the commune in 1871, and it is likely that the birth

certificates of several of Louis' children were recorded there during the magician's numerous visits to the French capital between 1818 and 1826.

<sup>10</sup> *L'Industrie du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais*, 25 December 1859; *De Postryder*, Journal Limbourgeois, 10 December 1859.

<sup>11</sup> Announcement, performance in Ghent, 23 March 1818. Collection Vliegende bladen (University Library Ghent).

<sup>12</sup> They visited Ghent, Courtrai and Oudenaarde, according to archival documents in the collection Vliegende Bladen at Ghent University Library, dated 1 April 1819 and 4 April 1819; see also Vanden Berghe, 2003, 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Bredasche Courant*, 2 November 1822, 's-Gravenhaagsche Courant, 6 May 1822, *Utrechtsche Courant*, 15 July 1822, *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 13 August 1822, *Journal de la province de Limbourg*, 2 May 1823.

<sup>14</sup> The phantasmagoria slides probably belonged to Van Hoestenbergh, who had already given phantasmagoria shows without Courtois in Ghent in 1820 (as we can deduce from the various posters and announcements in the contemporary *Journal d'affiches de Gand et de la Flandre*), and on other fairs in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (according to announcements in 's-Gravenhaagsche courant, 11 May 1821, *Opregte Haarlemsche Courant*, 25 August 1821, *Leeuwarder courant*, 20 July 1821 and 25 August 1821, and the *Bredasche courant*, 27 October 1821, all accessible online through Delpher ([www.delpher.nl](http://www.delpher.nl)), developed by the Dutch National Library).

<sup>15</sup> On the history of the phantasmagoria see Heard 2006, Wynants 2017 and Jones 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Press reports on their shows appeared in the Parisian journal *Le Diable Boiteux: journal des spectacles, des mœurs et de la littérature* on 26 and 27 March 1824, 22 April 1824 and 16 May 1824 (accessible online through Gallica, the digital library of the Bibliothèque nationale de France).

<sup>17</sup> Several announcements in the *Middelburgsche Courant*, between 15 July 1830 and 14 August 1830 (accessible online through Delpher); advertising poster in Germonpré (1995, 16).

<sup>18</sup> See, in particular, *Middelburgsche Courant*, 15 July 1830, *La Tribune de Liege*, 11 July 1846, and *Le Messager de Gand*, 11 April 1854.

<sup>19</sup> According to the *Middelburgsche Courant* of 29 July 1830, visitors to Middelburg paid 1.50 f in the first category, 1 f in the second category, 60 cents in the third category and 30 cents in the fourth category (the symbol f or fl. for the Dutch guilder was derived from the old currency the florin). The cheapest places were stand-up places in the back. It is striking that the prices dropped two weeks later at the same location (first category: 90 cents; second category: 60 cents; third category: 30 cents, according to the *Middelburgsche Courant* on 10 August 1830). This was not uncommon, and it happened in other theatres as well, perhaps in order to attract the public a second time, as the programme was changed regularly. In Kortrijk and Ghent, the following year, Courtois applied only two or three different rates (in Belgian francs): 47 cents, 23 cents and 12 cents in Kortrijk (poster in Germonpré 1995, p. 16) and 50 cents and 25 cents in Ghent (*Journal des Flandres*, 2 April 1831).

<sup>20</sup> According to announcements in *Le Pilote du Calvados*, 24 July 1836, *L'Ami de la Charte*, 13 February 1836, *Journal L'Indépendant*, Paris, 8 October 1837, *L'Industriel de la Champagne*, 20 April 1838, and *La Gazette de Lausanne*, 25 October 1839.

<sup>21</sup> Several announcements in *Le Messager de Gand* between 5 December 1843 and 23 January 1844 (accessible online through BelgicaPress, the digital library of The Royal Library of Belgium).

<sup>22</sup> Files including such applications, signed by dozens of exhibitors, can be found in the city archive of Brussels (IP II 2578), Antwerp (MA #504/3-6) and Ghent (MA V 176-200).

<sup>23</sup> The earliest references to the Grandsart-Courtois theatre are a little confusing. In *Une Promenade à la Foire d'Amiens*, the text of a lecture given in 1913, Alfred Ansart writes in a short passage about how the fair is threatened by the growing amount of permanent theatres.

The only theatre show on the Amiens fair in 1842 was by the Grandsart-Courtois family, according to Ansart, and he especially praises the elegant tightrope walking act of ‘the young and pretty Mrs. Grandsart’. However, this is probably a sister of Julie, who was reportedly married to a brother of André Grandsart. This assumption is confirmed by the following remark by Ansart: ‘[c]ette jeune et jolie danseuse était la sœur de cette vénérable dame qui, l’année dernière encore, présidait au contrôle du Théâtre Grandsart [this young and pretty dancer was the sister of this venerable lady who, just last year, presided over the control of the Théâtre Grandsart]’. (Ansart 1913, 26). If this source is reliable, then the Grandsart-Courtois theatre may have given its first performances in Amiens as early as 1841. Laurent Courtois (2019) situates the first performance of the Grandsart-Courtois couple without ‘daddy Courtois’ only in 1843, the year when Julie gave birth to their eldest son Auguste Emile in Paris.

<sup>24</sup> For examples of mechanical slides see The Dutch Virtual Magic Lantern Museum at [www.luikerwaal.com](http://www.luikerwaal.com).

<sup>25</sup> Advertising poster for Grandsart-Courtois on the Ghent Fair, 28 April 1867, archive Vliegende Bladen (Ghent University) BIB VLBL HFI PKF 3.

<sup>26</sup> Advertising poster for Grandsart-Courtois on the Ghent Fair 21-25 April 1867, archive Vliegende Bladen (Ghent University) BIB VLBL HFI PKF 3.

<sup>27</sup> According to advertising posters found in the city archives of Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp, the collection Vliegende Bladen (at Ghent University Library) and the collection of the Museum of Walloon Life in Liège.

<sup>28</sup> Reported in *Le Courrier De L’Escaut* on 13 September 1894.

<sup>29</sup> Several announcements in *La Meuse*, including 12 October 1894.

<sup>30</sup> *Revue comique normande: artistique, littéraire, théâtrale...*, 2 October 1897 (Gallica).

<sup>31</sup> “Her eventually patented costume used bamboo rods as prostheses to extend the reach of her arms, enabling her to manipulate the fabric into spectacular forms. These silken dresses, which she manipulated to extend the boundaries of her body into her surroundings, acted as screens for light projections, while creating a rippling effect or afterimage. Her innovative use of electric technologies (such as mirrors, lighting, and phosphorescent dyes) further amplified the grandiose effect of her costuming, which was highlighted at the 1900 World’s Fair Exposition in Paris.” (Doran 2015, 24).

<sup>32</sup> Maximilien Consael, whose nickname was ‘max de la foire’, founded his luxury travelling waffle stand in 1839. He is said to be the inventor of apple beignets.