Méliès – Léger d’écran

Sharon Coleclough

Senior Lecturer Film Production and Sound Design

Department of Media and Performance, Staffordshire University

sharon.coleclough@staffs.ac.uk

Abstract

The magic act is a performance best seen live, the skill of prestidigitation more difficult to deny when the trick is offered in the physical space shared by the audience. For Georges Méliès the cinema offered the opportunity to extend the stage act he had developed and to embellish upon the traditional illusions of the music hall. Méliès’ skill lay with his knowledge of legerdemain, sleight of hand (literally ‘light of hand’), but also the way of thinking it suggests, a trickster’s mind and one which was able to anticipate and apply what the technology of cinema could contribute to the communication of this craft to a wider audience.

This work seeks to examine the relationship of Méliès’ artistic vision with his background in the music hall and his future in the cinema, exploring the ways in which Méliès used (indeed, in many cases created) the production and post-production processes available to produce on-screen magic – whether accidentally, by early exploitations of the medium (Escamotage d’une Dame Chez Robert-Houdin), progressively more technically complex realisations (L’Homme à la tête de Caoutchouc), or even the use of social and professional connections from his music hall background. Additionally, the mediatory effect of the technology of camera, editing, and mise-en-scene will also be considered. By offering technical and aesthetic analysis of Méliès’ work and examining the technology and expectation at hand during its creation, this article seeks a closer consideration of the relationship between the music hall and the cinema and the work of Méliès as bond between the two as entertainment entered a new age.

Keywords: Méliès; camera; editing: theatre; technology

For many film scholars Méliès is seen as the father of the fantastic. The very familiarity of his presence in the history of cinematic special effects could be seen to diminish his contributions to, as well as his understanding of, the potential and possibility held within cinema and, behind that, music hall. This would seem to stem from his founding role within the medium of film, with a stigma attached to the very particular ways in which he used opportunities afforded by cinema, an oversight especially when those approaches are considered alongside his background and aims for his products. In this article I propose that it is within Méliès’ work that we can seek a union of magic, the theatrical, and celluloid, a place where we can find a meeting of these entertainment traditions, the prestidigitation and technology of the established live theatre or the music hall, and the creation of filmic tricks using camera, blade and substantial imagination. In exploring the work of Méliès and establishing the relationship of the technical and artistic aspects found within both environments, that of the stage and film, and recognising that Méliès’ work was far more complex and considered than some critics may have us believe, this article seeks to explore the ways in which the two meet and inform each other and identify the craft which is central to the appreciation of Méliès as an accomplished and knowledgeable entertainer of the masses.

One of the main differences between the old (theatre) and new (film) forms of entertainment is the concept of the place of the audience within the implicit agreement between performer and spectator. It is here, therefore, that we need to start, as the cinema can be seen to adjust this relationship from that of the theatre or music hall. The established relationship can be read as one which focussed upon the specialness of the event within the theatrical space. While the audience were relatively passive viewers – relatively in the sense that the music hall was a venue which embraced and encouraged verbal participation – in terms of expectation the music hall or magical theatre audience was there to be offered content and, in those parameters, acknowledged as present and mindful of the purpose of the acts they watched: to entertain and astonish. As we shall explore, the work of Méliès stands as stepping stone for the changing role of the audience within the idea of performance and in turn a development in the practice of illusion for them. As Erving Goffman offers, the idea of a traditional performance is one where we need to consider the presence of both performer and audience: ‘Performances can be distinguished according to their purity, that is, according to the exclusiveness of the claim of the watchers on the activity they watch’ (1986, 125). To see, then, is to believe and in turn validate the realness of the event itself. That conceptually a specific event will never exist in that precise form again is an important constituent portion of a live performance. As the experienced stage illusionists John Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant wrote in 1911, ‘since magic is one of the ephemeral arts, which can only attain fruition in actual performance, one might say, that without adequate presentation there can be no art in magic’ (1911, 101). Liveness therefore can be seen to be an aspect central to the concept of magic in its many forms, with the focus of a magic act being an authentication of the event being viewed, distracting from the trickery involved, and focussing the spectator upon the execution of the conjuration. To enable the magical manoeuvres the performance, and so the performer, must guide the spectator in their suspension of disbelief; this may be within the format of the staging, the framing of the illusion or the establishment of veracity, and it must also accommodate the technology or technique necessary to complete the manipulation, a list of tasks which overlap with those involved in the creation of the cinematic experience. Such machinations on the stage set specific concepts for the creator of the expected view, the space required to present the work and the format in which such an act might be delivered. As Maskelyne and Devant observed,

[a] real modern magician, then, is essentially an actor. He must be so [….] Both authority and common-sense unite in compelling us to that conclusion. To all intents and purposes, the real art of the magician is identical with that of the actor. (1911, 6, emphasis in original)

Writing as contemporaries of Méliès – indeed Devant appeared conjuring in one of Méliès’ early films – Maskelyne and Devant make an interesting connection between the need to deliver a performance and a character within the work of the magician and the actor, a connection which can be seen within the work of Méliès. That a role is played and a presentation offered is central to the success of a performance within either format. In each case the audience is asked to imagine what they see as authentic and therefore believable. This relates directly to the expectations of the audience and the ways in which their positioning, both literal and figurative, might bring about the validity of a magic act. An event designed for the theatre stage offers specific use of the space linked to that location and the proximity of the audience. In many cases staged magic before and after the 1890s worked because of the positioning of the spectator, their distance, literal physical placement, their line of sight and fixed viewpoint. That a number of the most exciting tricks used mirrors and lighting positioned very specifically to create the appearance of an apparition, of transfiguration, or of dismemberment meant that an exacting understanding of the relationship of viewer to stage was necessary to create a successful trick. As Henry Ridgely Evans assured, ‘[o]ptics, mechanics, sound, and electricity have all been pressed into service by the fin de siècle prestidigitateur’ (1897, v, italics in original). That such technology was already a part of the theatrical experience is important to the development of Méliès’ cinematic product. Early performances included the phantasmagorical, images projected by magic lantern onto smoke or semi-transparent screen of ghosts and ghouls. As film began to become more popular magicians integrated screenings into their stage performances as an added attraction. Through such continued exposure the audience could be considered ready to accept films as an entertainment in their own right, delivering an extended repertoire of magic, much of which had already been encountered on stage or had elements which could be expanded upon through the opportunities of the camera and the edit. As Tom Gunning observes, ‘[t]he magic theater of the turn of the century was a technically sophisticated laboratory for the production of visual effects using recent technology to control the spectator’s perception’ (Gunning, 1989, 10). It is such experimentation that marks out Méliès’ strides forward in the techniques of cinematic expression. The combination of his background and knowledge of stage illusion informing an ability to conceptualise the potential of film and shift the moving image from ideas of integration and fad into the cynosure of the entertainment experience.

It is the visual element of Méliès’ work which captures the imagination and collective memory. This aspect, above the drive for narrative complexity (although as we will explore there is importantly a consideration of an overarching plot within his work), is the marker of Méliès’ output and stylistic sensibility. It is important to note that Méliès created around 500 films during his production period (1896 to 1913) and that these texts were varied in their content. Many know Méliès’ fantastical creations, easily aligned with his magic-based experience and interest; however, much of the subject matter for his films can be seen to fall into drama, actuality, and reconstruction (historic and contemporary). There are also various films which offer the retelling of fairy tales, a subject more supportive of the magical elements, but nevertheless not particularly focussed upon the phantasmagorical for which he is famous. It is, however, useful to consider examples from across the range of Méliès’ output as his fingerprint is indelible in terms of not only technical construction but also aesthetic. These elements are important to understanding Méliès’ connection to his time, the stage, technology, and popular assumptions of presentation. It is these expectations and possibilities of the theatre or music hall stage which ‘frame’ the work, underscoring the importance of this foundation to his creative purpose.

For this initial consideration we need to identify the use of the frame and of focal length/camera distance in Méliès’ work. In this way we can begin to identify connections to the practices of the stage. The adherence to a set framing and so conceptually a relatively fixed distance for the viewer from the action has a link to a number of elements surrounding the work of Méliès, but, importantly, aesthetically can be traced back to the theatrical roots of his art. Much of his framing focusses upon what might be called a master shot, a wider framing encompassing groups of people within their environment; additionally this set-up works with the tableaux tradition, more on which later. Considering Méliès’ work we as a spectator are too close to the action to identify an Establishing Shot, a framing where the landscape is the focus to provide geographic context for the spectator. In turn we are then too distant to distinguish the long shot, a tighter framing where the human form is shown in its entirety (head to toe filling the height of the frame) with closer grouping of characters required in response to the more compact framing. This is not to say that these shots do not occur within the work of Méliès, simply that when they do they are the exceptions rather than expectations of a filmic or artistic style. Most obviously the master shot resembles the concept of the proscenium arch with the edges of the camera frame representing the edges of the stage front. The allocation of the proscenium arch to Méliès’ work foregrounds the concept and detail of the tableaux but this means that Méliès keeps the audience distanced rather than inviting them into the space. Within this framing we can see ‘[t]he thrill of display rather than the construction of a story’ (Gunning 1989, 9) per se.

However, this choice of shot (where the whole stage is offered) is far more important to his work than many have suggested: the distance and framing are not just like those of the theatrical stage; the left and right boundaries of the cinematic frame serve as filmic counterparts for aspects of the stage itself, specifically as the wings of the theatre stage. A holding space for those characters or items not needed on-stage or on-screen at a certain point in the action. They are spaces which exist in the knowledge of the spectator but are ostensibly not a part of the visible content of the frame so in this use off-screen space becomes a very fluid element. A pertinent example of this use of the camera’s ‘wings’ can be seen in one of Méliès’ final films, a féerie, Cendrillon ou la Pantoufle merveilleuse (Cinderella or The Glass Slipper, 1912). Following the traditional narrative, Cendrillon is made to clean the house by her step-sisters; in this early scene the room is ‘cleaned’ by the actress playing Cendrillon throwing props out of frame and into off-screen space (see Figures 1 to 6).

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**Figure 1**. *Cendrillon ou la Pantoufle merveilleuse* (1912). Initial set-up of the mise-en-scène. Note the left of frame as the space into which the ironing board is moved to ‘tidy’ the room.

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**Figure 2**. *Cendrillon ou la Pantoufle merveilleuse* (1912). As can be seen, the box is moved but only just out of frame; the wings of the camera are employed as implicitly unseen space (unseen by all – characters and viewers alike).

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**Figure 3**. *Cendrillon ou la Pantoufle merveilleuse* (1912). The ironing board is lifted and moved to the ‘unseen’ space off-screen.

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**Figure 4**. *Cendrillon ou la Pantoufle merveilleuse* (1912). The board is placed into the ‘wing’ of the camera.

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**Figure 5**. *Cendrillon ou la Pantoufle merveilleuse* (1912). The support is also placed into the camera’s wing. If we think of the diegesis nothing is hidden from the visitors but because these objects are out of the frame and so out of the viewers’ sight they become so.

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**Figure 6**. *Cendrillon ou la Pantoufle merveilleuse* (1912). The support is out of sight of both the viewer and the characters.

If we consider the camera frame as a modern audience would, she is simply hurling the unwanted elements into another part of the room where they are presumably still visible and littering the space. If we instead treat the edge of the frame as the wings of a stage, then this process makes sense: the unwanted elements are out of sight of the viewer and so the room is ‘cleaned’. By using the ‘wings’ the film hastens this action, but it does so by relying on the audiences’ prior experiences of stage performance for the action to make logical sense.

Such a reading can also be found in the set design for Méliès’ films and in the stage direction of the performers. When his films represent rooms, the walls on the left and right sides of the set are angled inwards rather than being set at 90 degrees to the front of the stage, so the plane of the wall is visible to the viewer, a design associated with the theatre. Additionally in the theatrical context the wings can act as entrance points for on-stage spaces, and it is in these traditions that the treatment and use of the cinematic frame in his work can also be seen. That Méliès elects to primarily offer single shots of an environment, usually via an unchanging perspective and distance, means that as a spectator we are not offered any geography of a setting, and in many cases the viewer is neither enabled nor encouraged to create an environment off-screen, except perhaps in the very broadest terms; other locations exist because we visit them but we do not explore them in a spatially constructive sense. Therefore in many of Méliès’ films a player’s use of the set becomes as that of a stage: doors and windows are used as they would be in a play or indeed in a filmed environment, but they are also used as a flexible element with entrances and exits being made via the wings as well as through the agreed portals of the diegesis, the playing space extended as it would be in a theatre to encompass the agreed unseen places. A useful example can be seen within the film L’auberge du Bon Repos (The Inn Where No Man Rests, 1903). The plot is a relatively simple one. An inebriated man is shown to his room for the night by the owner of the inn. As the night progresses the man is challenged by a number of odd, and mildly occult, occurrences in the room. The action progresses until the guest is pursued by a number of employees and guests because of his strange and noisy behaviour. The group pursuing the protagonist runs off screen stage right (camera left), not obeying the set dynamics created by the mise-en-scène. In so doing Méliès is using what would be the wing of the stage (see Figures 7 and 8). The protagonist then re-enters, pursued, through the hall doorway into the room, this set of actions disrupting the geography of the diegetic space (see Figure 9). Every other element of the film is contained within the created setting and its agreed diegesis, with the windows, walls, and door used for all other entrances and exits; although fantastically characters may exit through walls and picture frames, they are still true to the space, its verisimilitude, and the conventions as established by the narrative world rules (see Figure 10). The confusion of film and theatre is apparent within this use of off-stage rather than off-screen space which places the work within the traditions of staged rather than filmic space.

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**Figure 7**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). The angry staff and guests begin their pursuit of ‘the Drunk’.

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**Figure 8**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). ‘The Drunk’ is chased into off-screen space through the wings of the camera. Diegetic space is not followed as the other characters follow him.

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**Figure 9**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). Note the character of ‘the Drunk’ returns to diegetic space through the room’s door, having left via the wing.

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**Figure 10**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). Note the use of the window (near the top right of frame) as one of the diegetic entrances or exits.

When Méliès does explore the potential of creative geography within his work it is still with a very theatrical sensibility, the exception that proves the rule, using movements or spaces which can be seen to correspond to the theatrical potential of his studio. When such use is made its application does stand out as a somewhat “special” event. In the Éclipse du Soleil en pleine Lune (The Eclipse, or the Courtship of the Sun and the Moon, 1907), our astronomers climb a ladder and we fade out of the present space and then in to the new space, and see them complete the ascent through the floor (Figures 11 and 12).

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**Figure 11**. *Éclipse du Soleil en pleine Lune* (1907). The astronomers begin their climb of the ladder.

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**Figure 12**. Éclipse du Soleil en pleine Lune (1907). The astronomers complete their climb; through the window can be seen the height they have reached.

That Méliès selects a fade out and in to offer the transition between spaces is revealing as it suggests a passage of time which may or may not be relevant to the spectators’ understanding of that specific diegetic space. A spectator contemporary to the film’s release may read the fade as an accepted way of moving between locations or sets, as we might change the spot light on a theatre stage to draw attention to a new piece of scenery. We, as modern viewers, are more likely to read narratively that the ladder is long, time passes and the climb itself is arduous. Within Méliès’ work narrative time is generally assumed to be continuous. However, his use of different transitions tends to speak more clearly to taste, technology, and aesthetic than to the narrative rules of our traditional continuity editing. In discussing Le Chevalier des Neiges (The Knight of the Snows, 1912) Pierre Jenn identifies a camera movement, less used within Méliès’ work, which offers the spectator knowledge of the wider space within the frame as the Knight enters the caverns in order to reach a trapped Princess. Jenn elects to call this movement ‘a travelling parallel shot’ (1984, 89); however it is intriguing to note that this camera movement is much more akin to a pan than a track. Such a movement fits well within the adherence to the concept of the theatrical space within Méliès’ films, a pan offering a sense of widened space and indeed changing perspective but from a fixed viewpoint, a turn of the head available to the passive seated spectator rather than the track’s highly mobile sensibility. That this movement stands out so clearly is illuminating as it underscores the fact that Méliès generally chooses to have his camera fixed rather than in motion. Creative geography within a scene is also offered, making this short film one of Méliès’ most visually dynamic. However, it is achieved via one of the few instances of the reveal of the trapdoor space built below the studio stage area. A rope is lowered through a trapdoor in the floor to the Princess waiting to be rescued below; a match on this action is offered as we see the rope coming towards the trapped Princess’ hands. As she is pulled up another matched cut offers the spectator her escape.

Many, although not all, of the technical specifications which Méliès used also speak to the traditions of the theatre rather than those of cinema as we know it today. As previously indicated, the lack of shot changes, in terms of repositioning of spectator viewpoint, in the majority of his works is closely connected to the experience of the theatre, as are the movements when they are, on occasion offered. This fixed viewpoint was an important element of Méliès’ aesthetic; it related both to the experience of the theatre and to the success of his trick cinematography. It is useful to identify that the knowledge of the importance of audience position and viewpoint, and, in turn, the discipline needed to accomplish the technically complex tricks of camera and edit that Méliès used, was based in the traditions of theatre magic. Many illusions of the time relied upon specific angles – between objects, light sources and reflective/transparent surfaces – and specific audience vantage points on those arrangements to enable the trick to be realised, with such careful control key to the popular magical effects of the early twentieth century. As Tom Gunning observes,

[t]he flowering of magic as a modern, international, highly popular, and highly technological entertainment in this era came largely through understanding itself as an optical art, based in a knowledge of human eyesight, a calculation of the possibilities of various optical devices and principles (light, reflection, refractions, virtual images), and a showman’s deeply pragmatic knowledge of how people react to what they see (or think they see). (2012, 55)

The consideration of optics and lighting alongside the understanding of position and gaze/attention focus that is found within theatrical production – and, most importantly, magical programmes – gave Méliès a grounding which few directors at that time enjoyed. That these elements remained central to his work throughout his period of production is important to understanding Méliès’ ongoing attachment to his established techniques and practices. As styles and tastes changed and as audiences collectively became more knowledgeable about cinema and its way of communicating, Méliès remained an adherent of the routine aesthetic that had served him well. Méliès’ technical selections also underline the concept of the theatre on screen. Initially we can see this in his selection of camera lens:

Méliès, who had connections in London thanks to his network of magicians, preferred to turn to the optician Robert William Paul, who was selling a 35-mm film projector called the Theatrograph [….] After returning to Paris, Méliès transformed the Paul projector into a film camera. He reversed the system, enclosed it in an oak box with a 54-mm Zeiss lens, and installed a rotating shutter and a metallic pressure plate, which intermittently stopped the film in front of the window. (Cinémathèque française, no date, para 4-5)

The selection of lens is an important aspect of the consideration of Méliès’ aesthetic and expectation of a scene and what it might be engaged to deliver. The sophisticated Zeiss 54-mm lens offered in its anastigmatic design a sharp image across the frame, as expected in a theatre. In relation to Méliès’ preferred shooting style this lens offered depth of field that was significant for its time so that all of the elements placed before the camera were readable, therefore content and action both closer to and farther away could be captured offering content on the x, y and z axes. Such a technical selection enabled the capture of the spectacle that was Méliès’ chosen look on screen. The spectacle is a stylistic aesthetic of the turn of the twentieth century, a look which spoke to the desire for visual busyness and stimulation. As Michael Booth remarks, ‘[c]ertainly much of the audience liked glare and glitter, and the more gorgeous the stage appeared the more they admired it’ (1981, 29).

The concept of the spectacle was one which was both used and challenged by Méliès; at its heart the spectacle offered audiences theatricality, an overwhelming of the senses not available in the everyday. Such an aesthetic is of course offered within the work of Méliès: that his productions cost an almost overwhelming amount for their producer offers the concept of ‘money on screen’ that spectacle would today suggest. That spectacle in the theatre metamorphosed towards the use of the very, real rather than theatrical representations, is where that particular concept and the work of Méliès part company.

However, another connection to the theatre is a very literal one, as Méliès designed his own studio. Paul Hammond explains that “[t]he stage itself was fitted with theatrical machinery such as trapdoors, winches and levers, and the studio was the same size as the Théâtre Robert-Houdin. There was no element of chance in this: Méliès was transposing his theatre to the film studio” (1974, 32). That the studio was essentially a reconstruction indicates the aspirations that Méliès held for his productions: they would constitute an extension of the theatre and an expansion of the opportunities for the fantastic already realised on stage via his illusion designs. It also speaks to the experience of Méliès and audiences of the day; the visual element (spectacle) was central to entertainment. As Michael Booth observes, the act of

[l]ooking at the world through the medium of pictures thus became a habit in the first half of the nineteenth century, and as the pictorial means of information and entertainment grew more sophisticated and better adapted to mass public consumption, the bombardment of visual and specifically pictorial stimuli became inescapable; the world was saturated with pictures. (1981, 8)

The re-positioning of the audience to watch and not particularly participate speaks to Méliès’ need to control the attention and gaze of his theatre audiences and in turn that of his cinematic spectators. The concept of the proscenium arch being maintained within his work makes more sense, at a time when editing was beginning to be used in more narratively dynamic ways within cinema, when we consider the willingness of the viewer to fit into this specific type of passive gaze; “[t]o look at the stage as if it were a picture was by 1850 an automatic response in audiences, and to make performance resemble painting was a habit of managers and technical staff” (Booth, 1981, 10). In this context we may think of the resemblance of a performance to a painting, not a literal recreation of a painted scene, although this was a popular visual iteration in the mid to late 1800s, but rather a framing of the action using the stage area and the filling of it with content, not changing the viewpoint but, rather, establishing it and using the opportunities afforded by that commitment. We can see this outlook within much of Méliès’ output; indeed the use of such tableaux is a central feature of it. Within this aesthetic choice we can also see Méliès’ use of the horizontal and the vertical within the frame, additionally utilising the z axis to provide depth to the visual arrangement, supported by the 54-mm lens affording an improved representation of the staging. That the camera was positioned to use the carefully designed vanishing points within the trompe l’oeil effects that Méliès designed also confirms his theatrical knowledge and its application to control the gaze and so an audience’s understanding of the trick being performed; “[f]or quite practical reasons the trick techniques which remained a feature of his work demanded a perfectly stable – and so immobile – camera. Méliès’ whole aesthetic depended on a unity of viewpoint” (Robinson 1993, 34). This is the controlled use of spectacle, frame, and mise-en-scène from the theatre being transferred to the cinematic environment. We can see this treatment of content within both the fantasy and drama or melodrama (recreation) films which Méliès made; the sets are constructed rather than using actuality and even at points of high ‘reality’-driven drama the camera tricks are still used to offer excitement to the audience. In Les Incendiaries or L’Histoire d’un Crime, (History of a Crime, 1906) a dramatic interpretation/recreation of an actual event, Méliès employs a substitution cut twice to enhance the tension. The first is used during a recreation of a bloody fight between a group of bandits and the police on their trail as

a terrific struggle ensues. Whatever is at hand is used as a weapon of combat. Very soon members of both sides fall dead. One of the robbers reels over with his head split to pieces by a terrific blow of an axe, which remains firmly imbedded in his skull. (Méliès 1905, 103)

The second, and perhaps better known, is the use of the guillotine on the chief of the robbers at the close of the film, the substitution almost seamless as the blade is brought down. Even in a genre where drama and narrative drive is central to the work it is clear that Méliès was still keen to foreground spectacle. As Pierre Jenn writes,

[l]e problème du montage est, on le sait, directement lié à celui du statut de la narrativité et ce n’est pas un hasard si Griffith pose les bases du montage moderne en même temps qu’il donne au récit son rôle de premier plan. Il convient donc, dans cette analyse, de considérer les procédés présents chez Méliès comme des formes propres à une cinématographie où la narrativité « n’était pas la seule et unique préoccupation. [The problem of editing is, we know, directly linked to that of the rule of narrativity and it is no fluke if Griffith establishes the basis of modern editing when he gives to the story its foreground role. It is appropriate, then, in this analysis, to consider the processes presented by Méliès as forms belonging to a cinematography in which narrative “was the not the sole and unique preoccupation] (1984, 65)

As Jenn offers, Griffith’s establishment of the primacy of the narrative drove forwards this aspect of the evolution of film and storytelling . Narrative is offered within Méliès’ work and there is storytelling in terms of forward momentum; however, Méliès was driven not only by narrative but also by the implementation and utilization of illusion and event. The narrative becomes a part and not the whole of the entertainment, a vessel for the more engaging visual chicanery. As we can see in the example from L’Histoire d’un Crime, trickery is used to deliver spectacle within the dramatic parameters available via the genre of melodrama. If we again look to the effect of the theatrical upon his work, we are able to see that Méliès elected to link together moments to facilitate momentum, in differing volumes depending upon the chosen genre, but always moving towards the next trick or speciality point of the work; this address of the content of his films came directly from his work with stage magicians. At the Théâtre Robert-Houdin an act would have a loose narrative element which would assist in connecting together tricks or illusions for the audience; additionally Méliès would have groups of magicians sharing the stage rather than one illusionist moving through their repertoire trick by trick. Such extension of these visual elements on stage speaks strongly to the spectacle aesthetic previously explored but also to the basic call for continuity of content and momentum that Méliès sought through this decision to combine and overwhelm rather than single out one aspect at a time. Although narratives within Méliès’ films do exist, they can be discerned as providing a place on which to hang the film tricks or the moments of business central to the style of the magical theatre or music hall. That Méliès’ films can be perceived as a series of moments is not a negative reading; rather it reflects the tableaux focus of his work, an aspect responsive to popular expectation, taste, and also, in the case of Méliès, hard-won experience of what audiences wanted.

Again in the light of the presence of the theatrical expectation we can also consider the use of acting and performers within Méliès’ films, specifically the types of artists willing to appear in cinematic works, the use of them within the concept of what tended to be a loosely related series of moments rather than a strongly constructed narrative and, lastly, as already indicated, the demands of the camera and the technical considerations of Méliès’ productions.

An aspect of Méliès’ output which differentiates much of his work from that of his contemporaries is the use of presentation towards the camera and, thereby, the audience. In many of the shorts created early in Méliès’ repertoire there is a strongly presentational nature to his work; there is an acknowledgement and address of the camera and so in turn the viewer, or a directionality within the actors’ work which accommodates the presence of the camera and directs the gaze of the spectator towards the centre of the frame (stage). The delivery of a short trick, as in *Le Portrait Mystérieux* (1899), creates the staging of a show and requires the demonstration of the nature of the elements involved in the illusion (see Figures 13 and 14). In *The Infernal Cauldron* (1903) the narrative element which frames the trick is relatively consistent, with the elements of the characters and their interactions kept within the diegesis, until the infernal leader (Méliès) turns to the camera and so the audience in celebration of his nefarious deeds (see Figure 15).

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**Figure 13**. *Le Portrait Mystérieux* (1899). Méliès the magician presents to the audience. Méliès stands behind the frame to demonstrate the empty space behind.

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**Figure 14.** *Le Portrait Mystérieux* (1899). Méliès the magician once more presents to the audience, showing the stool that will soon become part of a moving image.

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**Figure 15**. *The Infernal Cauldron* (1903). The infernal leader celebrates their deeds with the audience.

Aspects such as these underline the understanding of the constructed quality of Méliès’ work. Even in moments when the camera is being ignored (indeed backs are turned towards it in Voyage dans la Lune), there is still an implicit acknowledgment that the primacy of the viewer’s gaze should remain intact. Such consideration can be located in the theatrical aesthetic of tableaux framing which eschews subtlety for the sake of audience clarity, so making the narrative development of cinema difficult to consistently perceive within Méliès’ films.

When exploring the presentational elements in Méliès productions it is necessary to categorise his output as mute cinema rather than silent/deaf cinema; in the former characters mostly interact as if they are unable to speak, while we might consider silent cinema as one where dialogue exists but is not recorded (heard). This difference means that Méliès’ players pantomime many of the narrative elements of their performances; his productions did not need inter-titles, with everything the audience needed to understand held within the physical delivery of the actors. This pantomime principle dictates the presentational nature of the acting in many of his films. This element is sometimes expected and sometimes not. Where an ‘act’ is being delivered it is reasonable for the performer to deliver to the camera and so the audience, as it is in *La chrysalide et le papillon d’or* (1901) (see Figure 21) or *Le Portrait Mystérieux* (1899) (see Figure 14). Such is the expectation of a performance that is being moved to the sphere of film from another location, usually that of the theatre. It is clear that the presence of narrative structure, even implicitly, means that such presentation is no longer welcomed or desired, the diegesis needs to be preserved and a fourth wall built and not broken. That Méliès perceived a need to mitigate the traditional presentational style of the theatre creates a significant contradiction with the still-present elements of theatrical use of space and delivery present in his films:

Cinematic mime demands a whole study and special qualities. The actor no longer has an audience to address, either in speech or mime. The only spectator is the camera, and nothing is worse than to look at it and to take notice of it when playing, which invariably happens the first time with actors used to the stage rather than the cinema. The actor must imagine that he has to make himself understood, whilst remaining silent, to deaf people who are watching him. (Robinson, 1993, 28)

There is certainly a tension between the concepts of performance delivery present in theatre and narrative film, and although it is clear that Méliès was aware of a need to balance the differing styles within his films, the fact that he never clearly breaks the ‘to camera’ aspect is indicative of a fixed stylistic attachment. In terms of performance, we may once again examine *L’auberge du Bon Repos*, which offers the music hall tropes of ‘performance’ through the comic business with the ‘servant’ and the female maid who open the film with the ‘drunk’ guest. The use of pratfalls and movement within the staging area of the film offers an insight into the consideration of the tastes of the audiences who accessed Méliès’ productions, situated, as they were was, ‘amidst other entertainments to be found in the magic theatres, fairground booths, wax museums and café-concerts’ (Hammond 1984, 95). The comic business of the stage comedian is clearly presented to the audience, with the anticipation of the drunken man’s falls treated as equal in importance to the actual completed pratfalls. An act is delivered, the speciality of physical comedy and ability being showcased as a part of the film (see Figures 16 and 17). The fixed space works well for the speciality pratfalls as they are related to prop-based comedy, specifically entanglements with boots and coats, all of which can be held within the staging area (see Figures 16 and 18). That Méliès’ adds his own ‘magic’ to the actor’s interactions with normally inanimate objects simply heightens the opportunity for interaction between the ‘drunken man’ and the contents of the room (see Figures 19 and 20). The space of the action combines the ideas of theatrical and film spaces, with neither of these ideas observed or adhered to completely within the setting. As identified earlier, the wings of the camera (stage) are used for an exit while at other times the set and so the diegetic film space is honoured. Expectation is then manipulated as aspects of theatre effect and filmic effect are combined to create a funhouse within the inn’s bedroom.

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**Figure 16**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). The drunk and the servant employ physical comedy to open the film.

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**Figure 17**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). The drunk squares up to the coat rack.

[NOTE TO TYPESETTER: INSERT FIGURE 18 HERE – THE FULL WIDTH OF THE PAGE]

**Figure 18**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). A flying leap brings the coat rack to the floor.

[NOTE TO TYPESETTER: INSERT FIGURE 19 HERE – THE FULL WIDTH OF THE PAGE]

**Figure 19**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). The elements of costume come to life and enable extended physical comedy within the film.

[NOTE TO TYPESETTER: INSERT FIGURE 20 HERE – THE FULL WIDTH OF THE PAGE]

**Figure 20**. *L’auberge du Bon Repos* (1903). The bed comes to life, again offering the chance for more involved physical comedy from the specialist physical comedian.

A presentational method of delivery is difficult to avoid with the fixed camera set-up, use of stage illusions and pantomimed ‘dialogue’ favoured by Méliès, and this presentational method was also enhanced by the use of the stage players he employed to act in his films. In the brief one-shot one-illusion films where the demonstration of a magic trick is the focus of the film, this aspect of presentation is easily related to the way in which a stage entertainer might gesture to an audience. This is an important element to demonstrate the authenticity of an illusion and confirm the absence of trickery. In La chrysalide et le papillon d’or (The Brahmin and the Butterfly, 1901) elements of the trick, the changing of a charmed caterpillar into the beautiful female butterfly, are presented and showcased to the audience. The Brahmin physically flourishes and gesticulates to the ‘audience’ as he demonstrates the emptiness of the cocoon as the illusion begins, and offers asides/glances to the audience (see figures 21 and 22).

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**Figure 21**. *La chrysalide et le papillon d’or* (1901). The Brahmin demonstrates the emptiness of the cocoon before the progression of the trick.

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**Figure 22**. *La chrysalide et le papillon d’or* (1901). The successful capture of the butterfly is confirmed to the audience.

Such body language communicates authenticity and the performative nature of the illusion to the viewer. L’Homme à la tête en caoutchouc (The Man with the Rubber Head, 1901) offers us Méliès in his guise as the mad inventor, as he mimes directly to the viewer the effects of his inflating apparatus on the duplicate of his head that he places in the machine (see Figures 23 and 24).

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**Figure 23**. *L’Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* (1901). Méliès the inventor demonstrates the experiment directly to the audience by miming the planned size and growth of the head.

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**Figure 24**. *L’Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* (1901). The inflating is confirmed to the audience again through direct mime.

Even in the more narratively complex Voyage dans la lune (A Trip to the Moon, 1902) the camera and so the audience are not completely ignored; they are regarded by one of the astronomers during the trial by the Selenites and during the award ceremony at the close of the film, even though the characters are more involved with the content of the scenes than in spending time engaging with the spectator. Indeed during the Selenite trial the astronauts almost all assiduously avoid looking at the camera, grazing the frame with their eyes until one of them looks at the audience (see Figure 25). It is also clear that the selection of players contributes to the perception, by a modern viewer, of the construction of the piece and the awareness of the performers that they are playing to an audience rather than each other. Consider the tumbling of the Selenites within this film; these characters were played by ‘dancers from the Théâtre du Châtelet [and] acrobats from the Folies Bergères’ (MoMa 1939, 1), and their contributions focus upon their speciality acts of acrobatics and contortion (see Figure 26). It is the knowing inclusion of this element that confirms these players as a part of the theatre, the speciality of their acts used within the overall film narrative and this consideration which marks out the essentially presentational nature of their work within the films in which they appear.

[NOTE TO TYPESETTER: INSERT FIGURE 25 HERE – THE FULL WIDTH OF THE PAGE]

**Figure 25**. *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). The audience are regarded by one of the astronauts (front right wearing a long white wig).

[NOTE TO TYPESETTER: INSERT FIGURE 26 HERE – THE FULL WIDTH OF THE PAGE]

**Figure 26**. *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). A Selenite played by a contortionist completes a part of their repertoire.

That Méliès utilised the opportunities the screen provided to move his stage work forwards and laid the foundation of many on-screen production and post-production techniques is clear, as is his debt to the stage, and to the opportunities afforded to him by the music hall and magical theatre, not only through the gathering of participants and collaborators but also through the boundless imagination that the Robert-Houdin perpetuated. The use of the proscenium arch and the tableaux style of framing has led to a minimising of his skills as a director and creator. As identified, the foundation of Méliès’ work is the theatre and the theatrical experience. This does not lessen his skill or the content of his work but offers an indication or reasoning for the selections he made within the production and realisation of his output. That the stage plays such a central role in the creation of Méliès’ productions is not a weakness but a strength, one which offered the foundation upon which to build and realise the possibilities only afforded by adherence to a fixed camera and established space. This article opened by identifying Méliès as a legerdemain, from the French léger de main meaning ‘dexterous’, which literally translates to ‘light of hand’. This would initially seem the perfect sobriquet for Georges Méliès and his many productions, given that he worked with the opportunities afforded by cinema to extend his stagecraft and illusory work. However, with film in mind we may be able to give Méliès a new title, one that encompasses and underlines the importance of the stage to his realisation of film’s potential to imagine and create – that of léger d’écran or ‘light of screen’.

Notes on Contributor

Sharon Coleclough holds a PhD from the University of Salford where her thesis focussed upon the study of cinematic expression and performance. Presently she is a lecturer in Film Production and Sound Design at Staffordshire University, focusing upon practice and theory in filmmaking. She has written for Viewfinder magazine on the practice of lighting for diversity and produced a lecture series on the subject for Learning on Screen, UK. Since 2015 she has collaborated with Zane Forshee on the moving image and content design for the Laptop Tour, a project which addresses the use of space and connectivity in musical performance, in both the United States and more recently the UK.

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