

ENGLISH VERSION

MUSÉE



MÉLIÈS

THE MAGIC OF CINEMA



Flammarion

LA
CINEMATHEQUE
FRANCAISE

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Foreword

Invited by the Lumière brothers to the premiere screening of animated photographs with their Cinématographe on December 28, 1895, Georges Méliès came out with "his head ablaze," as he put it. He instantly glimpsed the mysterious and unrivalled possibilities of the invention. Subsequent shows attracted hundreds and then thousands of spectators, and since that time, billions worldwide. The Lumière brothers and Méliès opened the floodgates. The magician of Montreuil was the first to grasp the Cinématographe's potential for the spectacular and the artistic: a machine for telling fantastic stories, for dreams, and for conjuring up fairy-like, magical worlds worthy of the Théâtre du Châtelet and the Théâtre Robert-Houdin.

The entire film industry—Ferdinand Zecca and Segundo de Chomón at Pathé and Alice Guy, the first female director, at Gaumont—was soon copying his works and imitating his famous "trick films." That voracious industry would eventually devour this proud, independent craftsman, who dared to claim that filmmaking was an art.

He made his own camera and projector, and then built in Montreuil, near Paris, at his own expense, the first film studio, glazed from floor to ceiling. There he summoned up fairies and novel phantasmagorical dramas and invented dozens of intricate and subtle tricks that were plagiarized and rehashed by generations of

filmmakers, to this day. Didn't George Lucas, visiting the Cinémathèque française and placing a hand on Méliès's first camera, remark: "This is where it all started"? As a man of the stage and a conjurer, Méliès was well acquainted with artistic problems and in his earliest films he was soon faced by the aesthetic and spectacular side of cinematographic technology—an optical, chemical, and mechanical labyrinth no one else had entered before. Before he could give free rein to his illusions, his dreams, utopias, and fantasies—and they were legion—he had countless problems to solve. His mastery of the camera and of the studio gave Méliès complete independence. Producing his own films, he was also the director, screenwriter, technician, set designer, scenographer, painter, gagman, costume designer, talent scout, and a brilliant actor—both because he liked it and because he had no choice. At the dawn of cinema, well-known actors refused to "pose" before the Cinématographe, since they considered it beneath them. So Méliès employed players from the Théâtre du Châtelet and dancers from the Folies Bergère.

Between 1896 and 1913, Star Film released 520 films. With his inspired, visionary imagination, combined with breathtaking verve, Méliès turned childhood dreams into pictures. Several masterpieces are landmarks in cinema history: *A Trip to the Moon*, *An Adventurous Automobile Trip*, *The*

Kingdom of the Fairies, and *The Coronation of Edward VII*, for which Méliès was decried as a forger by the press. It's true that an Edward VII lookalike (a boy working in the Kremlin-Bicêtre laundry) stood in for the sovereign, while a dancing girl from Paris played the queen. The scene was filmed in Montreuil—before the crowning! The magic of the silver screen.

Méliès also directed *The Dreyfus Affair*, *Joan of Arc*, *The Wandering Jew*, *A Miracle under the Inquisition*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and many others. The undisputed specialist of special effects, he also dealt with social, political, and religious issues, with History and great novels.

Among the superabundance of Méliès's ideas and discoveries, one thing never changed: the position of the camera. Adopting the standpoint of a spectator at the theater, it never moved in close, neither to the action, nor to the characters. It was a style, but also a limitation.

With Méliès and his contemporaries, the initial cycle of the fledgling cinema drew to a close. It ended with the conflict of 1914. With the war came new mentalities, new imperatives, new aesthetics. Above all, the creative impulse of cinema changed, with filmmakers tackling urgent social and national issues. The makeshift economic foundations of Méliès's firm begin to give way. Business failures in America, financial slackness, ever more costly productions, and competition from Pathé, Gaumont, and American companies left him ruined. His films were scattered to the four winds and

forgotten. Many disappeared without trace. Georges Méliès, poor and unknown, ended up selling toys in the Montparnasse rail station. His fall was precipitous, as is so often the case with poetic filmmakers. He died in Paris, on January 21, 1938.

But Henri Langlois, founder of the Cinémathèque française in 1936, never forgot him. He had known the magician of Montreuil well in his days as a pensioner in Orly. With Georges's granddaughter, the admirable Madeleine Malthête-Méliès, over the years, Henri Langlois salvaged a substantial proportion of this unique corpus: films, archives, drawings, props, cameras, costumes, etc. The collections of the Cinémathèque française and of Madeleine (acquired in 2004 by the Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée), have since merged. Thanks to this, the Cinémathèque française is now able to open a museum dedicated to the phenomenal oeuvre of Georges Méliès, with the aim of showing and preserving it forever.

Costa-Gavras
President of the
Cinémathèque française

Preface

The Cinémathèque française is opening a new museum: the Musée Méliès, 160 years after the master of Montreuil's birth. In celebrating the life of film's first magician, we are following in the footsteps of our founder, Henri Langlois, who strove unremittingly to salvage all he could of the work of an artist he admired immensely before passing the torch on to the tireless Madeleine Malthête-Méliès, who pursued his quest of collecting and distributing Méliès material all over the world.

For what would the cinema be without *A Trip to the Moon*? What would our world be like if Méliès and his phantasmagorias had been forgotten? Langlois believed that the world would be saved, and permanently this time, if only Méliès's films were recovered, restored, and screened. We can at least give the idea a chance.

When, in 1961—already!—the Cinémathèque held a major Méliès exhibition to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of his birth, Langlois recalled how our collection of cinematographic equipment had begun with Méliès's camera: "It was a gift, a camera presented to us by Mme Georges Méliès, after Méliès's death. This was Georges Méliès's first camera and it is from this apparatus that our collection has

been built up." Méliès, then, is the fount and origin, as all the contemporary filmmakers eager to appear in this volume demonstrate here with such gratitude. They hark back to Méliès—inventor of special effects, pioneer of cinematic enchantment, and an inexhaustible experimenter. And it is only right that they acknowledge their debt, since Méliès was the first to think of working in the studio, not to reduce the vast world to a painted canvas, but, on the contrary, to lift his head and gaze up at the moon and the stars, and then to picture them, as Jules Verne had done before him. While the Lumière brothers were the first to demonstrate that, to survive, their Cinématographe would have to become a collective experience, Méliès, at the famous Grand Café screening on December 28, 1895, reacted like the magician he was. As the audience was dazzled, the showman in him immediately realized that the new attraction would be enhanced by his illusionist world and become its most effective propagandist. His first instinct was to get hold of the marvelous machine, all at once camera, printer, and projector. But the Lumières, anxious to keep it off the market,

refused to sell him one, so he went to England, buying a projector from Robert William Paul, an optician and one of the pioneers of cinema, which he converted into a camera.

Proving that necessity is the mother of invention, within a few years Méliès had literally forged a new language, which still governs much of cinema today.

For the art form grew up in leaps and bounds; every accident turned into a decisive advance. Cinema extended its possibilities, increasing its power of fascination.

Fiction had been part of it from *L'Arroseur arrosé*, of course, and Louis Lumière himself was a masterful director, but Méliès's brainwave was to extend its scope to events that could not be filmed without editing, whether it be *Cinderella* or *The Dreyfus Affair*, both in that same year of 1899.

The dizzying leap from Perrault's fairy tale to the most cataclysmic scandal of the era shows how the pro-Dreyfus Méliès was more than just the brilliant inventor of images for Star Film, such as the moon with a rocket in its eye (endlessly rehashed and updated, from Luis Buñuel to Christopher Nolan), the gorgeous anthropomorphic shooting stars, and the giant *Snow Man*. These now iconic images were made by a visionary, who, to his cost and in less than twenty years,

encapsulated the terrible and depressing fate of a true artist drowning in those icy waters of self-serving expediency we call the movie industry.

At first, Méliès was destined to lose out, only to become a romantic, and therefore star-crossed, figure. Pirated and ransacked, he was, in a career echoing many others, the first cursed filmmaker. This story, his story—from glory days in Robert-Houdin's theater to a drab toy and candy stand in the Montparnasse train station—has never been better told than in this museum, which reveals the many facets of the first filmmaker to truly explore the imagination and the legacy of his work in contemporary film.

Frédéric Bonnaud
General Director of the
Cinémathèque française



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