Silent Magic

Trick Films and Special Effects

1895 – 1912

Tuesday, May 20, 2014

Northwest Film Forum

The Sprocket Society
Seattle, WA

The Cinema of Wonders

Adapted from entries written by Frank Kessler, appearing in Encyclopedia of Early Cinema *(Routledge, 2005/2010), edited by Richard Abel.*

Trick Films

Originating in the tradition of stage magic, trick films were a well-established, autonomous "genre" for more than a decade. They are a significant part of the genealogies of two different practices: special effects, on the one hand, and animated films on the other.

Trick films are among the earliest appearing in manufacturer's catalogs: in Pathé-Frères sales lists up to 1903, they are grouped under the heading, "*scènes à transformations*," and from then on under "*scènes à trucs*" (tricks). The former denomination in fact describes a then dominant practice of trick cinematography: namely, the use of a substitution splice in order to instantly transform an object or person into something or someone else. In another variant of this practice, objects or people suddenly appear or disappear, sometimes in combination with pyrotechnical effects (explosions, smoke).

In these films, the trick effects are clearly foregrounded. They are constructed to highlight them: very often there is a stage-like setting with characters such as magicians, illusionists, sprites, fairies, or devilish creatures performing their tricks, in a frontal arrangement, sometimes even addressing the camera and thus also the audience. Both the fixed framing and the frontality are in fact essential to the functioning of the tricks, since their effect rests upon the illusion of a temporal continuity that is enhanced by the unchanging spatial arrangement. The same goes for tricks based upon multiple exposures, combining people or objects of different sizes, or multiplying a character within the frame. Many early trick films consist of but one tableau, or setting, although during the production there may have been a number of different takes in order to perform substitutions.

Trick films clearly fall within the realm of the "cinema of attractions." Although they may also present a narrative, the story mainly serves as a pretext for a series of spectacular and elaborate tricks. In this respect, trick films do have a lot in common with *féeries*/fairy plays. Both are deeply rooted in stage practices, and color frequently enhances their spectacular qualities.

Of course, tricks had never been exclusive to trick films. Not only *féeries*, but also comedies and dramatic films had made extensive use of them. With the industry's shift to narrative films, their spectacular qualities were increasingly subordinated to the needs of storytelling. More and more, tricks in fact turned into special effects: they now came to function as narrative devices.

Symptomatically, at about the same time this shift began to occur, a number of texts appeared, revealing to a general audience how film tricks actually worked. In 1908, for example, Gustave Babin wrote two articles for the widely distributed French weekly, *L'Illustration*, explaining in detail different types of tricks. At the same time, Babin outlined a different aesthetics of cinema, in which trick photography in fact mainly would serve the ends of realism. Instead of creating a magical universe of fantastical metamorphoses, he argued, trick effects ought to contribute to the convincing representation of dramatic action.

From about 1910, trick films' popularity gradually declined.

Féeries, or Fairy Plays

Féeries, or fairy plays, originally were a stage genre that became popular during the 19th century, especially in France. In other European countries there were similar kinds of magical plays, such as the *Märchenstucke* or *Zauberstücke* in Germany and Austria, or, within the tradition of popular culture, even the Pantomime in England. But contrary to the French *féeries* these did not develop a strong link to early cinema.

Although stage *féeries* shared a number of features with other theatrical forms such as the *opéra comique* or operetta – in particular, the

combination of music, ballets, songs, and stage action – in *féeries* these all were primarily conceived of as spectacular elements, while narrative played only a secondary role. The subject matter was generally fantastic or supernatural and included a number of miraculous or magical events. These were presented by means of sophisticated stage tricks, another important component of the genre. Very often the tricks were extremely complicated and had to be executed with the help of intricate machinery off stage. Visual splendor was achieved through luxurious staging, rich costumes, and colorful dance scenes. In other words, stage *féeries* clearly foregrounded an aesthetic of spectacular display.

The first filmic *féeries* appeared quite early in French sales catalogs. In 1899 Georges announced his film, *Cendrillon* (*Cinderella*), as a "grand and extraordinary *féeries* in twenty tableaux." Among the nine categories listed in the Pathé-Frères sales catalog of 1900, there was one heading grouping together *Féeries et contes* (distinguishing between fairy plays and fairy stories). Earlier still, in 1896, a hand-colored 58mm film produced for Gaumont by Alice Guy was made to feature as a special attraction in a stage *féerie* called *La biche au bois*, which was given at the Châtelet theater in Paris.

The integration of filmic *féeries* into stage performances was not an uncommon practice. Stage producers apparently saw moving images as yet another spectacular trick or attraction that could be added to the show. Méliès repeatedly received orders from theaters for cinematographic interludes. He sometimes reworked these productions and released them as independent works (as with *Les Quatre cents farces du Diable*).

Even though filmic *féeries* were recognized as a distinct type of film, it is not easy to clearly define them as a genre. They were often based on traditional fairy tales, but this was not always the case. Nor did every film based on a fairy tale appear in the catalogs as a *féerie*. In other respects they often had much in common with trick films. As in the stage genre, one of the most salient characteristics of filmic *féeries* lay in the quite systematic use of trick techniques. Compared to fairy tale films, *féeries* privileged spectacular attractions over narrative; compared to trick films they were more complex and longer, and their tricks were motivated by the fantastic and miraculous subject matter.

As a rule *féeries* were shot indoors, using a stage-like setting, painted backgrounds, studio-built machinery, and more or less frontal mise-en-scène. Even in films based on well-known tales such as "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," the narrative was often reduced to a series of key moments and mainly served as a framework within which visual attractions could be presented.

In their sales catalogs, production companies such as Pathé-Frères highlighted the spectacular elements as well as production values, particularly the sets, costumes, ballets, and the climactic tableau called the "apotheosis." Another attractional element, though not always present nor exclusive to the genre, was color. Tinting, hand-coloring, and (in the case of Pathé) stencil coloring made the films even more spectacular. Given these relatively high production values, exhibitors would have to invest more money when acquiring a *féerie* compared to most other productions – and apparently they were willing to do so.

In spite of the relative prominence accorded to *féeries*, few companies were involved in their regular production. The two main producers clearly were Méliès's Star Films and Pathé-Frères. Other French companies such as Lux or Gaumont only occasionally advertised *féeries*. Outside France, *féeries* appeared irregularly and were marketed differently. For example, in American sales catalogs the Méliès *féeries* were announced as "spectacular productions" or "spectacular pantomimes." Their most characteristic feature, namely their attractional qualities, were highlighted, whereas the link to fairy sales so prominent in the French term was absent.

For almost a decade *féeries* were highly prestigious. From 1908 or 1909 on, however, their importance gradually declined, and *féeries* appeared less and less frequently in sales catalogs, even though articles in the trade press continued to hold them in high esteem. Audience preferences shifted to other kinds of films where narrative logic and dramatic conflict played a more important role. In 1912 and 1913, there were only four titles categorized as *féeries* in the Pathé sales catalogs. These marked the *féeries*' definitive decline.

This Evening's Program

All titles are shown as 16mm film prints, using a theatrical-grade Eiki EX-6000 projector with a 1,000 watt lamp. All musical accompaniments, detailed below, are non-sync recordings chosen especially for this program.

A shorter version of this program was presented at the Alamo Drafthouse Ritz in Austin, Texas, on October 20, 2013.

The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots

1895 (Edison Manufacturing Company, West Orange, New Jersey, USA)
Directed by Alfred Clark. Photographed by William Heise. With Robert Thomae as Mary.
Originally shot at +/- 40 frames per second. This archival print is not speed corrected.

> "Representing the beheading of Mary, Queen of Scots. A realistic reproduction of an historic scene." – Maguire & Baucus catalog, 1895

One of the very first films to use any kind of special effect lasts only a few seconds. But it must have been quite shocking to those who watched through the Kinetoscope's peep hole some 119 years ago.

Robert Thomae, who plays the doomed Mary in our film, was at the time the secretary and treasurer of the Kinetoscope Company, a consortium of entrepreneurs that was among the very first companies created to exploit the brand new novelty of moving pictures.

Director Alfred Clark (1873-1950) came from a prosperous middle class New York family. In 1889, at age 16, he went to work for the North American Phonograph Company, which leased the devices as office dictating machines. After the company collapsed in 1894, Clark was hired by Edison's Kinetoscope business to make films and assist with sales.

As a producer/director Clark specialized in historical tableaux, often with sensational content. These included *The Burning of Joan of Arc*, *Indian Scalping Scene*, *A Frontier Scene* (which depicted a lynching) and tonight's film, which is the only one of these films known to survive.

All were shot outdoors at Edison's West Orange laboratory in August and September of 1895. Several (like this one) used stop-action substitution to swap out a live actor for a dummy which then suffered the promised mayhem. Exactly which title was the first to use the substitution effect is now lost to history.

Clark's career as a filmmaker lasted less than a year. In 1896 he returned to the phonograph business, joining Emile Berliner's Gramophone Company as a sales manager. Three years later, he emigrated to France as an agent for both Berliner and Edison. Soon after that, he formed the French branch of The Gramophone Company. By 1909 he was its managing director and eventually became the company's chairman.

In 1931, Clark became the founding chairman of EMI, the legendary British recording label and electronics manufacturer. There he helped shepherd early experiments in television and radar, among other innovations. Clark retired in 1946.

L'Illusioniste fin-de-siècle
(aka *The Conjurer*; aka *L'Impressionniste fin-de-siècle*)

La Danse du feu
(aka *Pillar of Fire*; aka *La Colonne de feu*)

1899 (Star Films, Paris, France)
Directed by Georges Méliès

Two very early, very short films by Méliès that typify not only his work at the time but, in their way, much of his later shorter works. *L'Illusioniste fin-de-siècle* is really just a slightly jazzed-up remake of his 1896 film, *Escamotage d'une dame chez Robert-Houdin* (*The Vanishing Lady*) – little more than a film of a trick from his stage act enhanced with carefully executed stop-action photography. The pure spectacle of *La Danse du feu* is evidence of both his growing success and what laid ahead for him. While also little more than an elaborate stage presentation with a little stop-action, the tinting and hand-coloring make it an eye-popping feast. In the early years before 1905, he made dozens even hundreds of such films.

Georges Méliès (1861-1938) was the youngest of three sons in a family with a prosperous shoe manufacturing business. Sent to London for a year as a young man, he discovered the Egyptian Hall and the magic shows of the legendary conjurer John Nevil Maskelyne, whose innovation was to perform his tricks amidst a continuous dramatic sketch. There Méliès found his life's passion. Upon returning to Paris, he took magic lessons from Émile Voisin and soon was performing at the Grévin wax museum's Cabinet Fantastique.

In 1888, his father retired and gave the family business over to his sons. Georges sold his shares to his brothers and used the money to buy the famous (but now threadbare) Théâtre Robert-Houdin. He revitalized the theater, and soon achieved prominence in the thriving Parisian theater community by combining stage magic with phantasmagorical theatrical sketches laced with absurd humor, *a la* Maskelyne.

His life took another pivotal turn in 1894-95. In rooms rented directly above the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, Auguste and Louis Lumière were working on a new invention. In December 1895, Méliès was among the just 30 people who attended the public debut of their new *cinématographe*, a wondrous device that could actually project motion pictures onto a screen, and also be used as a camera. He immediately tried to buy one, but was rebuffed by the Lumières. Shortly after, he learned of the Briton Robert W. Paul's own new projector. He traveled to London and paid 1,000 francs for one. Back in Paris, in the workshop of the Robert-Houdin, he and Lucien Korsten reverse-engineered Paul's apparatus to jerry-rig a camera.

By the spring of 1896, Méliès was making and showing films as additions to the shows at the Robert-Houdin. Initially making actualities and street views, he quickly discovered the concept of stop-action, where the camera is stopped and people or objects rearranged to seemingly magical effect. (Legend has it he made the discovery thanks to a camera malfunction while filming on the Paris streets, but it is certainly not impossible that he may have seen Edison's *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*.)

This changed everything for Méliès, who plunged whole-heartedly into making dozens of films exploiting the idea within the first few months. He continued to experiment and in a very short span either invented or perfected nearly every special effects technique used for the next 100 years. Meanwhile, he also branched out with pioneering historical dramas, reenactments and proto-docudramas of major current events, including a multi-part series about the notorious Dreyfus case. He built a glass-house studio in the garden of his home at Montreuil, the first of its kind in the world. As his profits increased, his productions became ever more spectacular and complex. His 1902

epic *La Voyage dans la Lune* established him as one of the preeminent filmmakers in the world. By the time he ceased making films in 1913, he had produced more than 525 titles and forever changed the conception of what cinema could do.

La Voyage dans la Lune

(aka *A Trip to the Moon*)
1902 (Star Films, Paris, France)
Directed by Georges Méliès
Music: Ezra Read, "A Trip to the Moon: Comic Descriptive Fantasia" (ca. 1903), adapted and performed by Martin Marks.

The grand-daddy of all special effects extravaganzas, this was the first true international hit of the cinema, often playing for weeks or even months at a time when most films were shown for a day or two and then forgotten. Released more than a year before the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, Méliès' most famous film is not only the first science fiction epic it is a landmark in the development of cinema; indeed, it was the first movie to be designated a UNESCO World Heritage cultural artifact. Yet later in life, Méliès said this was not his personal favorite. "In brief, it was considered my masterpiece – I don't agree with that," he wrote.

Produced over four months for the then-staggering sum of 10,000 francs, no one before had achieved such a scale or used so many new, inventive tricks to create a cinematic world. Besides Méliès himself, the cast was recruited from the dancers, acrobats, and music hall performers active in the thriving Paris theater community. Méliès did all of the designs (examples of which still survive), built the models and many of the sets, and sculpted the master elements for the Selenite costumes, which were then fabricated from cardboard by a local mask-making company.

The story – told over an unprecedented 30 scenes – borrows liberally from several sources. Most famous of these is Jules Verne's 1865 novel, *From the Earth to the Moon*, as well H.G. Wells' *The First Men on the Moon*, first serialized in 1900-1901. Another influence was an 1876 *opéra bouffe* of the same title by Jacques (*Tales of Hoffmann*) Offenbach which had very successful premiere at Théâtre de la Gaîté in Paris and was revived in later years both in Paris and New York City. Recent scholarship indicates another important influence, though more by reputation, was a spectacular theatrical "cyclorama" that debuted at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, NY. Called "A Trip to the Moon" and bearing a number of striking similarities to Méliès' film, it was the sensation of the fair. In the summer of 1902, it was remounted at Steeplechase Park where some 850,000 paid to experience it. Finally, in 1903 it was moved to Coney Island, giving birth to the legendary Luna Park.

Hundreds of copies of *La Voyage dans la Lune* were sold worldwide, but in America most were bootleg dupes made by Siegmund Lubin, Edison, and others – an enormous financial loss for Méliès. This prompted him to send his older brother Gaston to the US, where a company branch was founded to defend the Star Films copyrights and do their own distribution. For decades, most of the only Méliès films known to survive were those submitted as paper prints to the US copyright office.

This evening's musical accompaniment was found by chance at the British Library in 2006 by film music historian Martin Marks, who performs this recording. It is a score for the film, composed circa 1903 by Ezra Read (1862-1922), a pianist and composer of popular music who, together with his wife, is said to have written over 4,000 pieces under some 120 pen names, some selling over one million copies. This is one of the earliest known scores written especially for a motion picture.

Jack and the Beanstalk

1902 (Edison Manufacturing Company, West Orange, New Jersey, USA)

Directed by Edwin S. Porter, assisted by Arthur S. White. Scenic design by George S. Fleming. With Thomas White as Jack.

Music: Various selections by John Phillip Sousa, conducted by the composer

> "From laboratory examination of some of the story films of the French pioneer director, Méliès – trick pictures like *A Trip to the Moon* – I came to the conclusion that a picture telling a story might draw the customers back to the theatres, and set to work in this direction."
>
> – Edwin S. Porter, quoted in Ezra Goodman, "Turn Back the Clock: Reminiscences of Edwin S. Porter, or the History of the Motion Picture," *New York Times*, Jan. 2, 1940.

*From the Edison Films catalog, Sept. 1902: "*A grand spectacular performance in nine scenes and one tableau, illustrating the most popular fairy story ever written.... From this very simple and popular fairy tale we have produced a most pleasing, interesting and mirth producing play in motion pictures, introducing therein many surprising new tricks and dissolving effects. The subject was carefully studied, and every scene posed with a view to following as closely as possible the accepted version of Jack and the Beanstalk. We have, for the purpose of producing comedy (which in reality is the life of any animated picture play), in some instances departed slightly from the story, in that we have burlesqued a few of the features; as, for instance, where the butcher trades the hatful of beans with Jack for his mother's cow, we have introduced a burlesque animal made up of two men covered over with the head, horns and hide of a cow. This animal goes through many ludicrous antics.... Note – In this beautiful production, in changing from one scene to the other, transformations are made by beautiful dissolving and fading effects. There are no sudden jumps whatever, and the entire effect is at once pleasing, gratifying and comprehensive, and the audience finds itself following with ease the thread of this most wonderful of all fairy tales."

While all too easily dismissed as a trifling Méliès knock-off, *Jack and the Beanstalk* was a minor landmark in American film history. It achieves a grandeur and narrative editing complexity little known in this country at the time. It also put Porter on the path to his landmark achievement the following year, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903).

Filmed over six weeks at the princely cost of $1,000, *Jack and the Beanstalk* ran twice as long as any other US film of the time. Porter later recalled that production "was a matter of great difficulty, and required great artistic skill to arrange all the different scenes, pose the various subjects and take the views successfully." In addition to some rather impressive sets and stagecraft, camera effects like superimposition and stop-action are used to a degree Porter rarely if ever repeated.

Edison positioned the film as a major release, clearly emulating the French – offering tinted copies for a premium, and encouraging exhibitors to use the catalog's detailed scene-by-scene description as the basis for live narration.

But *Jack and the Beanstalk*'s nearly unprecedented budget also put it at the center of Edison's ongoing battles with plagiarism by film pirates, like Siegmund Lubin in Philadelphia, who plied a considerable trade selling low-quality bootleg dupes that undercut Edison's rates. Even though orders for the film poured in, delivery was postponed while Edison's lawyers sought an injunction against Lubin. However, copyright protection for motion pictures in the US was still murky at best, and the judge demurred. *Jack* finally shipped in mid-July and, sure enough, it was widely pirated.

Edwin S. Porter (1870-1941) started in the film business at the dawn of cinema, working as a projectionist as early as 1896 both as a touring exhibitor and at the famous Eden Musée theater in New York. In 1900 Porter went to work for Edison where, working with George S. Fleming and others, he advanced from cameraman to become one of the key directors of the era.

Porter left Edison in 1909 to co-found the Rex production company, which eventually merged with Adolph Zukor's Famous Players in 1912. Porter continued to direct, making his last film in 1915, when he sold his shares and abandoned directing. Investing in the Precision Machine Corporation (producers of the Simplex projector), he eventually became the company's president. After losing his fortune in the great crash of 1929, Porter lived out the rest of his life in obscurity.

Aladin ou la lampe merveilleuse

(aka *Aladdin and his Magic Lamp*; aka *Aladdin and His Wonder Lamp*)
1906 (Pathé-Frères, Paris, France)
Directed by Albert Capellani. Photographed by Segundo de Chomón. Production design by Hugues Laurent. Produced by Ferdinand Zecca. With Georges Vinter as Aladdin.
Music: Excerpts from Taqsim and Makam compositions by Dimitrie Cantemir

The tale of Aladdin presented in classic *féerie* style, with lavish sets and costumes, and a cast of dozens.

Albert Capellani (1874-1931) was a major director for Pathé, which was the largest film company of its day, pioneering the industrialization of cinema around the world. He studied drama at the Paris Conservatory and began his career in the city's legendary theaters, first as an actor then as a stage manager and administrator. In 1905 he was hired on at Pathé by Ferdinand Zecca. There Capellani directed almost everything imaginable: literary adaptations, historical and biblical films, melodramas, comedies, and occasional fairy tales like this one. His films epitomized the world-famous Pathé style and high production values, with a particular adeptness at staging in depth (as opposed to the flat proscenium compositions common at the time) and a variety of editing techniques. In 1908 Charles Pathé appointed him artistic director of a new subsidiary company, where he supervised numerous prominent directors, advised on scripts, and recruited theater stars to act in their films. Significant films made during this period include *Les Misérable* (1912), a nearly three-hour epic that received worldwide acclaim. When French film production came to a halt due to World War I, Capellani came to America where he worked as a director and artistic among a small community of French filmmakers and, later, with a variety of companies. He returned to France in 1923, continuing to work despite failing health until his death in 1931.

Les Quatre cents farces du Diable

(aka *The Merry Frolics of Satan*)
1906 (Star Films, Paris, France) Tinted
Directed by Georges Méliès
Music: Hal Russell NRG Ensemble, "Hal on Earth" and "Calling All Mothers," *Hal on Earth* (self-released cassette, 1989; Abduction CD, 1995)

The engineer William Crackford and his assistant visit the wondrous laboratory of a mysterious Alchemist. The Alchemist prepares for them magic "bombs" that instantly create whatever the thrower wants. They offer to pay the Alchemist cash, but he waves it away. Instead he has them sign a contract, and off they go with their new toys. But alas — the Alchemist is actually Satan in disguise! The Evil One conjures malevolent imps and all Hell breaks loose as they pursue the hapless fools and drag them to their inevitable (and eternal) doom.

In 1905, the Châtelet theater in Paris commissioned Méliès to film the flying demon-horse sequence for use in their new stage production, *The Merry Deeds of Satan* by Victor Darlay and Victor de Cottens, itself a reworking of an old 1839 favorite, *The Devil's Pills*. When the show closed in 1906, Méliès shot new scenes to fill out the story, diverging from the Châtelet version but preserving key elements from the older one, and released this riotous masterpiece.

Méliès was extraordinarily prolific between 1904 and 1906, producing literally hundreds of films. These ranged from one-joke skits lasting a minute or two, to 20 minute epics like *The Palace of the Arabian Nights* (*Le Palais des Mille et une Nuits*, 1905) and *The Impossible Voyage* (1906). This incredible body of work allowed Méliès to hone his craft, and the result is readily evident here.

Le Spectre Rouge

(aka *El Espectro Rojo*; aka *The Red Spectre*)
1907 (Pathé-Frères, Paris, France) Tinted, hand-colored
Directed by Segundo de Chomón. Produced by Ferdinand Zecca.
Music: added sync soundtrack by artist unknown

In a hellish cavern, a devilish sorcerer performs amazing acts of magic.

Voyage sur Jupiter

(aka *A Trip to Jupiter*; aka *Voyage au planete Jupiter*; aka *The Astronomer's Dream* [sic])
1909 (Pathé-Frères, Paris, France) Tinted
Directed by Segundo de Chomón. Produced by Ferdinand Zecca.
Music: Sun Ra, "Space is the Place," *Space is the Place* (Blue Thumb Records, 1973/Impulse!, 1998)

The king's imagination inflamed by the royal astronomer, he dreams of a fantastical journey to the planets made by climbing a rope ladder. But Jupiter, god of the sky and thunder, takes issue at this intrusion and sends his majesty unceremoniously crashing back to Earth.

Jim le glisseur

(aka *Slippery Jim*; aka *Pickpocket ne craint pas les entraves*)
1909 (Pathé-Frères, Paris, France)
Directed by Segundo de Chomón. Produced by Ferdinand Zecca.
Music: Various popular French songs: Charles Jaquet, "Le Vagabond"; Max Varenne, "Les Guingueettes"; Maurice Chevalier, "Ce C'est passe un dimanche"; and Charles Jaquet, "Dans mon Coeur"

Police apprehend a pickpocket and haul him off to jail. Unfortunately, no jail or chains or even locked trunk can hold him. A genuine *tour de force* by Chomón, who uses an astonishing variety of effects techniques in the service of his anti-authoritarian romp. Unlike the stage-bound Méliès, here Chomón ventures out into the real world, manipulating it with the same whimsy, creativity, and technical precision as anything shot in a studio.

To the extent he is remembered at all, Segundo de Chomón (1871-1929) is usually pigeon-holed as "the Spanish Méliès." But as we can see, his trick films and effects work were as advanced as those of the French master – sometimes moreso. In addition, Chomón made notable actualities and dramas, helped to develop some of the best early color processes,

was a highly skilled technician, and a genuinely groundbreaking artist in the medium. He is deserving of a full revival and much greater scholarly attention, particularly in English.

Chomón entered the film business in Barcelona circa 1900, not long after being discharged from the Spanish army, having served in the Cuban war. With his French wife, Julienne Mathhieu (who had worked in Paris during his stint in the Army), he founded a business that distributed French films in Spanish territories, translating the intertitles. They also did hand-coloring of prints, including titles by Méliès and Pathé, and it is said that he co-developed the stenciling process later patented under the name Pathéchrome. Soon Chomón was also shooting films that were distributed by Pathé, mostly actualities and short documentaries, but also including a few trick films.

Chomón and his family moved to Paris in 1905, where Pathé put him to work as a cameraman working with Ferdinand Zecca, Albert Capellani, and Gaston Velle. Within a year or so, when Velle left the company, Chomón was put in charge of trick films and special effects. During this period he made some key innovations, including some of the earliest use of true stop motion animation and advanced use of mattes, and produced some of the best trick films of the time including *Electric Hôtel* (1908), *Le Théâtre Électrique de Bob* (*Bob's Electric Hotel*, 1909), *Le Voleur Invisible* (1909), and of course tonight's selections.

In early 1910, Chomón returned to Spain to cofound a short-lived (but prolific) production company, Ibérico Films, that sadly folded before the end of the year. He then independently produced a string of documentaries and narrative films that Pathé distributed, including eight that used a new coloring system he devised.

In 1912, he moved to Turin, Italy to work for Itala Film. There he worked as a director of photography and special effects artist, taking part in nearly all of their genre offerings including pioneering large-scale epics like *Cabiria* (1914). Chomón continued to work along these lines for the rest of his life, building an international reputation for the quality of his work in productions like Guido Brignone's *Maciste in Hell* (1925) and Abel Gance's legendary masterpiece, *Napoléon* (1927). Chomón's fascination with color cinema continued late into life, collaborating with Swiss inventor Ernest Zollinger to develop a photographic two-color color film process, which the pair exhibited at various science expos across Europe. Chomón died shortly after returning from Morocco, where he had been shooting color footage.

Princess Nicotine; or, The Smoke Fairy

1909 (Vitagraph Company, Brooklyn, NY, USA)

Directed by J. Stuart Blackton. Photographed by Tony Gaudio. With Paul Panzer and Gladys Hulette.
Music: Tex Williams, "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke!" (1947) and Billy Briggs, "Chew Tobacco Rag" (1951)

A delightful comic fantasy in which a man dreams of a pair of fairies playing pranks with his tobacco stash. Trick effects include stop-motion animation, mattes and superimposition, and the clever use of oversized sets.

James Stuart Blackton (1875-1941) is best remembered for his pioneering animated and trick films, but he was a seminal figure in the American film industry generally and his legacy was more wide-ranging.

He was born in England and immigrated to the US with his family as a child. In 1894, at age 19, he met fellow British expats Albert E. Smith and Ronald Reader and together they formed a magic act. Blackton's specialty was chalk talks and lightning sketches, a skill he used to get occasional assignments from the *New York Evening World* newspaper. In 1896, the paper assigned him to interview and draw sketches of

Thomas Edison and his new movie projector, the Vitascope. Edison was impressed enough with his drawing skills that he shot and released a film of him doing "lightning sketches." Blackton bought a projector, Smith reverse engineered a camera, and the pair founded the American Vitagraph Company that same year. Their film business took off, and the magic act was set aside. By 1905, Vitagraph was the most important film production company in America.

As Vitagraph's primary director, Blackton made all kinds of films – actualities, westerns, comedy series, and numerous stage adaptations. His 1906 *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* is generally considered to be the first animated film ever made. He made more of these plus a number of notable trick films, including the highly influential *The Haunted Hotel* (1907). *Princess Nicotine* was the last trick film he made. In 1911, he co-founded and edited the first movie fan magazine, *Motion Picture Story Magazine*. Blackton left Vitagraph in 1917 to be an independent producer. Among his last productions was the first British color feature, *The Glorious Adventure* (1922). He briefly returned to Vitagraph until it was acquired by Warner Brothers in 1925. Like so many, he lost his fortune in the 1929 stock market crash, but continued to make occasional films until his death.

The Airship Destroyer

(aka *Battle in the Clouds*; aka *The Aerial Torpedo*; aka *Possibilities of War in the Air*)
1909 (Charles Urban Trading Company, London, England)
Directed by Walter R. Booth. Photographed by F. Harold Bastick.
Music: Richard Wagner, "The Ride of the Valkyries" and "Magic Fire Music" from *Die Walkure*

A fleet of airships armed with devices for dropping bombs is launched and attacks an unsuspecting London. As the aerial invaders wreak terrible havoc on the innocent citizens, defenders fight back with special armored cars and biplanes, to no effect. An inventor saves the day with an experimental radio-controlled missile, but the city is devastated.

Inspired by H.G. Wells' prophetic novel *The War in the Air* (first serialized the year before), *The Airship Destroyer* was among the very first films to depict aircraft as a weapon of war, and even imagined a primitive type of drone. Using an impressive array of effects, staging, editing techniques and realistic scenes of destruction, this early science fiction thriller was successful enough to inspire several "sequels." In 1910 Booth made *The Aerial Submarine*, in which stateless pirates use a combination airship-submarine to sink and then loot ships carrying gold bullion. Booth's third and final film along these lines, *The Aerial Anarchists* (1911), recycled the same idea only with crazed radicals laying waste to military targets, railroads, and St. Paul's Cathedral. There were imitations by others as well, including *The Pirates of 1920* (1911) released by Lion's Head Films in Britain, and D.W. Griffith's *The Flying Torpedo* (1913) in the USA.

The Airship Destroyer was rereleased in January 1915 as *The Aerial Torpedo*, amidst growing fears of aerial attacks by German Zeppelins. (The fears were borne out: that same month two towns suffered that very fate, and by May London itself was the target of airborne bombing raids.) Also rereleased that year was *The Aerial Submarine*.

Walter R. Booth (1869-1938) was a magician working for John Maskelyne and David Devant's company at the Egyptian Hall in London, where he first saw films made by British pioneer Robert W. Paul. By the end of the 1800s, Booth was working for Paul designing and directing countless magic and trick films. More famous examples include *The Human Flies* (1899), which used an upside-down camera to make its performers look like they were dancing on the ceiling; *Hindoo Jugglers* and *Chinese Magic* (both 1900), which were based on stage conjuring tricks; and early experiments in

animation like *The Devil in the Studio* (1901) and *Political Favourites* (1903). Probably his most famous film for Paul was *The '?' Motorist* (1906), in which an exceptionally reckless automobile driver manages to wind up in outer space, driving on the rings of Saturn.

In 1906 Booth was hired away by Charles Urban. Almost immediately he made what is considered the first animated cartoon in Britain, *The Hand of the Artist* (1906). He also built an outdoor studio in the back garden of London's Neville Lodge, and there he made some 15 films a year until 1915, when he left Urban to make advertising films.

Producer Charles Urban (1867-1942) was a German-American raised in Cincinnati, Ohio who moved to London where he became the most significant figure in the early British film industry. By 1897 he was manager of the London office of Maguire and Baucus, which distributed films by Edison and the Lumière brothers. The following year, Urban renamed the business the Warwick Trading Company (after the street it was on) and within a few years built it into one of the top distributers in the country, with licenses for films by Méliès, G.A. Smith, James Williamson, Edison, and others. In 1903, Urban broke away and started the Charles Urban Trading Company, where he maintained his reputation for quality, an emphasis on scientific and current events documentaries, and the use of new technologies like Kinemacolor, the most successful color process of the time. He remained an important figure through World War I, after which he sought to reestablish himself in America by starting a new company there. By the early 1920s his business empire had collapsed.

The Revenge of a Kinematograph Cameraman

(Original title: Месть Кинематографического Оператора; aka *The Cameraman's Revenge*; aka *The Revenge of a Kinematograph Operator*; aka *Miest Kinooperatora Operatora*; aka *Zemsta kinooperatora*)

1911 (Khanzhonkov Studios, Moscow, Russia) – US release ca. October 1912

Animated, directed, and written by Ladislas Starevich (Władysław Starewicz).

Produced by Aleksandr Khanzhonkov.

Music: Le Quintette du Hot Club de France recordings of "I'm Confessin'" (1934), "Oh Lady Be Good" (1935), "You're Driving Me Crazy" (1937), and "After You've Gone" (1936)

Philandering insects are caught in their web of lies and publicly exposed.

There are earlier examples of stop motion animation. The first was probably *The Humpty Dumpty Circus* (believed lost) made in 1898 by J. Stuart Blackton and Albert Edward Smith, using toys borrowed from Blackton's daughter. Beginning in 1899, British filmmaker Arthur Melbourne-Cooper made a series of stop motion puppet films over several years, including *A Dream of Toyland* (1907) which featured as many as 20 toys animated simultaneously. In 1907, Edwin S. Porter included stop motion segments in two films: *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* and *The 'Teddy' Bears*. Around the same time, French animator Émile Cohl also began dabbling in stop motion in films such as *Les allumettes animées* (*The Animated Matches*, 1908). Meanwhile, drawn animation was no more advanced. Blackton had done pioneering work in 1900 and 1902, followed by Cohl and others. But Winsor McCay didn't make his very first primitive animated film, *Little Nemo*, until 1911 – the same year *Revenge of the Kinematograph Camerman* was made. It would be another three years after that before the release of *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) firmly established animated cartoons as a cinematic form.

While not the first, Ladislas Starevich (1882-1965) was one of the single most important stop motion animators in history, both as a pioneer and an artist. Despite this he has received little scholarly attention, and accounts of his life

remain varied and conflicting – much like the spellings of his name.

Born in Moscow to Polish parents, he was raised in the city of Kaunas (now in Lithuania). As a boy he showed interest in drawing, writing and nature, especially insects, which he collected. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg and, after graduation, worked at the natural history museum in Kaunas.

In 1909, Starevich bought a movie camera and made four short live-action documentaries about Lithuanian customs and animal life. While trying to film a fight between stag beetles, he found the heat of the lights made the bugs unresponsive or even killed them. Remembering Cohl's *Animated Matches* a year or two earlier, he decided to recreate a fight with stop motion. Using beetle shells and re-attaching the legs and mandibles with tiny wires held in place by sealing wax, he was able to create convincing "puppets" he could animate. The resulting film, *Lucanus Cervus* (1910), quickly became known outside of scientific circles, catching the eye of the important Moscow-based film producer Aleksandr Khanzhonkov, who hired Starevich away from the museum.

Moving to Moscow in 1911, Starevich made a surprising number of animated films in very quick succession. The first was a spoof of the popular Danish film *The Four Devils* using animated frogs. The same year, *The Ant and the Grasshopper* (*Konik polny i mrówka*) was a major success. When it was shown for Tsar Nicholas II, he awarded Starevich a silver medal. It was among the earliest Russian films to receive wide distribution across Europe, where it caused a sensation. *The Revenge of a Kinematograph Cameraman* followed soon after and received even wider distribution, including the American nickelodeon circuit. Thus established, Starevich delivered a string of successful animated bug films, including *The Beautiful Leukanida* (1912) and *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (1913). The animation was so effective that one London newspaper writer thought "the insects were alive, trained by an unidentified Russian scientist."

During World War I, Starevich left Khanzhonkov and worked for a string of film companies, abandoning animation entirely to direct live-action social dramas, a series of Gogol adaptations, and occasional fairy tale fantasies. The October Revolution of 1917 sent him and his White Russian colleagues fleeing to Yalta in the Crimea, where they formed a short-lived film company. But as the Red Army advanced, Starevich fled into exile much as the others did, passing through Italy and (apparently) Turkey before landing in the Parisian suburb Fontenay-sous-Bois, where he would spend the rest of his life and career.

Through the 1920s, Starevich continued to make stop motion shorts, including *The Frogs Who Wanted a King* (*Les Grenouilles qui demandent un roi*, 1922) and *The Voice of the Nightingale* (*La Voix du rossignol*, 1923), which was tinted and hand-colored and won a number of awards. During the sound era, Starevich made some of his very best and most ambitious work, notably *Fétiche Mascotte* (*The Mascot,* 1934) and his masterpiece, the feature-length *Le Roman de Renard* (*The Tale of the Fox*, 1930). He continued to make films until his death in 1965, while working on his unfinished *Comme chien et chat* (*Like Dog and Cat*).

À la conquête du pôle

(*Conquest of the Pole*)
1912 (Pathé Frères, Paris, France)
Produced and directed by Georges Méliès
Music: Excerpts from The Residents, *Eskimo* (1979), special remix by Scott Colburn

The greatest scholars of the world meet at Le Club Aeronautique to discuss how they might reach the North Pole. Professor Maboul ("Crazy") presents a solution: his griffin-headed "Aero-bus." Various competitors attempt to get there first, but their inferior machines all meet an ignominious end. Despite their own close calls, Maboul and his colleagues successfully reach the Pole, only to encounter the ferocious, man-eating Giant of the Snows (a full-sized mechanical wonder that required a crew of 12 to operate). Defeating the beast, they meet their match in the very magnetic pole itself. Thankfully, an airship happens along to rescue the explorers, who return to a hero's welcome.

One of the very last films Méliès made (only three more followed), this is in many ways the epitome of his great adventure epics. It also heralded the end of the classic trick film era. Originally 20 minutes long, a shorter version is presented here.

As usual, Méliès drew inspiration from various places. The polar explorations of Peary, Amundsen, and Scott were in the news; and aspects of Jules Verne's *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1897) are also apparent. A more direct inspiration was probably a 1903 film by Robert Paul, *Voyage to the Arctic*, which even featured a giant living at the Pole.

In late 1911, his fortunes failing, Méliès had made a distribution deal with Pathé, which also provided production funds in exchange for a lien on his studio. He made a handful of films under the arrangement but declining sales and, especially, heavy interference from Pathé finally led Georges to retire from filmmaking in 1913. Pathé began foreclosure proceedings.

Méliès continued to show his films at the Robert-Houdin until the outbreak of WWI in 1914, when the theaters in Paris were closed. During the war, the French military seized most of his prints, which were melted down for their silver content and the celluloid used for boot heels.

Following the war, the long-delayed foreclosure was completed, the Robert-Houdin was demolished to make way for a new street and, in 1923, his beloved second wife died. In despair, he burned the few remaining prints and negatives he had, and resigned himself to a life of impoverished obscurity as proprietor of a small shop in the Paris train station.

In 1929, Méliès and a small surviving number of his films were rediscovered and hailed in a special gala screening in Paris. In 1932, a mutual assistance organization of filmmakers arranged to give Méliès, his third wife, and his granddaughter a three-room apartment. There he was able to live out his remaining few years in relative comfort.

While the Méliès cinema legacy was nearly lost, today hundreds of his films have been recovered and restored, including most of his major works.

Sources and Suggested Reading

Frederick A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures: How They Are Made and Worked* (J.B. Lippincott Co, 1912) – This early book on cinema technology and production history includes several chapters devoted to trick films and the special effects techniques used to create them. Available online for free in various formats at http://archive.org/details/cu31924030699445

Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (Routledge, 2010) – A wide ranging book, covering early cinema through the present day, with background on the oral and literary origins of the fairy tale. The author is a respected authority on children's literature.

Matthew Solomon ed., *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon* (SUNY Press, 2011) with DVD – Excellent anthology of leading scholars providing a detailed examination of the landmark film, its roots in theater, and the impact it had on cinema. The DVD includes two versions of the film (plus commentary): 1) A black-and-white 35mm "reconstructed" version from Film Preservation Associates is accompanied on piano by Martin Marks, performing his adaptation of a 1903 score by Ezra Read, which he discovered in London. And 2) A previously unknown color-tinted and German-titled version found in an Amsterdam archive, accompanied by a new chamber score by Donald Sosin, played with sampled instruments.

John Frazer, *Artificially Arranged Scenes* (G.K. Hall & Co., 1979) – The best English-language book about Méliès and his films. Includes extensive biographical information, a history of Star Films, and an exhaustive filmography with detailed descriptions and production notes of all Méliès films known to survive at the time of publication. Illustrated throughout.

Paul Hammond, *Marvelous Méliès* (St. Martin's Press, 1975) – Thin but worthwhile, though organized in rather scattershot fashion. Profusely illustrated, and includes a length film list with known survival status ca. 1975. A fine book, albeit dated.

Maurice Bessy and Lo Duca, *Georges Méliès, Mage* (Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1961; orig. Prisma Editions, 1945 in an edition of 2,000) – Only ever published en Français, but it is the first extensive biography of Méliès, includes extensive excerpts from his unpublished *Mes Memoires*. It is also a genuine treasure trove of rare illustrations, including original production sketches.

Joan M. Minguet Battlori, *Segundo de Chomón: The Cinema of Fascination* (Generalitat de Catalunya, Institut Català de les Indústries Culturals, 2010). English-language edition: ISBN 8439381417 (ISBN13: 9788439381419). Also published in Catalan and French editions. – The only biography of Chomón. Profusely illustrated (almost 60 pages of images, many in color).

Joan M. Minguet Battlori, "Segundo de Chomón and the fascination for colour," *Film History: An International Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2009), pp. 94-103 – Traces the evolution and importance of early color processes in the career of Chomón. Archived online at http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/frames/color/Batllori2009.pdf

Charles Ford, "Ladislas Starevitch. The Pioneer with Puppets on Film Has Persevered Despite War and Revolution," *Films in Review* (April 1958). Translated by Anne and Thornton K. Brown. – An article based on a direct interview with Starevich, seven years before his death. Archived online at http://www.cartoonbrew.com/classic/a-rare-starevich-article-17222.html

Donald Crafton, *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film* (Princeton University Press, 1990) – The authoritative book about Cohl. A fascinating deep dive into the life, career and influence of an essential artist in the evolution of animation, trick films, and Surrealism.

Léona Béatrice & François Martin, *Ladislas Starewitch 1882-1965* (L'Harmattan, 2003) – The only biographical study of Starevich (and nearly 500 pages long), but available only in French. Léona Béatrice is the granddaughter of Starevich.

Ray Harryhausen & Tony Dalton, *A Century of Stop Motion Animation: From Méliès to Aardman* (Aurum Press Ltd./Watson-Guptill Publications, 2008) – A bedrock history (especially about the early years) co-written by one of the field's great masters. Solidly researched, well-written, and profusely illustrated. Highly recommended.

Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914* (University of California Press, rev. ed. 1998; orig. 1994) – An essential and richly detailed history covering the entire scope of French cinema during the period, written by a top film historian.

Erik Barnouw, *The Magician and the Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 1981) – A slim but important book tracing the role of stage magicians as crucial

pioneers in the early evolution of cinema. The author was then the chief film archivist for the Library of Congress. Profusely illustrated, with bibliography.

Michael Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (University of Illinois Press, 2010) – Explores how professional magicians shaped the early history of cinema, focusing on the work of the professional illusionists who actually made magic with moving pictures between 1895 and 1929.

Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle*, Vol. 8, No. 3/4 (1986) – Influential essay on early cinema. Archived online at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/film/gaines/historiography/Gunning.pdf

Richard Abel ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Film* (Routledge, 2005 & 2010) – An outstanding and seemingly inexhaustible resource covering people, companies, technologies, genres, and more up through the mid-1910s.

Stephen Herbert & Luke McKernan eds., *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema* (British Film Institute, 1996) – A slim but essential volume covering the period up to 1901, with excellent scholarship and only partly supplanted by the above *Encyclopedia*. Now out of print, its contents can be found for free online at http://www.victorian-cinema.net/

John Brosnan, *Movie Magic: The Story of Special Effects in the Cinema* (Plume: rev. pb. ed. 1977, orig. 1974) – A fine introduction to and survey of the lost era of "analog" special effects, from the silent era through *Star Wars*.

Home Video

A Trip to the Moon (Flicker Alley, 2011) Blu-Ray/DVD dual-pack, with booklet – Beautiful restoration of the only surviving hand-colored print of the film. Plus: a restored B/W version, two more moon-related trick film shorts, and a new feature-length documentary about Méliès produced by Lobster Films.

Georges Méliès: First Wizard of Cinema (1896–1913) (Flicker Alley, 2008) 5-DVD box set, with booklet – The gold standard home video collection of Méliès, with 173 films (most of the ones known to survive, including his very first) on five discs, plus an illustrated booklet with excellent notes by John Frazer (see above).

Georges Méliès Encore: New Discoveries 1896-1911 (Flicker Alley, 2010) – An additional 26 films found and/or made available since the release of the 5-disc set above. Also includes two films by Segundo de Chomón which had commonly been misidentified as being made by Méliès.

Segundo de Chomón 1903-1912: El Cine de la Fantasía (Cameo Media / Filmoteca de Catalunya, 2010) Region 2/PAL DVD with multilingual booklet – The only DVD anthology of Chomón's films not only requires an all-region player but is increasingly hard to find. But it gathers 31 rare titles including trick films, actualities, and dramas. The booklet (by Joan Minguet Batllori) has an English translation that is poor but serviceable enough, and remains one of the few detailed profiles of Chomón available in English.

The Camerman's Revenge and Other Fantastic Tales (Image Entertainment, 2005) DVD – Collection of essential films by the great stop-motion animation pioneer, Ladislas Starewicz.

R.W. Paul: The Collected Films 1895-1908 (BFI, 2006) Region 2/PAL DVD with booklet – Excellent collection of 62 pioneering shorts, including several landmark trick films co-produced with W.R. Booth.

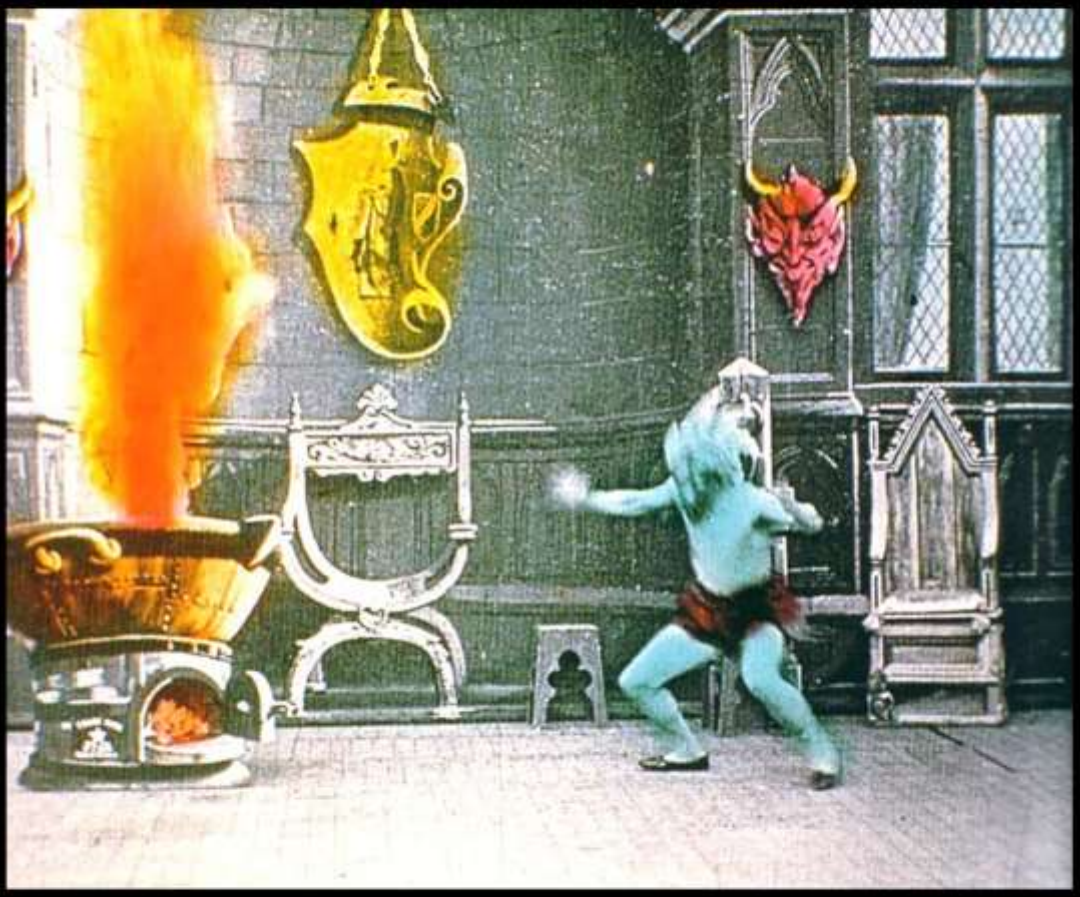
Emile Cohl, DVD 1 of *Gaumont Treasures Vol. 2* (Kino, 2011), a 3-DVD set – A very good selection of short films made 1908-1910 by the early master of animation and trick films. But if you can find it, a much more extensive 2-disc collection was released in France by Gaumont in 2008, *Emile Cohl: L'Agitateur aux mille images*.

Fairy Tales: Early Colour Stencil Films From Pathé (BFI, 2012) Region 2/PAL DVD – Anthology of some of Pathé's *féerie* films, spectacularly colored with their famous stencil, tinting, and hand-color processes. With newly-commissioned scores by Chris Watson, Philip Jeck, Fennesz, and others.

Stop Motion Matinee (Cartoons On Film/Inkwell Images, 2009) DVD – Collects some rare examples of early stop motion animated films by Willis O'Brien, Roméo Bossetti, Kinex, and others. More info at http://cartoonsonfilm.com/dvd.html

Stop Motion Madness (Cartoons On Film, ca. 2007) DVD-R – More early shorts by Willis O'Brien, J. Stuart Blackton, Tony Sarg, and Willie Hopkins. An excellent companion to the disc above.

SILENT MAGIC



TRICK FILMS AND SPECIAL EFFECTS

1895 - 1912 ~ USA, FRANCE, UK, RUSSIA

TUESDAY, MAY 20, 2014 ~ 8:00 PM ONLY

NORTHWEST FILM FORUM

1515 12TH AVENUE ~ CAPITOL HILL ~ SEATTLE, WA ~ NWFILMFORUM.ORG