

The Voyage of the Effect

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Georges Méliès is often considered one of the pioneers of special effects in Film. All his films are defined as ‘trickality’ films as they place special effects front and center with more priority given to them than the film's narratives. When referring to Méliès’ works it is clear to see why his works are placed in the integral film history period of ‘cinema of attractions’, as Méliès did exactly that – made his films attractions. Due to Méliès’ works being from the early 1900s he did not have access to modern day technology, and as such had to experiment and find ways to create special effects with the technology he had to hand. With Méliès’ works prioritizing special effects it is clear to see the importance and ingenuity of the effects within the individual film and the film world.

The cinema of attractions period is seen as films created before 1906 and rather than prioritizing narrative it sees priority placed on “Its ability to show something” (Gunning 64) through visual effects. It is this mantra that Méliès truly championed, stating “as for the scenario, the ‘fable’ or ‘tale’, I only consider that at the end” (Gunning, 63), highlighting his almost complete disregard for the narrative in favor of special effects. Méliès goes as far as to state that the purpose of films within the cinema of attractions era is to create magic rather than be so boring as to tell a basic narrative (Gunning 65).

*L'Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* (Méliès, France, 1901, 3min) is one of Méliès’ earlier works, and it centers around two characters, one being the man with the rubber head, and the other the one pumping him up. The effect of this short film is the man’s head appearing on the table and then seemingly being pumped up and deflated, without this effect, there wouldn't really be any narrative to the short film, thus the short film couldn't function without the special effect – as seen in most of Méliès’ works. The way the floating head effect is created is through multiple

exposure, with the set up for the ‘trick’ occurring around the 28 second mark. Multiple exposure consists of exposing the same film multiple times to create layers within a single scene, often blocking off the parts of the scene where the effect will be so that it remains completely unexposed. The set up for this particular scene is incredibly subtle, and consists of the doors at the back of the set being opened to a dark hallway. A darker background is important when attempting to implement multiple exposure, as it will allow for a better image – less ghost-like – as that part of the film is underexposed as opposed to if there was something lighter in that spot.

However, that is not the only effect used within the shot, as the ‘rubber head’ also ‘inflates’ meaning there is another effect at play. The effect in question is as simple as moving the object – in this case the man's head – closer to and further away from the camera, utilizing forced perspective. So, for *L'Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* the two main effects are multiple exposure and forced perspective to create the illusion of an inflating head. The overall result of the effect is incredibly important to the functioning of the film as a film, with the importance, arguably, extending to the title *L'Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* (the man with the rubber head) because the title essentially just describes the effect used. This also highlights how Méliès prioritizes ‘trick’ first and narrative second as again, the narrative is the effect.

The way Méliès created films was also in appreciation of the difference of viewing expectations for the spectators. Méliès appreciated that, by making films with little emphasis on narrative, that the relationship between his films and spectator was that of appreciating the created cinematic illusion, rather than completely falling for the trick (Gaudreault 113). The relationship between spectator's and Méliès' films can be seen in one of his longer films *Le voyage dans la lune* (Méliès, France, 1902, 17min). In *Le voyage dans la lune* (Méliès, France, 1902, 17min) there are multiple times where the characters – the scientists actually break the

fourth wall in doing so essentially appreciate that the audience is there. *Le voyage dans la lune* is also a rather interesting Méliès film as it is significantly longer than his other films, coming in at 17 minutes as opposed to the typical 2-4 minutes. As a result of *Le voyage dans la lune* having a longer run time, it also meant that there was more work put into the tying together of a narrative into the special effects that Méliès wanted to showcase.

The basis of *Le voyage dans la lune*['s] plot is a trip to the moon by a group of scientists, where they discover moon creatures and then journey back home. Within the film spectators are exposed to an even wider array of effects than normally seen in a single Méliès film. Much like *L'Homme à la tête en caoutchouc*, *Le voyage dans la lune* utilizes multiple exposure, such as in the scene on the moon when the scientists see the stars and the planets with the women around the 9:28 mark. Forced perspective is also utilized in *Le voyage dans la lune* however, it is more obviously seen in the background paintings for each set. Painted sets are a typical aspect of Méliès' films, as they allow the film to be set in a specific place or setting that would be harder to create with reality, and also are generally cheaper. Furthermore, as seen in *Le voyage dans la lune*, it also allows for easier manipulation of reality. Take the scene around 7:15 with the cannon that will shoot the scientists out, this 'cannon' is not actually real and is instead painted onto the back of the set to create the illusion that it is very large.

Another one of *Le voyage dans la lune*['s] effects that is sometimes a little overlooked is the editing, and not just the way the shots and scenes are put together, but also the speed and pace of editing that Méliès utilizes (Gaudreault 116). At the time, the rate at which Méliès was editing shots together was incredibly fast, and an effect in its own right, as it almost led to an effect seen in stop motion animation. A scene where the fast editing is particularly effective is in the scene where we see the moon and it gains its face and then the rocket of the scientists,

through the faster editing it allows for the story to move on in a more fluid manner as opposed to “stuttering” (Gaudreault 116).

The editing that Méliès utilized also allowed him to create his moon creatures that exploded upon any significant impact. The way Méliès was able to create this effect was through a mixture of precise editing – Méliès would precisely sit with the film and cut the editing exactly (Gaudreault 117) – and practical effects – the plumes of smoke that appear after the creature ‘dies’. The combination of effects is something that Méliès used a lot to increase the effectiveness of the effect and create better, bigger illusions. However, sometimes Méliès’ effects can be just as effective with just one ‘trick’ occurring.

*Un Prete Pour un Rendu* (Méliès, France, 1904, 2min) is another of Méliès’ short films and centers around the illusion of a head in a box then becoming a floating head. The way this effect was created is very similar to *L’Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* and utilizes multiple exposure and a darker background to create the effect. Méliès would have filmed the main scene first and then re-exposed the film, with the head. Something that is particularly interesting is the very visible remnants of the effect, the audience can tell its multiple exposure technique due to how jumpy the head in the box is. The jumpiness is created from the multiple exposures and the subjects not being in the exact same space again, making them appear a little jumpy. Another way that *Un Prete Pour un Rendu* is similar to *L’Homme à la tête en caoutchouc* is how important the effect is to the overall narrative of the film, as in most of Méliès’ films, without the effect there is not really a film.

Through looking at three different Méliès films from the cinema of attractions era it is clear to see the importance of the effect within the film functioning as a film. Furthermore, the effects that Méliès uses seem to be consistent– multiple exposure, forced perspective, intricate

editing. However, there are some cases where Méliès almost had to place a little more emphasis on narrative simply to allow the effects to be paired together and allow them to function within the course of the longer film as seen in *Le voyage dans la lune*. Overall, it seems that the function of effects in Méliès' films is to be the films rather than to complement them.