

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

# Georges Méliès



ELIZABETH EZRA

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The birth of the *auteur*

ELIZABETH EZRA

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## Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessary coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception



which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES  
ROBERT NGRAM

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Finally, I must thank the staff at the Bibliothèque du Film in Paris, which has been an oasis of helpfulness in a desert of bureaucracy.

# Preface

Invaluable contributions to early film scholarship have been made by Méliès's descendants, some of whom have made important discoveries about the technical aspects of Méliès's production practices. Researchers who do not have the good fortune to be related to Méliès, however, face difficult challenges in gaining access to films and archival materials. Fortunately, many of the films Méliès made after 1902 are available on video in the United States (from FACETS video in Chicago), and there are substantial film archives in London (the National Film Archive of the British Film Institute) and the United States (the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York). A selection of fifteen beautifully restored films was broadcast on the ARTE satellite television channel in German and French on 23 December 1997 and a VHS version of this three-hour programme, which also includes an excellent biography, is available in France under the title *Méliès le cinémagicien*. Finally, the user-friendly Bibliothèque du Film (BiFi) in Paris houses a small collection of documents of interest to the Méliès scholar.

## Note on translations and abbreviations

Unless otherwise stated, all translations of French quotations are my own, with the exception of film titles, for which I give standard translated versions taken from the British and American Star-Film catalogues.

The conventional abbreviations used in film studies, such as LS (long shot), EC (extreme closeup), and POV (point-of-view shot), are not usually applicable to Méliès. It is tempting, when discussing his films, to use an alternative set of abbreviations: POS (puff of smoke), WD (woman disappears), ME (mayhem ensues), and TSBCB (train swallowed by celestial body). I will refrain, however.

# Introduction

## Narrative attractions

On 28 December 1895, a barker stood outside the Grand-Café at number 14, boulevard des Capucines shouting at passers-by: ‘Entrez, entrez, mesdames et messieurs. Venez voir le cinématographe des frères Lumière de Lyon ... Un franc seulement et vous verrez des personnages grandeur nature s’agiter et vivre sous vos yeux ...’<sup>1</sup> (Malthête-Méliès 1973:156). Inside, in the basement area known as the Salon Indien, some thirty-five curious spectators, including the director of the popular Grévin wax museum and the head of the Folies-Bergère, took their seats expectantly, waiting to be impressed. Sitting among the specially invited guests was 34-year-old Georges Méliès, magician and director of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin (directly above which Antoine Lumière, father of brothers Auguste and Louis, had a photographic studio). The lights dimmed, and frozen images appeared on the screen. A few moments passed, and the figures remained immobile; members of the audience began to grow restless, and Méliès complained to the person sitting next to him that he didn’t see what all the fuss was about. Then, suddenly, the images sprang to life. As Méliès later described that moment, ‘No sooner had I stopped speaking when a horse pulling a cart started to walk towards us,

1 ‘Come on in, ladies and gentlemen. Come see the cinematograph of the Lumiere Brothers of Lyon ... For only one franc, you’ll see lifesize figures move and come to life before your very eyes ...’

followed by other vehicles, then passers-by – in short, all the hustle and bustle of a street. We sat there with our mouths open, without speaking, filled with amazement’ (Toulet 1995:15).

The effect produced by the first public exhibition of this new invention cannot be overstated. In the early days of cinema, watching a film was not the kind of experience it is today, perceived without thinking as a normal part of daily life; it was an experience unlike any other that had been known before. In 1896, Maxime Gorki described the sense of fear and amazement experienced by many at the earliest film showings: *Tout à coup, on entend cliqueter quelque chose; tout disparaît, et un train occupe l’écran. Il fonce droit sur nous – attention! On dirait qu’il veut se précipiter dans l’obscurité où nous sommes, faire de nous un infâme amas de chairs déchirées d’os en miettes, et réduire en poussière cette salle et tout ce bâtiment...*’ (Priour 1993: 31).<sup>2</sup> What appeared on the screen seemed real, and this very realism seemed magical - but it was not long before film’s seemingly magical effects, such as dissolves, splicing, and multiple exposure, became the basic vocabulary of realist film. Film history is in fact the story of this shift, this process of turning magic into reality; and Méliès is the magician who first performed this feat.

Méliès’s place in film history, however, is problematic. Although he is universally acknowledged to be an early film pioneer, his work has often been dismissed as simplistic, both narratively and technically. For a long time, Méliès’s work was cited as the foremost example of what Noël Burch termed the ‘primitive mode of representation’; films made before around 1906 were characterized, according to Burch, by four traits: the ‘autarky and *unicity* of each frame’, or framing that is self-contained and unchanged throughout the scene; ‘the *noncentered* quality of the image’, or the use of the edges of the frame as well as the centre; ‘consistent medium long-shot camera distance’; and

2 ‘Suddenly, we heard a clicking sound; everything disappeared and a train filled the screen. It was heading right toward us - watch out! You would have thought it wanted to rush out into the dark room in which we were sitting, to turn us into a grotesque pile of torn flesh and shattered bones, reducing to dust the room and the entire building ...’

the ‘*nonclosure*’ of the narrative, in other words its reliance on extrafilmic information (such as intertitles, a live commentator, or the audience’s familiarity with the film’s subject-matter) (Burch 1986: 486-88; original emphasis). In recent years, however, film historians have uncovered mounting evidence of the modernity of very early cinema, illustrated in the use of techniques normally associated with later cinema, such as deep staging and continuity editing. Noël Burch’s designation of films made before 1906 as ‘primitive’ has been superseded by the term ‘cinema of attractions’, developed by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault in recognition of the dismissive connotations of the word ‘primitive’.<sup>3</sup> Theories of the cinema of attractions ascribe roughly the same characteristics to early film, although they place special emphasis on its presentational or spectacular qualities. As Tom Gunning puts it, ‘[t]his cinema differs from later narrative cinema through its fascination in the thrill of display rather than its construction of a story’ (Elsaesser 1990:100). Yet even the theorists of the cinema of attractions oversimplify early film, deeming it to be largely devoid of narrative content, rather more ‘show’ than ‘tell’.

The distinction of ‘primitive’ par excellence has always been reserved for Méliès, whose *féeries* or fantasy films have helped categorize him as an imaginative but unsophisticated pioneer of early cinema. Méliès is the filmmaker whose position in film history would be the most affected by a reassessment of early film. David Bordwell acknowledges that film editing was ‘pioneered by Méliès’, but qualifies this statement by adding that ‘however, these techniques are not necessarily steps toward the perfection of film narrative; storytelling was only one purpose of Méliès’ *féeries*, and his editing often served to heighten legerdemain and theatrical spectacle’ (Bordwell 1997: 33 and 128). Although Bordwell’s assessment of Méliès’s place in film history is one of the best informed, the narrative content that he concedes on the one hand is dismissed on the other as it is relegated to the domain of theatrical

3 For Burch’s proposal of the term ‘primitive cinema’, see ‘A Primitive Mode of Representation?’ in Elsaesser 1990: 220. For a discussion of the term ‘cinema of attractions’, see Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’, also in Elsaesser 1990.

spectacle. Richard Abel makes a similar compromise in his magisterial study of early French film, *The Ciné Goes to Town*. He first discusses Méliès's work under the heading 'cinema of attractions'; but then, in the following chapter titled 'The Transition to a Narrative Cinema', he inserts another section on Méliès labelled 'The Cinema of Attractions (continued)' (Abel 1998: 156 ff.). The awkwardness of this insertion points to the tension between the narrative content in Méliès's films and the widespread tendency among film scholars to classify them as cinema of attractions.

Other recent reappraisals of early cinema make a similar gesture toward recognizing the narrative content of Méliès's films only ultimately to dismiss it. In a 1995 essay, Tom Gunning concedes that it is probably not possible to assign early films exclusively either to the realm of attractions or to that of narration, but then adds that narrative content in the trick films 'semble néanmoins principalement fonctionner de la même manière que le décor Louis XV lui-même, c'est-à-dire comme une sorte de cadre pour le véritable intérêt du film: le processus d'apparition, de disparition, de transformation et de réapparition'.<sup>4</sup> Gunning insists on attributing authorial intention ('the film's true subject') to Méliès in a way that would not be acceptable today in the context of later films (or in the context of literary texts of any period). Charles Musser offers a corrective to Gunning's dichotomy between attractions and narration, contending that, 'En fait, les attractions et la narration sont efficacement combinées puisque les coups de théâtre que Méliès adorait font également partie de la narration'.<sup>5</sup> But for all of his effective championing of Méliès's modernity, Musser quickly drops Méliès in order to turn his attention to highlighting the narrative

4 'nevertheless seems to function principally like the Louis XV decor, that is, like a kind of frame for the film's true subject: the process of appearance, disappearance, transformation and reappearance'. (Tom Gunning, 'Attractions, truquages et photogénie: l'explosion du présent dans les films à truc français produits entre 1896 et 1907' in Gili, Lagny *et al.* 1995:183 and 185.)

5 'In fact, attractions and narrative are efficiently combined because the theatrical turns that Méliès favoured are also an integral part of the narration'. (Charles Musser, 'Pour une nouvelle approche du cinéma des premiers temps: le cinéma d'attractions et la narrativité' in Gili, Lagny *et al.* 1995:155.)

dimension in the films of Edwin Porter, which, he argues, has previously been overshadowed by an excessive emphasis placed on Griffith (Gili, Lagny, *et al* 1995: 169-70). The case Musser makes for Porter is equally applicable to Méliès, but he does not go so far as to show this. That Musser has different priorities is by no means grounds for reproach; but now that all of the seeds have been planted for establishing the narrative force of Méliès's films, it seems that the time has come to take the project one step further. Marshall Deutelbaum has made a compelling case for elements of narrative structure in many of the Lumière films previously considered to be totally devoid of narrative content (Deutelbaum 1979); one of the aims of this study is to make a similar case for the work of Méliès.

There is no question that Méliès's films contain elements of spectacle, or 'attractions'. But the presence of spectacle in no way detracts from the films' narrative content – their internal heterogeneity only links them more closely to the vast majority of films that came after them. Rather than what Gunning calls the 'heterogeneous relation that film before 1906 (or so) bears to the films that follow' (Elsaesser 1990: 56), I wish to posit a certain homogeneity among films made prior to and after 1906 by locating a certain heterogeneity *within* individual films made by Méliès. As feminist and other film theorists have demonstrated, storytelling is only ever a single component of any film; the notion of 'visual pleasure' developed by Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 1975) surely applies to any spectacular element of a film, from lush scenery to magic tricks designed to amaze and delight. Although Méliès certainly exploited visual pleasure in the specific sense in which Mulvey intended it, in his repeated images of scantily-clad young women, he also promoted visual pleasure in a broader sense, but *within a narrative context*. Rather than a progression from recording (Lumière) to spectacle (Méliès) to narrative (nearly everyone who followed, with the exception of certain avant-garde filmmakers), film history is made up of different combinations of all three elements. Méliès's films, like most films, both show *and* tell (or 'monstrate' and narrate, as André Gaudreault puts it (Elsaesser 1990: 276)), creating meaning as they entertain.



This book, therefore, aims to dispel a number of myths about Méliès's contribution to film history. These myths, which sometimes overlap and sometimes contradict one another – as myths do – are the following:

*Myth 1* Méliès made primarily fairytales and fantasies characterized by their childlike naiveté.

*Myth 2* Méliès's style is exclusively theatrical, with little or nothing in the way of specifically cinematic features or effects.

*Myth 3* Méliès's work is largely devoid of narrative structure and symbolic coherence, and is therefore qualitatively different from that of most filmmakers who followed him. His films may not, therefore, be analyzed using the tools of modern film theory.

To some extent, these myths were fostered by Méliès himself. His lifelong struggle for artistic independence and creative control over his work extended to the legend that grew up around him – but this would eventually turn against him. Like the running story lines that Méliès brought to disparate tricks in his magic acts, the seminal moments that punctuate his life can be strung together to form a cohesive narrative, bringing a sense of purpose and meaning to what might otherwise appear as little more than a series of spectacular feats. This narrative may be called Méliès's Life Story.

## Life Story

Marie-Georges-Jean Méliès (known as Georges) was born in Paris on 8 December 1861, the youngest by many years of three children. His mother, Johannah Catherine Schuering (known as Catherine), was a native of Holland, and his father, Jean-Louis- Stanislas Méliès (known as Louis), had become a prosperous footwear manufacturer. Catherine Méliès was 42 years old when her youngest son was born, and the boot business that she and her husband had worked hard to build was flourishing, allowing her the leisure to lavish the better part of her time and attention on her youngest son. She was determined that Georges should obtain his *baccalauréat*, unlike his brothers, whom the family had not had the means to send away to

preparatory schools. At the age of seven, Georges was sent to board at the Lycée du Prince Impérial in Vanves. He already displayed a talent for drawing and puppetry, skills that would later serve him well in his film-making career. With the onslaught of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Méliès was evacuated to the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, where he obtained his *baccalauréat* in 1880. After a year of military service (November 1881–November 1882, a three-year obligation cut short by a 1,500-franc ‘donation’ to the armed services),<sup>6</sup> Méliès hoped fervently to train at the École des Beaux-Arts to become a painter, but his father insisted that he join the family business instead. Father and son were both adamant, so the only solution was a compromise: Georges would not attend the École des Beaux-Arts, but he would be allowed to take private art lessons – provided, according to his granddaughter Madeleine Malthête-Méliès (1973: 49 ff.), by the painter Gustave Moreau<sup>7</sup> – as long as he also devoted several hours a day to overseeing the mechanical functioning of the boot factory. Although he could not have foreseen it at the time, this compromise, which provided him with equal parts artistic and technical training, would provide him with many of the tools he would need in his future career as a filmmaker. But Méliès, who was mechanically adept and handled his factory responsibilities capably, longed to be able to devote himself entirely to creative pursuits.

In 1884 he went to London, for the purposes of learning English and establishing contacts for the London branch of the shoe business that the family would open soon afterwards. By all accounts, the year he spent in London was to alter the course of Méliès’s life.

While working first in a shoe store and then in a clothing boutique, Méliès sought diversion in London’s theatrical productions. His limited command of English, especially at the beginning of his stay, steered him toward the kinds of productions that relied largely on visual spectacle: pantomime and magic acts. The English ‘pantos’ that Méliès would have seen in London that

6 Paul Hammond (1974: 14) contends that Méliès spent over three years in the military, but all other sources give one year.

7 Hammond (1974:15) questions this assertion.