Georges Melies - Master of Illusion: Crash Course Film History #4

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=L8is28gAOTc
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/L8is28gAOTc

When's the last time you heard a really good story?

Maybe it was was a TV show that made you dream of discovering aliens as a kid, or a book that completely changed how you think about yourself. We're all hardwired to make sense of the world by telling and being told stories, and at the turn of the 20th century, motion pictures were starting to do just that.

At first, seeing any film was thrilling in and of itself, whether it was a Vaudeville performer flexing or a train pulling up to a station. But just five or six years into the history of film, audiences were looking for something more than just a technological marvel. So, filmmakers had to "try".

Ugh... The world was primed for artists to prove this medium was more than just a passing fad. And along came a storyteller who would make his own magic, take us to the moon, and jump-start the first special effects revolution.

He changed what filmmakers and audiences believed was possible, both onscreen and off. It was time for Georges Méliès.

[Intro Music Plays]

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, artists, engineers, and self-taught tinkerers were all pushing the boundaries of film. 1:04"Self-Taught-Tinkerer?" My nickname in high school. Technical innovations like the Latham Loop allowed filmmakers to use longer film strips in cameras, without them tearing and breaking.

Now they could create longer, more complex films, which facilitated the very first experiments with editing. Editing, also known as cutting, is the assembling of shots to achieve coherence: whether that's in the narrative, in space, in time, symbolically, or thematically. There are all kinds of ways to join shots together.

You can use transitions like fades, wipes, or dissolves, or you can just cut straight from one shot to another. Like this... Ya... see that?

We'll explore editing techniques in more detail later in Crash Course Film, and dive deep into their psychological, emotional, and even political implications. For now, all you need to know is that filmmakers were starting to join shots together, inching their way toward narrative-based films that explicitly told stories. One of these soon-to-be filmmakers was Georges Méliès.

He was born in Paris in 1861, and first achieved fame as a stage magician. If you're familiar with Christopher Nolan's The Prestige – his other movie with Christian Bale – it'll come as no surprise that stage magicians were huge celebrities at the turn of the century. Also, David Bowie played Tesla in that movie.

And that was awesome. Stage magicians entertained large crowds with illusions and magic tricks, and decked out their acts with elaborate sets, costumes, and characters. And most importantly for us, wove their larger acts around stories.

By all accounts, Georges Méliès was skilled and successful. He owned and operated his own theater, the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, where he acted as writer, producer, and director, and designed the sets and costumes himself. While Muybridge, Edison, and the Lumière Brothers were tinkering with motion picture devices, Méliès was developing magic tricks, from sophisticated sight gags to theatrical special effects.

One of his specialties involved using a lantern projection device to project light effects onto the audience, making it seem to rain or snow inside the theater... whoa... Méliès was invited to one of the Lumière Brothers' private cinématographe screenings before they officially revealed their device to the world, and he was awestruck. He tried to buy one of their inventions on the spot, but the Lumières weren't ready to sell.

Méliès didn't give up, though. He could already see all the possibilities a motion picture camera and projector held for stage magic, and vice versa. After an intense, transcontinental search, Méliès ended up buying an Animatograph, Then, get this, he reverse-engineered the Animatograph so it worked as its own camera, too.

And by April, 1896, he was making and screening his own films in his theater. At first, his films looked like Edison's or the Lumière Brothers' – continuous shots of short skits, quick magic tricks, or scenes from everyday life. But then along came one of those happy accidents that moved cinema forward.

In his autobiography, Méliès describes a day he was capturing footage on a Paris street when his camera jammed. Frustrated, he fiddled with the hand crank, fixed the problem, and started shooting again after a couple seconds had passed. When he developed the film later and played it back, the most amazing thing had happened.

The shot started with people walking, children skipping, and a horse-drawn omnibus full of workers trundling up the street. Then, in the blink of an eye, everything changed. Men turned into women, children were replaced by horses, and – spookiest of all – the omnibus full of workers changed into a hearse.

In an instant, Méliès realized what had happened. When his camera jammed, it stopped shooting for a moment, and then started capturing images again after he fixed it. When the whole sequence was projected, those two "shots" were joined in an instant and – poof! – magic happened before his eyes.

Méliès had found a way to perform actual magic with editing, to fool an audience and pull off illusions he'd never been able to on stage. He began making "trick films" with a vengeance, using the power of editing and special effects to do the impossible on screen: like levitating heads, making people disappear, or changing an object's size or shape. Let's go to the Thought Bubble to reveal a few of this magician's secrets!

Méliès pioneered the first double exposure in 1898, by running the film negative through the camera twice before developing it. When you do this correctly, both images appear on screen simultaneously, though the second image usually appears faded or ghostly. This technique led him to invent the split screen, in which he covered half the frame, shot his footage, rewound the film, covered the other half of the frame, and shot new footage.

When the film was developed, the two images appeared side-by-side in real time. This was a trick he used over and over again, often to allow actors to perform opposite themselves. It's a great technique that many YouTubers use.

He further refined this trick with a process called matting, where he'd paint black shapes on a glass plate attached to the lens of the camera. Those black shapes kept light from exposing those portions of the film as he shot a scene. Then, Méliès could paint the other portions of the glass plate, while leaving the original shapes clear, re-shoot the scene, and both exposures would combine.

We call these techniques in-camera effects because they're produced inside the camera, rather than after the film has been shot. And Melies used them and many others to masterful effect. Thanks Thought Bubble!

The laws of physics were no match for Méliès and his camera and

editing tricks. No match for me either. Can you make me float up?

Nick (off camera): We can't do that. ...or something. He could manipulate time. He could manipulate space.

And he could harness the fact that all film presents an illusion, to push his own illusions even further. Before long, Méliès began incorporating elements of his theatrical shows into his films – the elaborate costumes, the lavish sets, the exaggerated props, /and/ the stories. To our eyes today, his films have a distinct “stagey” quality.

By that I mean, the camera is almost always set back from the action, capturing an entire scene in one shot, roughly from the perspective of an audience member in a theater. We call this style of framing Proscenium Arch, named for the arch over the front of the stage in a theater. It’s not used as much today, but you might recognize the style from Wes Anderson movies.

To us, the scenes in Méliès’ films might feel static and too long, because, outside of all his special effects editing, he only cuts between scenes. Not to mention, his characters might seem one-dimensional, and their gestures can feel over-the-top. But put yourself in the shoes of a film-goer in 1901 Paris, having seen nothing but slice-of-life actualitiés and Vaudeville performers on screen.

The relative sophistication, ambitious vision, and powerful special effects of Méliès films would be downright thrilling. But Méliès wasn’t the only filmmaker at work during the very first years of cinema. Alice Guy-Blaché was a secretary for the major French film company Gaumont, who went on to become their head of production.

The first known female filmmaker, Guy-Blaché directed more than 1,000 films, was a pioneer in color tinting, rudimentary sound and picture sync, and ultimately opened her own film studio. Blanche also worked on the cutting edge of narrative fiction, like with her film The Cabbage Fairy, before she eventually lost her company and stopped making films altogether in 1920. In 1902, Méliès released his masterpiece, A Trip to the Moon, loosely based on the Jules Verne novel.

This 14-minute film follows a group of scientists who travel to the moon, sleep under the stars, battle some aliens, and escape back to Earth triumphant. Even if you haven’t seen the whole thing, you probably know the iconic image of the 6:51“man in the moon” with the space capsule stuck in his eye. A Trip to the Moon was made up of 825 feet of film – three times the average length of Edison or Lumière films of the time.

This film incorporates many of Méliès’ innovations – his trick photography, his fantastical settings, and his ambitious storytelling – all in service of a large scale, relatively complex, narrative fiction film. It was a massive international success. In fact, it made so much money that Thomas Edison – among others – made illegal copies of it and lined his pockets screening the film as his own... what a guy!

But it wasn’t just a financial hit. It also had a profound effect on other filmmakers of the time, and expanded what people thought was possible, narratively and aesthetically. Not only could films take us into space and let us battle with aliens, but they could also sustain our attention for almost 15 minutes and tell stories that unfolded over multiple scenes.

A Trip to the Moon gets referenced everywhere from Martin Scorsese’s Hugo, which features a loving portrait of Georges Méliès, to the Smashing Pumpkins’ 1996 music video for Tonight, Tonight. And perhaps, most importantly Matthew Gaydos’ arm. Okay you can leave now, Matt.

A Trip to the Moon was by no means the only film Méliès made. In his prime, he made between 25 and 75 films per year, a huge number by any standard. He founded a production company called Star Film and built a large studio in Montreuil, France, just outside Paris.

The studio was constructed like a giant greenhouse, to let in as much natural light as possible. And it was big enough to house Méliès’ massive painted sets and backdrops. And though we’re decades away from color film stock, audiences were already seeing films with color in them.

To achieve this effect, individual frames of film were hand-tinted or painted – to color an explosion orange or a dress red or the sun yellow. It was a costly, time-consuming process, and had to be repeated with every copy of the film. And I'm glad I didn't have to do it.

For a showman like Méliès, however, no bit of magic was too elaborate. It’s even said he employed twenty-one women to hand-tint his films at what must have cost a pretty penny. I'm glad I didn't have to pay for it.

Sadly, the high cost of his productions, legal challenges from rivals, and the devastation of Europe during World War I forced Méliès out of the film business by 1917. In the 1920s, he was living in obscurity, selling sweets at the Montparnasse station in Paris, as anyone who’s seen Hugo knows. Had his story ended there, it would’ve been a tragedy.

But this is the movie business. And there’s nothing we like better than a comeback story. In the late 1920s, journalists and filmmakers who’d been influenced by Méliès’ films tracked him down to celebrate his contributions to the art of cinema.

Someday I hope people track me down and do that... for me. And in October, 1931, Méliès was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor, the highest achievement in French military or civil affairs. The medal was presented to him by Louis Lumière himself.

So Georges Méliès, the Parisian stage magician who brought science fiction, special effects, and more sophisticated narrative storytelling to film, was ultimately honored by those who knew his work the best. Both his peers and his rivals agreed that his illusions changed history and took audiences to new and thrilling places. Places like the moon... and Matthew Gaydos' arm.

Today we introduced Georges Méliès, the magician-turned-filmmaker whose mistakes, experiments, and ambitious storytelling led to some huge advancements in early film production. We discussed how editing and special effects can enhance the very nature of film as an illusion, and how audiences were hungry for longer, more complex narratives. And next time, we’ll learn about some more experimentation with editing techniques, and a filmmaker who started to define the visual language of film as we know it today.

Wheezy Waiter, not Wheezy Waiter. Crash Course Film History is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. You can head over to their channel to check out a playlist of their latest amazing shows, like Coma Niddy, Gross Science, and Physics Girl.

This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these nice people and our amazing graphics team, is Thought Cafe.