

The Hypnagogic Dream Dome

The 21st Century Magic Lantern

An Essay — Unicornucopia — Bournemouth, UK — October 2026

I. The Lantern That Dreamed

In 1646 Athanasius Kircher described a device in *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*: a candle, a convex lens, a small painting on glass. In a dark room, a demon appeared on the wall. He called it *lanterna magica*. For two hundred years it was not a projector. It was a conjuring tool. Travelling showmen used it to make spirits appear in smoke, to teach scripture to those who could not read, to make a village gasp. Etienne-Gaspard Robertson's *Phantasmagoria* in Paris in 1798 put the lantern on wheels and terrified audiences by projecting ghosts onto smoke. Its purpose was never resolution. It was presence.

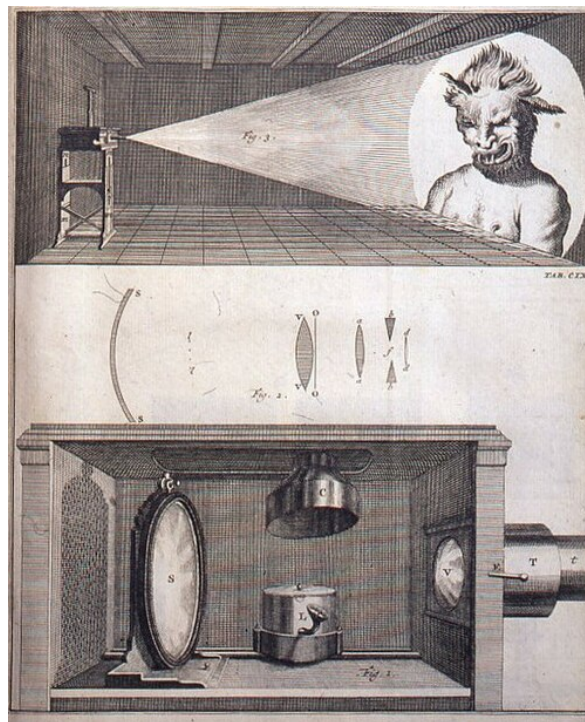


Fig. 1: Kircher's magic lantern, 1671 — light, lens, and a devil in the beam. The first shared dream machine.

The lantern's contract was simple: in the dark, we agree to see what is not there, together. The image was hand-painted, dim, flickering — and that was its power. It left room for imagination.

"The magic lantern took what was invisible — a fear, a saint, a dream — and made it shared, in the dark, for a few people at a time."

II. The Institutional Sky

The 20th century made the lantern big. Zeiss built the planetarium. IMAX built the dome. The projector became a million-pound machine bolted to a concrete floor. It showed us the universe brilliantly, but it lost the parlour. It stopped being something you could carry, set up in a front room in Bournemouth, and invite friends to gather around. We began to sit in rows, looking forward. We stopped gathering around a small circle of light.



Fig. 2: A Victorian magic lantern, c. 1890. Note the hand-painted glass slide — the ancestor of our Dome Master.

III. The Return: The Hypnagogic Dream Dome

Our dome is not fabric. It is 3mm thick opaque white acrylic — a solid, luminous sculpture, 200 x 400mm, that holds light within it. Inside, a compact projector the size of a book lies on its back, pointing straight up. The film is *Unicornucopia* — a 1280x720 ProRes file warped on a 27-inch Retina iMac into a 3840x3840 true fisheye circle (v360 flat to fisheye, 180 deg FOV), touching all four edges of the frame. It is deliberately a folk technology, but built as an object. Like Kircher's oil lamp, it uses what is to hand: consumer projection, open-source tools, acrylic and light. Its magic is not in the brightness. It is in the material — opaque white that becomes a world when lit from within.

The hypnagogic state is the threshold between waking and sleeping, when images form themselves. The dome does not show you a film *about* dreams. It is a vessel that holds them. You do not lie under it — you gather around it, and look into a small universe held in acrylic.



Fig. 3: *The Hypnagogic Dream Dome*, 2026 — 3mm opaque white acrylic. A 21st century magic lantern. The Green Man appears within the dome, just as Kircher's demon appeared on the wall. Same ritual, new forest.

IV. Why It Is The Same Device

1. **Intimate, not industrial.** The magic lantern was for a parlour. So is this. Acrylic, not concrete. A small crowd gathered around light.
2. **Handmade image.** The first slides were hand-painted. *Unicornuopia* is hand-warped — true fisheye, not letterboxed. The circle must touch all four edges. The acrylic holds the circle as an object.
3. **Shared interiority.** Robertson wanted you to feel a ghost was in the room. We want you to feel the forest is inside the dome. Technology changed — candle to laser — but the contract is identical: in the dark, we agree to dream together.

V. Unicornuopia

Unicornuopia is our first dream film made for this form. Rendered as a 3840x3840 Dome Master and as 4096x4096 for larger domes, it is designed to fill the acrylic edge-to-edge. No black bars. No half-dome. A full circle contained in 3mm white. The magic lantern always travelled from village to village. So does the dream dome — from living room in Bournemouth to festival field, the same file, the same circle.

If the 19th century lantern said 'I will show you the world,' and the 20th century planetarium said 'I will show you the universe,' the hypnagogic dream dome says: 'I will show you what is inside you, but we will see it together, inside a small circle of light.'

Come gather. The dome is warm. The projector is humming. The circle is complete.