

GEORGES MÉLIÈS' TRICKS AND TREATS

By Michael Ventura

October 23, 2009

A man makes a florid gesture as he stands between two white tables set against a black backdrop. He's slim, mid-30s, with a playfully intelligent expression. His gestures and beard announce him as unmistakably French. His fingers flutter, and he removes his head – while it continues to converse – and, headless, he places that head on a table, where it goes on talking silently (this is silent cinema). He grows another head, while the first never shuts up, then crawls under that table to prove no one is under the first head. He stands. Creates one more head. Places it beside the first. They yak at each other while he creates yet another and puts it on the second table. Procuring a banjo and chair so swiftly they might come out of thin air, he sits and sings. His heads sing along. He doesn't like the yowls of the two on his right, so he smashes them with his banjo. They vanish. As does the banjo. He removes his present head. Tosses it casually away. Places the head on the second table back on his shoulders. Exits with another florid gesture.

That is Georges Méliès, directing and starring in "The Four Troublesome Heads" ("Un homme de têtes"), one unbroken scene of cinema, running one minute, five seconds. Date: sometime in 1898.

What is it? It's not exactly narrative. It's comedic but not funny-ha-ha. A stagy performance, but it can be done and seen only on a screen, which makes it pure cinema. Above all, it's play. Shared play. Incredibly charming, with a sweet, kidlike sense of "See what I can do!"

How he did it is something else again. Méliès' special effects were solely his inventions. There were none before him.

1897's two-minute "The Bewitch Inn" ("L'auberge ensorcelée") is more like a story. A weary soldier (Méliès) enters his room. His luggage disappears before his eyes. His helmet falls down by itself, scoots across the floor, and is no longer there. A candle vanishes when he grabs for it. Another explodes at the touch of his match. He sits in a chair; it disappears; he falls. He takes off his boots. They walk away without him. As he undresses, garments vanish. He ought to know better by now, but he lies on the bed and falls to the floor when it, too, disappears. That's all he can stand. He runs from the room. Again, this is one flowing scene, without a cut.

The let's-play pictures of Georges Méliès were creations of utter originality. Early cinema made children of everyone, so fascinated and delighted were our forebears with pictures that moved. Méliès made hundreds of films in that same spirit of fascination and delight.

(Fittingly, after the times passed Méliès by and he went bankrupt, he and his wife ran a little kiosk in the Gare Montparnasse, selling candy and toys.)

If I taught kindergarten, for Halloween I'd string together a dozen films from *Georges Méliès: First Wizard of Cinema (1896-1913)*, Flicker Alley's 5-DVD set. Méliès would speak to today's children as freshly as he spoke to audiences a century and more ago. Now computer graphics can make anything look like anything, but there is a sense in Méliès' work of a shamanlike trickery, an excitement of invention, as we watch him take an infant medium and make it do what no one dreamed possible.

By 1902, Méliès had invented many basic elements of cinema grammar: dissolves, fade-ins and fade-outs, slow motion, fast motion, stop motion, masking (a technique of creating scenery), double and multiple exposures, and the very concept of special effects. As John Frazer writes in the set's excellent booklet, "He may have been the only filmmaker ... to have photographed under artificial light as early as 1897, in this case a combination of fifteen arc lamps and fifteen mercury-vapor lights." It would be 18 years before American filmmakers managed that.

By 1897, in a studio of his own design and construction – the first complete movie studio – his hand forged virtually everything on his screen. Norman McLaren writes, "He was not only his own producer, ideas man, script writer, but he was his own set-builder, scene painter, choreographer, deviser of mechanical contrivances, special effects man, costume designer, model maker, actor, multiple actor, editor and distributor." Also, his own cinematographer, and the inventor of cameras to suit his special conceptions. Not even auteur directors such as Charles Chaplin, Orson Welles, John Cassavetes, and Stanley Kubrick would personally author so many aspects of their films.

Méliès was a professional magician before he turned filmmaker. Seeing the Lumière brothers' first films late in 1895, he sought to buy one of their cameras. They refused. Instead, he bought one designed by England's Robert W. Paul. Méliès studied it, and, with the help of Lucien Korsten and Lucien Reulos, designed his own – appropriately, according to Frazer, "using machine parts from the magic apparatus" of the theatre in which Méliès both performed and owned.

His sense of intention was too slight to be called genius. He had little interest in story, none in character. Occasionally, he turned serious, as in 1899, when he made an 11-film serial (nine of which are included in the box) dramatizing the Dreyfus affair that had convulsed France. Mostly, though, Méliès wanted to play. His was the magician's love of the trick for the trick's own sake.

This doesn't diminish his importance in cinema's history. While the Lumières, Edison's directors, and others used the motion-picture camera solely to document what were called "actualities," Méliès was the first to grasp that film could do so much more. On film, anything could happen. That possibility – the "anything" of the moving image – was the great contribution of Georges Méliès.

Almost from the first, Méliès' films were shown in the United States. In 1903, his brother Gaston opened a distribution office in Manhattan. His films were well-known in the New York/New Jersey area, the birthplace of American cinema. So you have to wonder why it

took Americans more than a decade even to begin to employ Méliès' innovations, and the better part of two decades to master them. The answer is twofold. On a practical level, our pioneer filmmakers were under tremendous pressure to produce. In their first years, D.W. Griffith and Mack Sennett turned out a finished one- or two-reel picture every week or so. There wasn't time for the artistry of Méliès (who'd spend weeks constructing sets for a brief film). But it was also a matter of Americans learning how to see through the camera's lens. Méliès understood his cameras inside and out because he had built them. He knew what they could do. Griffith and Sennett were handed this fabulous artifact, the motion-picture camera, and told, in effect, "Bring me something salable in a week!" Under those working conditions, it took them years to understand what they held in their hands.

Cinema's first years have been mostly unavailable for general study until very recently. Now early films by Griffith and many others can be widely viewed for the first time in a century, alongside *Edison: The Invention of the Movies* (2005), *Biograph Productions (Without D.W. Griffith), Volume 1: 1898-1905* (2007), the Méliès set (2008), and *Gaumont Treasures: 1897-1913* (2009). Together, these discs present surprises, raise questions, and fill in blanks. Some are revelations. Pages of film history need to be scratched out and rewritten; others need touch-up and revision; new pages must be added. Reputations need re-evaluating, while the sequence of cinema's progress demands serious reconsideration. For this is the history not only of film, but of how the motion-picture camera taught us to see.

And if you do organize a kindergarten Halloween program of Méliès, best not include 1898's "La tentation de Saint-Antoine," all one minute and 10 seconds of it. When that lovely, scantily clad woman takes the place of Christ on his cross, smiling invitingly, you don't want to hear some innocent tyke ask, "Teacher, what's she doing?"

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All Rights Reserved.