

A Lantern View from The Ruwenzori Mountain Range

Between Science Communication, Travel Story, and Colonial Propaganda in an Illustrated Lecture Performance from 1932

▼ RESEARCH ARTICLE

▼ **ABSTRACT** This article explores the role of magic lantern performances in Belgian colonial history, and their impact on broader discussions on science communication and colonial representations. It centers on a lantern lecture that recounted a scientific expedition to the Ruwenzori mountain range in the Belgian Congo in 1932, extensively illustrated with photographic slides. Our analysis focuses on the performative strategies employed by Ganshof Van der Meersch, the lecturer, to frame his scientific discourse on the Ruwenzori mission. Drawing on visual tropes and the narrative structures of an adventurous travel story, he emphasizes the hardships and heroism of the expedition members. While the scientific aspects of the mission are highlighted, the lecture predominantly portrays the scientific process and the heroic endeavors of the members, rather than delving into the region's fauna and flora. This narrative reinforces Western superiority over the colonized territory and its inhabitants, aligning with imperialist agendas. Enhanced by captivating visuals, the lecture strategically evokes emotional engagement to solicit financial support. By examining these dynamics, the article unveils the underlying mechanisms behind science communication in service of

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colonial endeavors. In the broader context of colonial studies and the history of science and knowledge, this analysis contributes to understanding of how performance-based science communication was used to advance the colonial agenda.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Magic lantern lecture; colonialism; Ruwenzori expedition; Visual communication; Belgian colonial history

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On the evening of Wednesday, December 7, 1932, the Brussels criminal court teemed with spectators. Among the attendees, notable figures from diplomatic, scientific, and colonial circles were present, as reported by the daily newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*. The evening was dedicated to a significant event: a lantern lecture by Walter Ganshof Van der Meersch (1900–1993), organized by the *Conférence du Jeune Barreau*. The lecture, titled “Dans les Monts de la Lune. La Mission scientifique Belge au Ruwenzori,” was lavishly illustrated with no fewer than eighty-eight photographic slides projected onto a large screen with a magic lantern [Fig. 1]. This optical apparatus granted the youthful traveler the means to provide his esteemed audience with a vivid portrayal of the recent scientific mission he had undertaken with a team of academic researchers, diplomats, and military staff in the Congo’s Ruwenzori Range, a formidable mountain range straddling the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda.¹

During a comprehensive evening program, attendees were treated to a visual chronicle of the expedition team’s odyssey through the Ruwenzori Range. At the lecture’s outset, Ganshof emphasized the mission’s objective: the scientific exploration of the uncharted terrain.² The Belgian Mission for Scientific Exploration of Ruwenzori consisted of a geologist, a botanist, and a zoologist, all tasked with unveiling the mysteries of this seemingly inaccessible region. To navigate the challenging terrain, the head of the Belgian Alpine Club, Xavier de Hemricourt de Grunne (1894–1944), was also enlisted. He was assisted by four club members, including Ganshof. The expedition unfolded through successive stages, traversing different mission stations, and gradually ascending into the rugged mountains, ultimately culminating in their triumphant achievement: the exploration of an unexplored territory standing at an impressive altitude of 5,125 meters (approximately 16,800 feet). To commemorate this accomplishment, the uncharted peak (“montagne vierge”) was

1 Nowadays the range is called the Rwenzori Mountains. We will employ the name as used during the lecture. The mountains are located on the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

2 Ganshof Van der Meersch, “Dans Les Monts.”

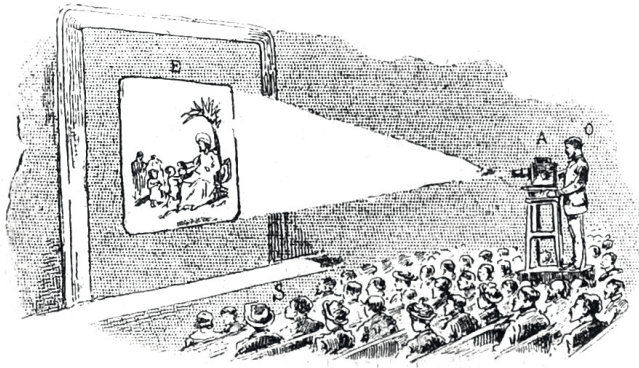


Figure 1. A magic lantern presentation at the beginning of twentieth century. Engraving in *Le Fascinateur* (1 April 1903, p. 111).

baptized Pic Albert [**Fig. 2**], in tribute to Belgium's reigning monarch at that time, King Albert I, who was known for his own passion for mountaineering.³

The Belgian Congo, a Central African colony from 1908 to 1960, traces its colonial origins back to the late nineteenth century, initiated by King Leopold II's personal endeavor to establish a colony within the largely unexploited Congo Basin. The Free State officials' brutal violence against native Congolese, coupled with an exploitative economic regime, prompted international pressure on Belgium. Consequently, Belgium assumed direct control in 1908, leading to the establishment of the Belgian Congo. Ganshof was assistant prosecutor to King Albert I, frequently accompanying him on mountain ascents. Born into a Catholic family in Bruges in 1900, Ganshof pursued legal studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), and eventually achieved a professorship in constitutional and public law by 1944.⁴ His engagement with the Belgian colony extended beyond the Ruwenzori expedition. Notably, in 1960, he was appointed as a minister resident in the Congo to help the nascent independent state form a government.⁵

The Ruwenzori mission received sponsorship from the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS, the National Fund for Scientific Research), the Institut Royal Colonial (the Royal Colonial Institute), and the Institut de Sociologie Solvay (Solvay Institute of Sociology). The latter played a pivotal role in the production of academic knowledge on the Belgian colonized territories. Originating in 1902, the institute emerged as one of the earliest projects

³ In 1906, the Duke of the Abruzzi named the central and southern peaks of the Ruwenzori Range as Margherita and Alexandra, honoring the Queens of Italy and England. De Grunne, "Ruwenzori from the West," 287.

⁴ Schandevyl, "Van Der Meersch."

⁵ Van Reybrouck, *Congo*, 218; Schandevyl, "Van Der Meersch," 98.



Figure 2. Ruwenzori: Pointe Albert (5,088 m.) seen from Pointe Marguerite, 2 August 1932. All photographic images are 8.5 x 10 cm glass slides designed for lantern projection, originating from the 1932 Ruwenzori mission. They are sourced from the Walter Ganshof Van der Meersch Collection, Université libre de Bruxelles, University Collection, Brussels, unless otherwise specified.

under the aegis of Belgian industrialist Ernest Solvay.⁶ Notably, the institution fostered a “colonial studies” working group and extended financial backing to numerous scientific explorations in the Congo.⁷ Among these ventures, the 1932 expedition to the Ruwenzori Range held a prominent place. Backed by both the scientific and industrial communities in Belgium, its main goal was “to further enhance Belgium’s scientific prestige abroad.”⁸

The Belgian press covered the Ruwenzori mission extensively, allowing people at home to closely follow its progress week by week. Expectations were high: “The titles of the participants are too impressive to disappoint these

⁶ Tasked with overseeing this scientific research institution was the young engineer Emile Waxweiler, whose collection of colonial lantern slides is also housed at the ULB archive; the photographic slides were digitized as part of the B-magic research project (www.B-magic.eu).

⁷ Couttenier, *Congo tentoongesteld*; Nicolai, “Le mouvement géographique”; Crombois, “Le Congo et l’ethnographie.”

⁸ *La Nation Belge*, April 27, 1932.

hopes. Their success will be a major scientific event,” wrote *La Nation Belge* on May 25, 1932.⁹ Upon their return, the explorers’ accomplishments resonated beyond scientific circles, heralded as “a new glorious page to the moral achievements of our country” (*Le Soir*, January 29, 1933). The mission’s significance was underscored in the annual report of the FNRS and earned prestigious honors, including recognition from the Royal Belgian Geographical Society. Moreover, considerable efforts were made to communicate the mission’s scientific importance to the general public. An exhibition by artist James Thiriart at the Brussels *Cercle artistique* drew significant attention and was extended due to its success. Thiriart, known as “peintre d’histoire” and “peintre colonial,” accompanied the mission as an artist-adventurer and created a visual report. His drawings, along with photos, film fragments, and a small reconstruction of a tent camp in the centre of the exhibition space, allowed visitors to experience the mission’s various stages as a “true adventure novel,” as reported by *L’Indépendance Belge* (April 29 1933). Additionally, lectures, illustrated with projected photographic views, were organized for a broader audience. They were given by Ganshof and other expedition members, including ULB professor Lucien Hauman and expedition chief Xavier de Grunne.¹⁰ These illustrated lantern lectures aimed to inform audiences about the mission’s outcomes and generate enthusiasm contributing financially to new exploratory undertakings.

This article will explore the significant role of the magic lantern in communicating the Ruwenzori mission, positioning it as a performative visual medium for the popularization of science and fundraising, and contextualizing Ganshof’s lecture within the broader Belgian colonial and international historiography. Drawing from various primary sources, including Ganshof’s lecture notes, travel diaries, personal letters, and a substantial collection of lantern slides from the Walter Ganshof Van der Meersch archive, housed within the ULB’s collection, this study aims to unravel the intricate dynamics of scientific communication related to colonial expeditions.¹¹

The main objective of this paper is to elucidate the performative strategies employed by Ganshof in his lecture to frame the Ruwenzori mission as

⁹ *La Nation Belge*, May 25, 1932.

¹⁰ Notable among these was a lecture by Grunne at the Palace of the Academies, attended by the King and many mission members. Lectures on the Ruwenzori mission were given in Leuven, Antwerp (*La Société Royale de Géographie*, January 28, 1933), Brussels (Palais des Académies, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Fondation Universitaire), Liège, Tournai, Bruges, London, and Paris (at the Sorbonne), and were mostly organized by geographical societies or mountaineering clubs.

¹¹ The ULB is cataloguing its colonial archives, including those of the Institut de Sociologie and others such as the archives of the Centre scientifique et Médical de l’ULB et Afrique Centrale (CEMUBAC), Fonds Jacques Cassel, Fonds Reine Élisabeth pour l’assistance médicale aux indigènes du Congo belge (FOREAMI), and Le comité de propagande colonial. The disclosure of these archives to the scientific community and public raises questions about the handling of cultural discourses and inherent colonial biases. Scholars such as Mbembe, Stoler, and Azoulay have discussed these complexities. Mbembe, “The Power”; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*; Azoulay, “Potential History.”

scientific, and critically analyze the presented narrative, focusing on the way scientific communication, colonial propaganda, and fundraising purposes are intertwined, as he swiftly navigated between science, adventure, and colonial rhetoric. The case is exceptional, since both his lecture notes and the lantern slides used for illustration are preserved, providing unique source material, particularly considering the scarcity of similar traces for other lectures by expedition chief De Grunne and others.¹² The manual annotations, revisions, and humorous notes adorning the margins of his script are tangible testimonies to Ganshof's assiduous groundwork in preparing to deliver the lecture.¹³ They provide glimpses into the performer's preparatory realm, akin to the moments just prior to stepping onto the stage, scribbling a final sentence to his script. His performative talent is demonstrated by his use of red underlines to indicate accents, and the inclusion of exclamation marks adjacent to paragraphs earmarked for pauses, all contributing to enhancing the dramatic effect of his narrative.

Moreover, the Ruwenzori expedition yielded a substantial photographic trove, comprising roughly 1,500 images, including 200 photographs taken from an airplane by Gordon N. Humphreys during the first flight over the snowy Ruwenzori summits.¹⁴ Of these, more than 150 proved suitable for projection.¹⁵ Approximately fifty glass plates, or a third of Ganshof's collection, portray aspects of nature, vividly capturing a diverse array of fauna and flora—a central scientific pursuit of the mission [Fig. 3]. A similar number of slides portray the expedition team members themselves, documenting their challenging traverse through the region. The remaining fifty images depict the local inhabitants, mainly the “porters”—between thirty and sixty indigenous individuals from the mountains, who were able to stand the climate at high altitudes. Trained and equipped for mountaineering, these porters were tasked with navigating the challenging terrain to transport loads amidst the dense vegetation on the steep slopes. Together, these images create a visual narrative encompassing their cultural practices, spanning culinary traditions, clothing, as well as musical and dance rituals. However, the categorization of images into thematic clusters is not an exact science; many images encompass different dimensions of the lecture's central narrative: the exploration and charting of unexplored territory and its inhabitants, conceived through a Western lens [Fig. 4].

12 Magic lantern lecture remnants, split into discursive sources and visual artifacts, are often stored separately, making it difficult to assess their interrelation.

13 In the quotes, we have incorporated his manual underlining, strikethroughs, and modifications.

14 A dozen prints, showing detail of the western slopes of Stanley and Emin, were used by De Grunne in drawing up the plans. De Grunne, “Ruwenzori from the West,” 279.

15 Ganshof's collection contains approximately 150 slides, whereas de Grunne refers to 200 (De Grunne, “Concernant La Conférence Ruwenzori”). Due to the fragility of the glass, some may have broken over the years.



Figure 3. The vegetation at an altitude of about 2,500 meter is described as obscure by Ganshof in his lecture: "Deep in the giant ferns. Leaf follows leaf, and apart from a few rare glimmerings, the density of the vegetation above and around us prevents any communication with the sun." Ganshof, "Dans Les Monts de La Lune."



Figure 4. Ruwenzori from the West: Panoramic view of the Stanley Peak.

Magic Lantern as Performative Tool for Science Communication

The magic lantern emerged as a pivotal instrument for visual communication in the nineteenth century, becoming an integral part of the burgeoning visual mass culture.¹⁶ Its importance notably surged in the 1880s with the growing use of photographically produced slides, a trend that persisted until the onset of the Second World War, particularly evident in the realm of illustrated lectures. This evolution led to the transition from the traditional “magic lantern” to the more sophisticated “optical lantern,” recognized as a pedagogical tool, widely used in educational and scientific settings. Referred to by Jens Ruchatz as the “rationalization of the lantern,” this transformation imbued the medium with a scientific aura, especially with the adoption of photographic lantern slides.¹⁷ The lantern underwent a transformative evolution, spanning Europe, the United States, and colonized territories, shifting from occasional amusement employed by a relatively small group of lantern professionals to a widespread medium across the public domain. Its applications included religious education, social health campaigns, temperance propaganda, and public education.¹⁸ The lantern’s influence spanned all layers of society, as it often interwove entertainment with informative content.¹⁹

Educational institutions, from schools to universities, embraced the lantern as a central pedagogical instrument for visual instruction—a practice that endured until the 1950s.²⁰ From its inception, academic presenters underscored the transformative impact of the medium on their teaching methods. As Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk have demonstrated, in the second half of the nineteenth century, scholars such as the French physiologist Gustave Le Bon or the German art historian Herman Grimm stressed how the lantern facilitated the integration of visual display into their lectures, effectively augmenting verbal communication with visual demonstration, while simultaneously reaching expansive audiences.²¹ Functioning as an early medium for science communication through visuals, the lantern extended its reach beyond the confines of academia, disseminating knowledge to broader audiences encompassing

16 Mannoni and Crangle, *The Great Art*; Crangle, Heard, and Dooren, *Realms of Light*; Dellmann and Kessler, *A Million Pictures*; Jolly and deCourcy, *The Magic Lantern*.

17 Ruchatz, “The Magic Lantern.”

18 Scholarly interest in the magic lantern is recent and has shifted from viewing it as a precursor to cinema to understanding its role in a larger performance culture. This shift has been facilitated by various funded projects at universities worldwide, including Trier University and the University of Marburg (DE), Utrecht University (NL), University of Exeter (UK), University of Girona and University of Salamanca (ES), Australian National University (AU), and University of Antwerp, ULB, KU Leuven, and UCL (BE).

19 Kember, Sullivan, and Plunkett, *Popular Exhibitions*; Vanhoutte and Wynants, “On the Passage”; Vanhoutte, “Deep Time.”

20 Teughels and Wils, *Learning with Light*.

21 Kessler and Lenk, “Projected Image.”

both experts and laypersons. Many scientific societies, for instance, organized regular illustrated lectures to disseminate new knowledge and to popularize science for a broader audience. Geographical societies across Europe and beyond aimed to popularize geographic and cultural-ethnographic knowledge. Their international nature facilitated networking, especially around colonial agendas, and fostered domestic and foreign economic relationships and the sharing of knowledge.²²

To understand the magic lantern's role and impact as a tool for science communication, it is crucial to acknowledge the performative nature of these lectures, as the lecturer would provide commentary to the projected images and engage with the audience. Unlike newspapers, journals, and books, the lantern had a unique advantage in its live combination of words, images, music, light, gestures, and intonation. Moreover, while newspapers were typically consumed individually or within small groups, the lantern's appeal lay in its live performance before larger audiences, often ranging from several hundred to even a thousand spectators at once.²³ Also, the size of the images was significantly larger. Typically limited to small-scale viewing in books and magazines, slides could be projected on a monumental scale in theaters or lecture halls, substantially increasing their visual impact. This effect was particularly pronounced for microscopic images of scientific specimens or astronomical visualizations, which were among the most popular themes. Additionally, the lecturers could tailor their discourse to suit the audience, engaging in live interaction such as addressing questions and responding to current events both inside and outside of the venue. This allowed the lantern to achieve greater audience engagement. Consequently, the success of the lantern lecture depended largely on the rhetorical and performative skills of the lecturer, underlining the entanglement of the seemingly separate worlds of science and spectacle.²⁴

As a powerful visual medium with elaborate performative potential, the magic lantern was also a prominent tool for informing a broader public about the colonies. Particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when few individuals had the opportunity to travel, visual media, particularly photography, were pivotal in shaping perceptions of colonial territories and satisfying the European fascination with the exotic. The portable Kodak camera became the standard equipment for explorers, scientists, missionaries, and travelers venturing into these territories. The resulting photographs found their way into various media, including postcards, posters, magazines, exhibitions, and educational materials, allowing a diverse and extensive audience to access and engage with representations of overseas territories. Existing scholarship on the use of visual media, such as film and photography, for

²² Hayes, "Geographical Projections"; Hayes, "Nothing but Storytellers."

²³ Pons i Busquet, *Image Makers*.

²⁴ Kember, Sullivan, and Plunkett, *Popular Exhibitions*; Kember, *Marketing Modernity*.

colonial propaganda has documented how they were employed to reinforce Western and racist ideologies, as well as to raise awareness of—and funds for—missionary endeavors.²⁵ The use of illustrated lantern lectures as a tool for colonial propaganda has only recently received scholarly attention.²⁶ Lantern slides, featuring photographic images of colonial territories, were projected onto screens during these lectures, offering a live and interactive context for a diverse audience.²⁷

Margo Buelens-Terryn's pioneering research on the lantern lecture circuit in Antwerp and Brussels between 1900 and 1920 has demonstrated that lectures on the Congo were highly popular in Belgium, and during the interwar period they became the second most popular topic in the category of lectures on societal issues.²⁸ Lantern lectures aimed to Christianize and "civilize" the Congolese population, while simultaneously generating enthusiasm among the Belgians for the new colonial venture, particularly its religious missions. Buelens-Terryn's data show that, around 1900, most lectures on the Congo Free State were organized in Antwerp, reflecting the city's economic interests in the colony and its direct connection via Congo boats. In the interwar period, Brussels took the lead in organizing these lectures, as the government had assumed responsibility for colonial policy.²⁹ The government established colonial state institutions in Congo, overseeing professional training for colonials to populate the Congo with administrators, magistrates, and merchants. In the 1930s, a growing number of Belgians traveled to the Congo, which is reflected in the popularity of the colony in lantern lectures. Within the broader Belgian public lecture circuit, lantern lectures were extensively used to disseminate and perpetuate ideas concerning colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism. Furthermore, fundraising efforts for scientific and religious missions and the establishment of economic networks were integral components of the agenda of these lectures. This also holds true for the various lantern lectures

25 Ramirez and Rolot, *Histoire du cinéma colonial*; Moser, "Photographing Imperial Citizenship"; Lydon, "Charity Begins at Home?"; Thompson, *Light on Darkness?* In the context of Belgian colonial image production, scholars such as Matthew Stanard, Bambi Ceuppens, and Karel Arnaut have made significant contributions to our understanding of pro-empire propaganda including colonial film in Belgium, see: Stanard, *Selling the Congo*; Ceuppens and Arnaut, *Leopolds Congo*; Convents, *Images & paix*; Vints, *Kongo made in Belgium*.

26 Academic research on colonial lantern lectures is virtually non-existent in Belgium and is also limited internationally. See Sliwinski, "The Childhood"; Thompson, *Light on Darkness?*; Lydon, "Charity Begins at Home?"; Moser, "Photographing Imperial Citizenship"; van der Waal, "Enticed to Settle Elsewhere."

27 In Belgium, religious organizations such as Scheut, Zusters Franciscanessen, and the Minderbroeders conducted numerous lectures, with around 20,000 glass slide images preserved at the Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture, and Society (KADOC) in Leuven. Scientific organizations such as the Royal Geographical Society of Antwerp (KAGA) also used projected images to augment lectures, often preceding or following a film screening on related topics.

28 Based on extensive research of newspapers in which such lectures were announced, she encountered 168 lectures on colonialism in Brussels and Antwerp between 1922 and 1924, accounting for 56 lectures per year, or seven per month during the regular lecture season from September to April. Buelens-Terryn, "From 'Magic,'" 593.

29 *Ibid.*, 262–63.

concerning the Ruwenzori mission, with Ganshof's lecture in Brussels a notable example. Ganshof's discourse and use of magic lantern slides, navigating between science, adventure, and colonial rhetoric, is an exemplary case of how the magic lantern was used as a performative medium for the popularization of science, colonial propaganda, and fundraising purposes.

Scientific Mission Narrated as Heroic Travel Story

Let us return to the courthouse in Brussels on that evening of December 7, 1932. At 8.45 pm, Ganshof steps onto the stage and, after a long pause, addresses the room:

Ladies and gentlemen,

I had some hesitations about coming to this Hall where so many great memories linger, to this place where so many of your colleagues have developed ideas or recounted events that often intertwined with the history of the country, to tell a story, the story of the Scientific Exploration of the Ruwenzori. I am willing to do so, but it's just a simple story.³⁰

Ganshof's mastery of rhetoric is evident. He strategically begins by alluding to the venue's historical significance for Belgian history; employing a clever semblance of modesty, he situates the scientific mission as an evident extension of both the nation's history and the broader international narrative. Indeed, in one breath he also mentions Henri Morton Stanley (1841–1904), the foremost European to traverse the region in question. This initial gesture establishes a thematic foundation for the lecture, one that revolves around the trope of a travel adventure with challenges, dangers, and obstacles that the team members, cast as heroes, valiantly surmount. By invoking the name of Stanley at the outset, Ganshof aligns himself with a well-established tradition that resonates with the audience. Stanley, often epitomized as the "adventurous traveler," is a figure readily recognizable not only within Ganshof's lecture but also within the broader context of travel stories and films:

The idea of exploring the immense planted massif (...) is fifty years old. Ten countries have sent teams of scientists and explorers towards this fascinating goal since the discovery of the Ruwenzori by Stanley. Indeed, it was the great British explorer who, during his extraordinary African discoveries, some of which are reminiscent of ancient grandeur, had the first glimpse of the Ruwenzori peaks.³¹

Ganshof recounts how Stanley earned recognition as the first individual to gaze upon Mount Stanley, also known as Mount Ngaliema, nestled within the

³⁰ All translations are provided by the authors unless otherwise noted.

³¹ Ganshof Van der Meersch, "Dans Les Monts."

Ruwenzori Range. Credited with naming the range “Rwenzori,” a colonial derivative of “rwe nzururu,” signifying “a place of snow,” Stanley’s nomenclature still prevails. Ganshof then addresses Western historians who examined the mountain range both before and after Stanley’s exploration. This historical lineage encompasses ancient geologists such as Ptolemy, who referred to it as the “source de nil,” to the Duc d’Abruzzes, who scaled the mountain’s heights in 1906.

Subsequently, the lecturer acknowledges the backing of various scientific institutions that funded the undertaking in 1932, thus establishing a performative consolidation of scientific authority from the outset. He delineates the mission’s scientific objectives, accompanied by references to the expertise of the mission participants. Following the presentation of the expedition team members, a contingent featuring several experienced mountaineers [Fig. 5], Ganshof reiterates the dangers of the mission:

It wasn’t easy: the country to be explored was vast and bristling with obstacles. The many previous attempts had given the measure of the difficulty.³²

What follows is not a detailed presentation of scientific observations and analyses. Instead, the lecture adopts the form of an adventurous travel narrative, emphasizing physical challenges and dangers. The audience is taken on a journey with the expedition members as they explore the magnificent yet hostile nature of the Ruwenzori mountains. The mission starts in Beni, situated at a Belgian territorial station along the principal route connecting Irumu to Lake Kivu. The explorers first traverse dense forests on the slopes, facing various challenges and obstacles, until they reach the ultimate destination: the snowy summit of the mountain. The Ruwenzori is home to more than thirty glaciers that never melt, creating a stunning contrast with the tropical climate below, as the lecturer emphasizes in his talk. The public in the room witnesses how the expedition members encounter diverse flora, ranging from mountain forests and bamboo to tree heathers, lobelias, and senecio, eventually leading to mosses, lichens, and bare rocks. The final three slides of the lecture show two majestic peaks: Point Albert and Point Margarita, the highest point of the Ruwenzori. The concluding image depicts one of the expedition members proudly standing on the peak, surrounded by a pristine landscape of white snow and clouds [Fig. 6]. This is the climax of the expedition and the visual narrative, demonstrating the achievement of the expedition and the domination of the West over the colonized land and its nature.

The adventurous travel narrative is a recurring trope in the history of the magic lantern, in which images are meticulously arranged to trace a logical

³² Ibid.



Figure 5. Eleven of the members of the Mission after a month in the high mountains. From left to right: Burgeon entomologist; J. Thiriart: drawing artist; J. de la Vallée Poussin: geologist; P. Marlier: topographical officer; J. Georges: guide; P. Solvay: engineer; Perger: doctor; L. Hauman: botanist; X. de Grunne: Head of mission; Ganshof van der Meersch: deputy head of mission; H. De Schryver: deputy head of mission. P. Michot: geologist, absent from photo. Source of identification De Grunne et al. 1937, p. 238.



Figure 6. One of the expedition members on a top of the mountain. The ice cap covering the summit of Ruwenzori.



Figure 7. Radio post connecting the explorers with the home country.

journey.³³ Similarly, the Ruwenzori images depict the expedition's various stages, from campsite to campsite, offering the audience magnificent landscapes along the way, filling the large projection screen. In the tradition of the travelogue, Ganshof explicitly addresses the danger and hardship endured. Starting from the arrival by boat and progressing through wide sandy paths, the expedition continues on foot, traversing rugged and inhospitable terrain. Amidst this wilderness, the only "echo of civilisation" is the radio post connecting the explorers with civilization [Fig. 7], a detail highlighted by Ganshof in his lecture. Here, the accompanying text serves to amplify the cultural contrasts depicted in the slides. Considering the performance context in which the lecture was delivered using projected images, Ganshof engaged the spectators as fellow travelers on the journey, with himself as the experienced guide of the virtual traveling party or a school class on excursion. The mode of address, particularly in comments referring to items outside of the frame, provided anecdotes from the scientific mission, details about tropical diseases, and insights

³³ Travel lectures were also known as "travelogues," a term coined by America's most famous traveling showman, Burton Holmes (1870–1958), referring to captivating presentations that transported audiences to distant lands. Wright, "The Results of Locomotion."

into the ever-changing weather, enhancing the audience's feeling of virtual presence and identification with the scientific explorers in the pictures.

Additionally, Ganshof employs another recurring motif in the history of lantern shows, which would have been familiar to audiences. When describing the bleak weather conditions at an altitude of 3,000 meters ("where it rains all day long, about 320 days a year") and the damp air in the dense and shadowy Bruyeres forest "with its branches adorned in countless garlands of lichens," he refers to "this botanist's domain" as "a real phantasmagoria." This genre of eerie lantern projections, in which lanternists projected dark scenes and conjured the ghosts of deceased individuals back to life, was certainly familiar to the public of the time.³⁴ The gloomy and misty images of the Ruwenzori region projected on a monumental scale [Fig. 8 and Fig. 9] will certainly have resonated with the cultural memory of the audience.

Anchoring these images in an eyewitness account simultaneously generates an impression of authenticity and truthfulness—both within the images themselves and the personal narrative they convey. The slides serve to illustrate this first-hand experience, attributing credibility to the visuals and affirming the tangible existence of the depicted scenes. In line with Daston and Galison's notion of "mechanical objectivity," as a prevalent factor for scientific undertakings within the positivist timeframe, film and photography were widely regarded as objective media capable of documenting reality faithfully.³⁵ The documentary nature of photographs during this period was seldom questioned. Similarly, Ganshof's lecture, relying on photographic images, asserted a documentary value and objectivity concerning the sights witnessed in the Ruwenzori Range. Moreover, the scientific claim of the lecture was emphasized by using terms such as "objective," "analysis," and "exploration," as well as by situating the mission within a longer tradition of explorations in the region, enhancing the lecture's scientific authority.

However, Ganshof's meticulous selection of photographs for display served a purpose beyond scientific observation and illustration. He seamlessly integrated them into his narrative, strategically guiding the audience's interpretation of the images and eliciting specific emotional responses, as integral components of his travel story. This fusion of scientific terminology with the storytelling conventions of an adventure tale within a performative setting effectively blurred the lines between objective observation and subjective experience, challenging the perceived boundary between personal narrative and scientific communication. This subtle shift in perspective happens almost unnoticeably but significantly early in the evening, setting the tone for the entire lecture.

³⁴ Heard, *Phantasmagoria*.

³⁵ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.

Figures 8 and 9. The Bruyeres forest with its branches covered in countless garlands of lichens, at around 3,100 m. In his lecture Ganshof recounts how “it rains all day long” and compares “this botanist’s domain” with a “veritable phantasmagoria.”

A View from Nowhere?

Ganshof's lantern collection begins with a map of the Ruwenzori Range, promptly followed by a schematic depiction of the range in relation to neighboring mountains [Fig. 10 and Fig. 11]. This is another recurrent motif typical of numerous colonial lantern presentations, wherein the introductory image often features a map or an illustration of the colonized region or the converted landscape, as seen in missionary lectures. These visuals depict the area as an object of study, offering a distanced perspective into which the lecturer will delve during the evening.³⁶ In history of science literature such a perspective is called "a view from nowhere" to refer to a notion of objectivity that claims to be independent of any subjective or local perspective. Coined by philosopher Thomas Nagel, it contrasts with the idea that scientific knowledge is always contextually situated. It differentiates between subjective views based on personal experiences and values, and objective views striving to understand reality as it is, transcending individual standpoints.

Nagel's concept of "a view from nowhere" has drawn criticism from historians and sociologists of science who contend that detachment from one's social and historical context is either unattainable or undesirable. Donna Haraway was an early critic and a proponent of the situated perspective, arguing that all knowledge is produced from a specific position and perspective, and that there is no such thing as a neutral or universal view from nowhere. She challenges the traditional notion of scientific objectivity, which claims to be independent of any subjective or local influences and argues that this notion is a form of power and domination, which obscures the interests and values of the dominant groups who produce and control scientific knowledge. Along similar lines, Steven Shapin³⁷ and Bruno Latour have argued that scientific knowledge is always produced, interpreted, and evaluated in relation to specific interests, values, and norms of a given community, and that the location of science affects its meaning and credibility.

However, visual representations such as the map of a specific area obscure this situated perspective and present this point of view, or orientation, as objective. The first slides in the Ruwenzori lantern collection are examples of such a misleading, supposedly objective, view. They are a first portrayal of the Ruwenzori Range as their object of study; as a "view from nowhere," they seem to erase, as it were, both these white men's and other positionalities

³⁶ Scholars in the field of geography and map history have developed critical perspectives on the history and theory of cartography, focusing on the political and ideological implications of mapmaking, arguing that maps are not neutral or objective depictions of reality, but rather powerful instruments of knowledge, authority, and domination. See Wood, Fels, and Krygier, *Rethinking the Power*; Pinder, "Mapping Worlds." Particularly within colonial contexts, maps reflected and reinforced the political and economic interests of the colonizers, as well as their cultural and epistemological assumptions about the colonized lands and peoples.

³⁷ Shapin, "Placing the View."

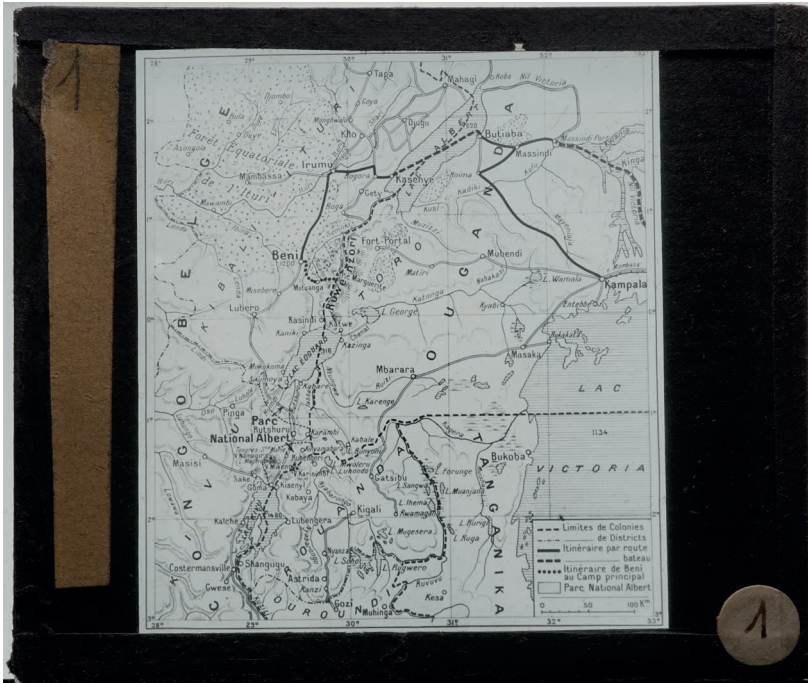


Figure 10. First slide in Ganshof's collection: a map of the Ruwenzori Mountain Range.



Figure 11. Second slide in Ganshof's collection: Ruwenzori Mountain Range compared to other mountains.



Figure 12. Construction of a meteorological observatory in Beni. "The observatory is built in matt. This type of house costs just a few francs."



Figure 13. "The observatory is almost complete. Throughout the mission, all the meteorological observation data will be regularly recorded, as will be done at all the camps."

in the world. However, what follows are photographs that are highly situated. The subsequent pair of slides in Ganshof's lecture depicts the establishment of a meteorological observation post in Beni [Fig. 12 and Fig. 13].³⁸ This was the initial gathering point for all expedition participants, where they received updates on weather conditions for their journey. The following slide offers a panoramic view of the Ruwenzori Range [Fig. 14] captured from fifty kilometers at the same location. From this vantage point in Beni, commanding a view of the mountain range, Ganshof begins the triumphant narrative of the expedition.

The Ruwenzori mission was inaugurated on July 25, 1932, as a group of thirteen men converged in Beni to initiate their journey to the initial encampment in Kaporata. Ganshof's account evokes the emotional resonance of this convergence of diverse individuals, arriving from different paths, on the same day, at the same hour, and at a predetermined central point in Africa:

This meeting of men representing various activities, arriving from opposite directions, disembarking on the same day, at the same hour, at a predetermined point in the heart of Africa, planned months in advance, held something slightly moving that translated into genuine enthusiasm in the joy of reuniting. It was an auspicious sign for the work that was to be undertaken.³⁹

This vantage point underscores the "white orientation" of the story, to use a term coined by feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed. In "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," Ahmed critically analyzes how whiteness is constructed and experienced in everyday life.⁴⁰ She highlights how whiteness often goes unexamined, with its effects and privileges taken for granted. Her exploration of whiteness unveils how dominant perspectives, often rooted in whiteness, shape knowledge production and societal norms: "whiteness becomes worldly through the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others."⁴¹ Rather than illustrating an elusive "view from nowhere," these slides indeed point to the performance of a distinctly embodied, masculine, colonial viewpoint.

The framing of the scientific expedition as a conquest of "virgin" and "untouched" terrain in the Ruwenzori mountains, as a triumph over hostile nature, reinforces this colonial perspective. As highlighted by scholars of colonial film, the portrayal of overcoming such natural "obstacles" signifies European dominance over the wilderness.⁴² Ganshof's narrative similarly portrays nature

38 The Ruwenzori lantern slides, often reused and renumbered, bear multiple numbers and descriptive labels. Ganshof's lecture text describes the displayed images, but since they are not stored sequentially, some images are hard to identify.

39 Ganshof Van der Meersch, "Dans les Monts," 5–6.

40 Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness."

41 Ahmed, 150.

42 Ramírez and Rolot, *Histoire du cinéma colonial*, 103.

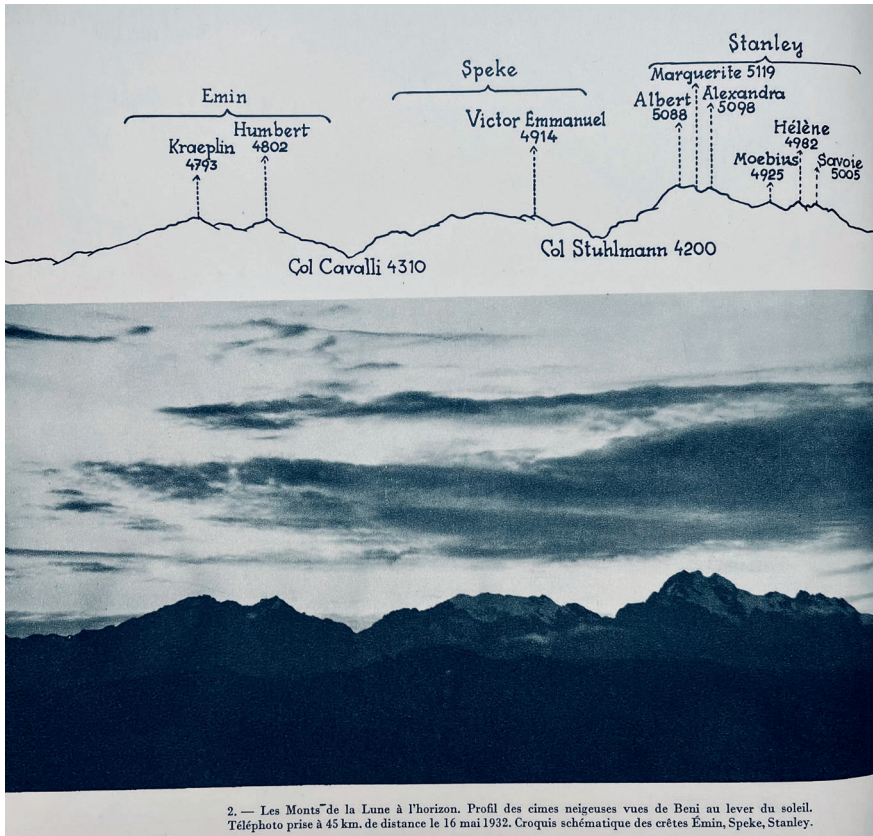


Figure 14. . Panoramic view of 'Les Monts de la Lune' on the horizon, the snowy Ruwenzori peaks seen from Beni at sunrise on May 16, 1932. Schematic sketch of the Emin, Speke, Stanley ridges. Image reproduced in De Grunne et al 'Ruwenzori' and the 28 January 1933 edition of 'L'illustration'.

as a territory to be scientifically mapped and inventoried, as dominated and controlled by white men, conquering the equatorial forest in the pursuit of progress. In Ganshof's portrayal, the vegetation itself becomes an impediment to progress, shifting agency from humans to the natural world and glorifying the heroism of colonialism in its quest to conquer nature's formidable challenges. However, this narrative obliterates the harsh reality of colonialism, which reduces the local environment to exploitable resources. Both the textual and visual elements, including the lecture and the magic lantern imagery, mask the true and symbolic violence inherent in colonial ventures, presenting instead a seemingly neutral account of scientific exploration.

Money for the Cause

The Ruwenzori scientific mission and its subsequent reporting were not isolated events, but part of a larger agenda driven by political, scientific, and economic interests, all aimed at involving Belgians in the colonial project. Science, in this context, served as a tool to further economic interests. Back in Belgium the progress of the mission was closely followed through weekly press reports, with the illustrated lectures serving as a culmination of the narrative that had been unfolding in stages. These lectures offered a captivating visual depiction of the expedition's endeavors, providing a sense of closure to the unfolding story that had gripped the public's imagination. Through these lectures, science was not only communicated but also leveraged to bolster support for colonial initiatives and foster a sense of national pride and achievement. Thus, the scientific exploration of the Ruwenzori mountains symbolized Belgian scientific prowess and a means to advance colonial interests, illustrating the intertwining of scientific inquiry with broader geopolitical goals.

Various scholars have underscored the capacity of lantern slides to evoke emotions among the public, more than words alone.⁴³ This emotional resonance rendered them particularly useful for fundraising. Organizations frequently harnessed such public exhibitions to generate financial support for their endeavors, spanning religious, social, or scientific purposes. The juxtaposition of projected images and accompanying text artfully weaving a compelling and coherent story had to convince the wealthy public of the mission's significance. If efficacious, such performances succeeded in not only persuading the audience of the necessity to endorse the undertaking morally and monetarily, but also in eliciting their financial contributions, a point Ganshof and the expedition's chief de Grunne were aware of.

Several letters by de Grunne illustrate that the same dynamics applied to the Comité pour l'exploration scientifique du Ruwenzori, acknowledging the efficacy of such visual presentations. In one of these letters, de Grunne articulated their reliance on the proceeds from such events for the broader popularization of the scientific mission.⁴⁴ The Ruwenzori expedition had incurred costs amounting to 888,000 Belgian francs, resulting in a deficit of 58,000 francs. A few days after Ganshof's lecture in the Brussels courthouse, de Grunne and Professor Hauman delivered a lecture within the grand hall of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, honored by the presence of King Albert I and Prince Leopold. This event enjoyed resounding success, with a sold-out crowd of 2,200 attendees, donating a total sum of 9,400 Belgian francs. In correspondence with the Société de Géographie Royale d'Anvers, de Grunne emphasized the paramount role of the projected images in procuring funds for

43 Crangle and Vogl-Bienek, *Screen Culture*; Lenk and Majsova, *Faith in a Beam*; Moens, "Emotions On Demand."

44 De Grunne, "Concernant La Conférence Ruwenzori."

the Comité, identifying the photographs as the lecture's most powerful asset.⁴⁵ Taken together, most of this deficit was covered by such initiatives and other entities.⁴⁶

Although framed as scientific communication, the lantern lectures were undeniably part of a colonial culture that sought a visual spectacle to market its narrative, rendering the remote world "imaginable" to its audience. Just like the popular exhibition and lantern culture described by Joe Kember in his seminal study *Marketing Modernity*, these lectures strategically interwove imperialist narratives, fostering a connection between audiences and their nation's colonial, scientific, and military pursuits. This linkage, particularly within the context of Great Britain, offered solace during a juncture marked by challenges to British colonial supremacy on both military and moral fronts.⁴⁷ The fact that these colonial images generated money demonstrates that they were part of the social-economic reality in which they performed. The esthetic and the economic impact of these images were clearly intertwined with scientific discourse. Notably, it is impossible to disentangle the scientific attributes of these images from the economic and military ambitions they served to bolster.

Of Voices Unheard

A multitude of individuals involved in the expedition remain unnamed in Ganshof's archive, despite their visually substantial presence within the lantern slides [Fig. 15]. While he meticulously detailed the Belgian members accompanying him on his departure from Beni, the archive is silent about the 200 porters, fifteen of whom accompanied the group to the mountain's highest reaches. This silence in the archive contrasts with the extensive coverage of the mission, which often emphasizes the uncharted nature of the Ruwenzori's snow-capped peaks, even to local inhabitants. A select few locals were trained as mountain climbers to assist the expedition members in their final ascent. However, the absence of explicit acknowledgment of local knowledge in Ganshof's lecture raises questions about the extent of indigenous expertise regarding the area. The guides and porters, who were not documented in the lecture, undoubtedly harbored knowledge of the local flora and fauna. The expertise possessed by these individuals regarding the area, its wildlife, and plant life, remained unrecognized and unshared. In his lecture, Ganshof briefly mentions the mountain's local nomenclature as "Mont de la Lune," although this is overshadowed by his dismissal of its origin as a simple confluence of snow and ice within one of the world's warmest regions. Despite their contributions to the expedition's success and their familiarity with the terrain,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ De Grunne, "Ruwenzori from the West," 275.

⁴⁷ Kember, *Marketing Modernity*.



Figure 15. A native person trained for mountaineering, after crossing the glacier (4700 m).

their absence from Ganshof's narrative suggests a disregard for their role and a selective emphasis on the contributions of the European explorers.

Similarly, family relationships frequently remain overlooked in adventurous colonial accounts, also in this specific lecture. The individuals showcased in the lecture are depicted independent from their familial relationships. However, from the archival records, including his *carnets de route* (travel diary),⁴⁸ it becomes evident that Elisabeth Orts, Ganshof's wife, played a pivotal role in facilitating his scientific journey. While the lecture emphasizes a masculine spirit of adventure and steadfast determination, the ULB archive reveals a somewhat different account. Within the archive, a file containing personal correspondences sheds light on the intimate bond between Ganshof and his wife. They meticulously prepared for the expedition together, months in advance. In a letter dated June 22, 1932, Ganshof expressed profound gratitude to his wife for her support in his participation in the expedition.⁴⁹ Additionally, on June 12, just before embarking on his train journey to Rome, Ganshof detailed in his initial travel journal how they spent their final twelve hours together: "Elisabeth and I escape for twelve hours before the grand departure. We live

⁴⁸ In a letter addressed to his wife, Ganshof expresses his intention to use his travel diaries for his articles. He further mentions that she was welcome to peruse some passages herself, granting her complete access, stating: "I simply wanted to make it as comprehensive as possible for you. Parts written on trains, planes, boats, at night, on my knees, in the rain, without light, frozen fingers ..." Ganshof Van der Meersch, "Mon tout," July 10, 1932.

⁴⁹ Ganshof Van der Meersch, "Mon Amour."

amidst hustle and tension, such that we long for a few serene hours. A precious memory to carry. Joy. Happiness.”⁵⁰

Throughout his journey, thoughts of Elisabeth continuously occupy his mind. “I realize the separation, which so many things had forced me to think about too much. Fortunately, E is going well during my absence,” he records a day later.⁵¹ Ganshof often sends passionate letters to Elisabeth, expressing the weight of her absence on him, his yearning to have her physically nearby, and his longing to exchange thoughts with her. Without overly idealizing Orts’s role in the expedition, these affective feelings stand in contrast to the image of the rational adventurer that Ganshof portrayed. The omission of Orts from the lantern lecture, along with the intimate emotional dimension inherent in such endeavors, was not uncommon and did not fit within the format of an academic lecture. However, Orts’s presence in the archival documents offers an alternative perspective to the story.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, our exploration of Ganshof’s Ruwenzori lecture highlights the intricate interplay between performative scientific communication, colonial propaganda, and fundraising endeavors, drawing upon familiar tropes such as the travel narrative. The Ruwenzori mission was indeed celebrated as a triumphant collaboration of scientific and physical prowess in the name of the country’s glory, as expressed by the newspaper *Le Soir* on December 14, 1932: “For the first time, our national colors flew over all the summits of the mountain massif. C’est une belle victoire à la fois sportive et scientifique.”

The lecture was introduced as a discourse centered around a scientific mission, with the institutional framework meticulously outlined to establish immediate scientific authority. However, the unfolding narrative diverges from the anticipated scientific exposition, and the story takes an adventurous turn, emphasizing the physical and emotional trials and hazards faced by the mission members. This emergent heroic narrative serves to reaffirm and strengthen the perception of Western superiority over the colonized region and its inhabitants. The narrative is visually enriched by captivating imagery that not only appeals to the audience’s fascination but also strategically evokes emotional engagement. This emotional connection is instrumental in soliciting financial support to address the substantial budgetary shortfall that arose due to the mission’s unexpected high costs.

While ostensibly presented as a vehicle for science communication, the lecture’s true objective becomes apparent: fundraising and bolstering the colonial agenda. Beneath the veneer of objective scientific discourse, the lecture

⁵⁰ Ganshof Van der Meersch, “Carnet de Route 1.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

effectively aligns with imperialist narratives, forging a link between the audience and their nation's colonial ventures. This analysis highlights how historical narratives, even those seemingly confined to scientific communication, can serve as conduits for advancing and legitimizing colonial ideologies. By examining the intersections of science, performance, and storytelling, it enhances our understanding of how science communication through performance was used to support the colonial agenda.

The case of the Ruwenzori lecture thus shows how the magic lantern lecture functioned as a genuine performative event combining visual and verbal rhetoric strategies: Rather than describing the reality of a specific geographic area, it aimed to *produce* a specific imaginary representation of that very same reality. The different sources—slides, annotations, testimonies—reveal how science communication was systematically entangled with colonial discourse and economic interests. Scientific dissemination thus served as a tool for spreading propaganda aiming at reinforcing a shared national identity as well as philanthropic enthusiasm. Filtered through the verbal and visual discourse of the adventure travelogue, science is presented as a heroic and even virile adventure undertaken by brave white men. Authority and veracity are not conveyed through scientific argument but through lived heroic experience.

The Ruwenzori lecture provides insights into the specific narrative and visual strategies deployed to substantiate this heroism. The “view from nowhere” is intended to create a sense of objectivity, as it naturalizes the presence of the white perspective: The colonial presence is obscured or neutralized and is thus represented as a “natural” state of affairs. At the same time, the lecture systematically renders invisible the implication of non-white actors in the production of scientific knowledge about this specific region. Local knowledge is thus obscured or appropriated without substantiating its origins, thus unwillingly revealing the mechanism of excavation proper to colonial science. Finally, we have also shown how the virile heroism of the colonial scientist-cum-adventurer is profoundly gendered, and how the involvement and expertise of women—in this case, Ganshof's own wife—seem to have been written out of the public discourse accompanying the magic lantern slides.

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