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A Trip to the Moon (1902)



TOM GUNNING

Lunar Illuminations

Context

We could say the movies began in 1902 with Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le voyage dans la lune*). Undoubtedly, it is the earliest film still screened regularly today that resembles what we think of as a movie: a continuous fictional story performed by actors and extending over space and time (that is, a number of shots edited together to create a narrative). Certainly, there were films made before *A Trip to the Moon*, including scores of films by its producer, director, and star, Georges Méliès, who began film production in 1896, a few months after the first successful projection of motion pictures in France. But the best-known earlier films, such as the views shot by the Lumière Company in 1895 or the performances of dancers and acrobats filmed by the Edison Company in the 1890s, do not tell extended stories. A few fictional films consisting of several shots edited together were also made before *A Trip to the Moon*, such as Edison's *Love and War* (1899) or even Méliès's own *Bluebeard* (*Barbe-bleue*, 1901). But *A Trip to the Moon* is still widely watched with pleasure by audiences who sense that this relatively short film already possessed in 1902 many of the patterns that define movies today. But part of our pleasure in watching this film comes from its differences from later films. Both aspects of the film are important to explore: its establishment of many basic aspects of cinema entertainment still used today as well as the ways it belongs uniquely to the era of its production more than a century ago, both in terms of cinema practices and historical context.

From almost its beginnings, cinema invoked the moon, as if the silvery light of the projector piercing through a dark theater recalled lunar illumination. The full and glowing moon sailing through the night sky provides a spectacle for the eye in a manner the blinding

glare of the sun cannot. But beyond this shimmering visual pleasure, the moon teases, as if its visible clarity promised a reachable proximity. Walter Benjamin wrote of the child who learns to catch a ball by reaching for the moon (124). In 1901, two years before his more famous *The Great Train Robbery*, pioneer American filmmaker Edwin Porter produced the short film *Love by the Light of the Moon* for Thomas Edison, in which a rubbernecking and goggle-eyed moon plunges out of the sky to ogle a couple necking behind a shrubbery. There is something about the visual power of the moon that makes one dream of reaching it.

Georges Méliès, like Porter one of the very first generation of filmmakers, displayed this modern desire to bring everything closer, to try to bring the alluring into our grasp. Even before *A Trip to the Moon*, Méliès had reflected this desire either to bring the moon down to earth or to propel people through space to conquer it. A magic act staged in 1891 in Méliès's theater of illusions, the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, entitled *Les farces de la lune et les mésaventures de Nostradamus* (*The Moon's Pranks and the Misadventures of Nostradamus*), portrayed a wizardlike astronomer who observes the moon through a telescope only to find it invading his observatory. It looms at his window in the form of a voraciously grinning, full-moon face that swallows the astronomer's telescope and threatens to devour him as well. Then a delicate crescent moon brings in a lunar lady, Phoebe, who defends him from the devouring phase of the moon. In 1898, Méliès, having become a filmmaker as well as a manager of a magical theater, produced a film of this act, entitled *The Moon from One Meter*, aka *The Man in the Moon* (*La lune à un mètre*). The title expresses the idea that the magnification of the moon through the astronomer's telescope seems to bring it within arm's length, although the moral of both stage act and film seems to be that such overcomings of distance might prove dangerous.

As a professional magician, caricaturist, and producer of theatrical spectacles, Méliès mastered the arts of visual illusion. Himself well described as an *Up-to-Date Conjurer* (the English-language title of his 1899 film *L'impressionniste fin de siècle*), Méliès followed the lead of other nineteenth-century stage magicians (Jean Robert-Houdin, whose theater he took over, and the English master of modern magic John Nevil Maskelyne) and incorporated the latest technology into his theater of illusion, whether it be an electromagnet, strongly focused

electric light, or concealed mechanical contraptions. When his friends the Lumière brothers invited him to a preview of their latest photographic contraption—the *Cinématographe*, producing motion pictures—he immediately recognized it as a mechanical device that created visual illusions, much like his magic theater, and attempted to purchase one. The Lumières, however, had decided not to put their invention on the market yet, and Méliès had to work with mechanics to create an equivalent device, which he did very quickly.

Méliès's first films were imitations of the Lumières' views of everyday life: *Card Party*, *Arrival of a Train at the Station*, *Place de Opera* (all 1896), as well as films of brief gags and popular dances, genres exploited by the Lumières as well. But, by the end of the first year of production, Méliès had realized that while cinema might ordinarily present a magical illusion by projecting moving images of daily life on a screen, it could also create impossible scenes of magic and transformation through manipulations of the camera and the film.

For years, film historians described the central trick used to create magical effects in Méliès's cinema as "stop-motion," but, in fact, this is only part of the story. Stop-motion involves stopping the camera, rearranging the scene while the camera is not filming, and then resuming filming after the changes have been made. Since the action of rearrangement did not appear on film, a magical effect of instantaneous change or disappearance could be achieved. Méliès (aware that journalists love such stories) later claimed he discovered the process accidentally, when filming traffic in the Place de Opera. His camera jammed momentarily, then resumed filming a few seconds later. When the film was projected, a bus, passing in front of the camera when the camera jammed, seemed to transform itself into a hearse, which was passing when the camera resumed filming (Méliès 44).

Such stories are rarely true, expressive of Méliès's sense of humor as this one may be. The process of stop-motion would naturally occur to a master of mechanical and visual illusions, such as Méliès, whose stage illusions depended on magic's basic device of concealing the actual process from view. Concealing the labor of creating the illusion by having it occur while the camera was not filming provided a filmic equivalent of the trapdoors, disguised mechanical supports for floating women, or invisible black-clad assistants that Méliès used onstage. In fact, this device of substitution during a break in filming had

already been used in an 1895 Edison film showing the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in order to make it appear that the queen really was beheaded (a dummy being substituted for the actress during the break in filming, before the executioner brought down the ax).

Moreover, in describing the device he used as "stop-motion" (in French, *arrêt de le caméra*), Méliès was concealing part of his actual practice, following the great tradition of magicians and chefs (and filmmakers!) who only explain their processes to a certain degree, leaving the final ingredient a secret. Careful examination of Méliès's original prints undertaken some decades ago by Jacques Malthête (a great-grandson of the filmmaker) discovered that these moments of stop-motion were supplemented by cuts and splices made in the film ("Méliès, technicien du collage" 174). By cutting and splicing, Méliès could refine the trick, eliminating frames that would be overexposed as the camera slowed down and making the substitution smooth and magical. As André Gaudreault, who first theorized this practice (which he found was common among many early filmmakers), claims, Méliès was therefore a pioneer in editing, since with a simple trick, a film that appeared to consist of a single shot might actually include over a dozen "substitution splices" (217-18).

Méliès moved away from the scenes of everyday life and travel that were the specialties of the Lumière Company. An illusionist, he explored cinema's ability to create an alternative reality, rather than capture familiar views of the world. Méliès became increasingly obsessed with filmmaking, which became a passion for him that exceeded even his love of theater (or cast that love in a new dynamic form). Founding his own film production company, eventually called Star Film, he constructed a glass-enclosed studio for filming in the suburbs of Paris. In this studio Méliès ran everything. While calling him the cinema's first film director hardly covers his many roles in film production, Méliès most certainly was cinema's first *auteur*. He ran his studio; produced every film; wrote the scenarios and engineered the tricks (both cinematic and mechanical); designed, and often painted, the scenery; cast the roles; and, more often than not, played the leading man (as he does in *A Trip to the Moon*). Quoting the title of one of his trick films, Méliès was a "one-man band." Further, he developed an international system to export his films abroad, although it was in this area that his first problems arose.

Méliès made trick or magic films of two sorts. Some simply presented a series of dazzling and often hilarious transformations, while others placed these tricks within a context of characters and stories. For his story films, Méliès drew on the genre the French called *féerique* (fairy shows) and the related British form of pantomime: elaborate programs often based on fairy tales that included dances, songs, and spectacular effects, as well as slapstick comedy and acrobatic stunts. Méliès had actually provided films that were incorporated as special effects into such stage performances at the Parisian theater of Châtelet. These stage performances packed a series of attractions into a single program, often straining (or even abandoning) dramatic logic, since the acts, dances, and stage effects were often more important than the story line. They resembled a fantastic vaudeville show with the story line linking the various parts.

Up to 1902, most of the films Méliès produced consisted of a brief succession of magic tricks and gags (with occasional actualities still being produced as well; for instance, films of the 1900 Exposition and some reconstructions of historical or contemporary events, including a series of eleven short films on the Dreyfus scandal made in 1899). Méliès's most ambitious films before *A Trip to the Moon* were adaptations of fairy tales in the *féerique*/pantomime tradition. These films, *Cinderella* (1899), *The Christmas Dream* (1900), and *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Bluebeard* (both 1901), exceeded the few minutes' running time of the simpler trick films, extending gradually to nearly fifteen minutes. Transformations, appearances, disappearances, superimpositions, and spectacular theatrical effects (such as elaborate scene changes) now became embedded within a plot, usually a well-known one with familiar characters.

Analysis

The most elaborate film Méliès had produced to this point, *A Trip to the Moon*, continued and to some degree departed from the *féerique*/pantomime tradition. At 260 meters, it was longer than any previous Méliès film (although *Bluebeard*'s 210 meters approached its length). Its topic, travel through space to the moon, seems to offer a major departure from the "once upon a time" of the fairytale adaptations. Film historians have cited *A Trip to the Moon* as the first science-fiction film.

While it is always a difficult (and possibly dubious) process to establish the first film of a genre, certainly part of the originality of Méliès's film lies in its novel subject matter, placing it in a tradition that extends from Fritz Lang's *Woman in the Moon* (1929) and William Cameron Menzies's *Things to Come* (1936) to Fred Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

But one must notice the difference in tone between Méliès's film and later examples of the genre. "Science" fiction implies a certain sobriety and serious concern with scientific and technological possibility. This is certainly true of Jules Verne's novels, which Méliès claimed as his sources for the film. Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Around the Moon* offer detailed discussions of theories of propulsion, orbits, and gravity (even if the portrayal of the Gun Club engineers who debate the moon launch takes a satiric tone). But Méliès cannot take his scientists seriously at all, introducing them first as wizards with pointy hats, figures out of fairy pantomimes (which often introduced contemporary figures or events in order to mock them).

Certain aspects of *A Trip to the Moon* reveal Méliès still very much working within the *féérique*/pantomime tradition of burlesque and exaggeration, rather than the serious realm of later science fiction. Thierry Lefebvre, in his exemplary work on the sources of *A Trip to the Moon*, has demonstrated that one of its sources (never mentioned by Méliès) was a comic opera produced in Paris in 1877 with music by Jacques Offenbach, also called *A Trip to the Moon* (181–84). Although the major plot of the piece, a romance between an earthly prince and a moon princess, does not appear in the film, stereoscope cards showing the various acts of the opera reveal that the opening of Méliès's film reproduces events and scenic effects from the opera—including the industrial workshop in which the projectile is constructed and the enormous cannon that fires the lunar ship into space. Méliès also adopted the opera's comic treatment of the scientists.

A Trip to the Moon shares the fairy pantomime's dual focus, balancing complex visual effects with a simple story line. Today, spectacle (such as special effects) and story line continue to vie for audience attention, especially in contemporary blockbusters, so it could be said that *A Trip to the Moon* introduced a conflict that still marks popular movies (in a sense, it was cinema's first blockbuster: costing more, lasting longer, and drawing larger audiences than any previous single

film). The film's story seems little more than a pretext for its effects, especially by modern criteria. We can hardly speak of individualized characters, and the motivation of character psychology plays little role in the plot. The camera maintains the framing of a theatrical tableau, never isolating or emphasizing a character's reaction. Except for the ambiguous example of the moon face as the spaceship lands, there are no close-ups (or even medium shots) in *A Trip to the Moon*.

The action often seems to pause to let special effects take center stage. After the space voyagers arrive on the moon, they stretch out their blankets on the lunar surface and take a nap. This narrative dead time, as the characters sleep in the lower part of the screen, allows Méliès to present a series of visual attractions with little attempt to advance the story. Superimposed on the dark background of the lunar sky, a comet passes by. Then the stars of the Big Dipper appear, and the heads of showgirls pop out, looking out at us as much as at the lunar explorers. Two women stars, moon maid Phoebe (pleonastically seated in a crescent moon), and a bearded man popping out of a mock-up of Saturn appear next, figures out of the burlesque mythology of comic opera, rather than space exploration. The characters notice none of these attractions (except for being awakened by the snow the mythological beings cause to descend on them), which are presented purely as visual delights (although the Méliès catalog refers to them as the visualization of the explorers' dreams) (Malthête, Maltete-Méliès, and Quevrain 109).

Spectacle, burlesque, and even absurdity frequently dominate over scientific logic, realism, or dramatic story line throughout *A Trip to the Moon*. Thus, in the apparently scientific scene of the launching of the lunar vessel, Méliès was not behaving naively in having the projectile loaded into the breach of the cannon by a troupe of showgirls dressed in a burlesque version of sailor suits. Burlesque and fairy pantomime both relied on displays of feminine attractions (such as the showgirl's legs, here encased in tights), and Méliès favored this mode of entertainment over Verne's detailed discussion of ballistics. As Lefebvre points out, in Verne's novel the huge cannon that propels the projectile toward the moon has everything but its opening underground, while both the Offenbach opera and Méliès chose to place the enormous cannon above ground, a spectacular set being more important than scientific accuracy.

The girls who push the projectile into the cannon resemble a chorus line, precisely because that is what they are supposed to be. After the projectile is loaded, they turn toward the camera and wave their hats. We are in the realm of spectacle, in which the audience is openly acknowledged and addressed, rather than the classical narrative film, in which the rule of the "fourth wall" prevails and the camera and viewer are ignored. Likewise, the disproportion in this scene between the actors and the rooftops, above which they tower like giants, does not indicate a naive primitivism in Méliès's set design (since he personally designed and built all the sets especially for this production) but an acknowledged and whimsical theatricality.

The performances, sets, and theatrical tricks in this film contrast sharply with a later cinema practice of realism and transparency. Méliès flaunts his tricks and attractions; they are what the audience has come to see. Thus when the explorers land on the moon, the effect of the earth rising is accompanied by flats of the lunar landscape descending below the stage, a common device of the fairy pantomime theater of the era but at antipodes to the realistic three-dimensional sets being introduced around this time by naturalists in the theater, such as André Antoine in France and David Belasco in the United States. We must keep in mind that Méliès was not offering an inadequate approximation of realism but a different style, based on acknowledged theatricality and illusion—a fairyland with a sense of humor and irony about itself.

Méliès openly acknowledged the dominance of tricks and attractions over the story line in his filmmaking. He wrote some years later, "As for the scenario, the story or tale, I considered it last. I can state that the scenario had no real importance, since I utilized it only as a pretext, a context for tricks or pleasing theatrical effects." He added, "One could say the scenario in this case was little more than a thread designed to link the various effects" (qtd. in Sadoul 115). The image of a film's plot as a sort of clothesline on which Méliès pegged his various attractions certainly does seem to describe one aspect of *A Trip to the Moon*. This investment in the spectacular rather than narrative or character development caused me to proclaim Méliès the primary filmmaker of what I termed "the cinema of attractions," a phase of early cinema that preceded the later focus on storytelling and character (Gunning). *A Trip to the Moon* does tell a story, but it is secondary to the display of attractions, performing, as Méliès said, as little more

than a pretext. Later cinema gave dominance to storytelling, especially character development, but it hardly abandoned attractions and special effects. Even *Jurassic Park* (1993), as dominated by special effects as it may be, provides much more character motivation and psychology than *A Trip to the Moon*.

Méliès, master of popular entertainment that he was, cobbled together numerous sources to make what Lefebvre calls this "composite" film. From Verne's 1865 novel he took essentially only the concept of the projectile (technically not a rocket, the mode of later, actual space exploration, which Verne, tied to earlier ideas of ballistics, had not foreseen). Since Verne's adventurers never land on the moon's surface (Verne was aware of how difficult liftoff from the moon would be, a problem Méliès solves quite nonsensically), Méliès added some elements from H. G. Wells's novel, *The First Men in the Moon*, published shortly before the film (such as the subterranean lunar cave with its gigantic mushrooms and the very vulnerable lunar inhabitants, the Selenites).

However, both of these sources probably reached Méliès partly through other media. Offenbach's already mentioned comic opera gave Verne a comic twist. Most curiously, as Lefebvre was the first to note, Wells's lunar caves and their inhabitants reached Méliès partly through the fairground attraction, "A Trip to the Moon," invented by Fred Thompson, later the founder of Coney Island's Lunar Park. This attraction was the hit of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, in 1901 and then was brought to Coney Island as a permanent attraction. Visitors were seated in a flying machine that seemed to lift off, fly over Niagara Falls, and head through space, creating an illusion both visual and kinesthetic, and apparently so convincing that many attendees truly thought they had been airborne. They then descended from the airship onto a lunar surface, wandering through caves inhabited by midgets dressed as horny-headed Selenites until they eventually reached the palace of the Man in the Moon, where they watched moon maidens dance and were fascinated by electrically illuminated fountains, before emerging back onto the exposition's midway.

It is likely that this fairground attraction served as Méliès's most direct inspiration. It is also worth noting that the Pan-American Exposition, taking place soon after the United States' victory in the Spanish-American War and its subsequent taking possession of Spain's colonial empire, celebrated the United States' entrance into the

ranks of imperialist nations. The new colonial possessions, from Puerto Rico to the Philippines, were highlighted in the exposition, including the display of natives brought in from the Philippines. As Woody Register points out in his biography of Fred Thompson, the "Trip to the Moon" attraction, with its emphasis on the moon's odd inhabitants, also reflected the turn-of-the-century fascination with exploration and imperial conquest (75). The end of Méliès's film, in which a captive Selenite is paraded through the streets, also participates in, and possibly satirizes, Western imperial ambitions, now extending beyond the earth's surface.

It would be one-sided to ignore the role that story does play in *A Trip to the Moon*, especially since for audiences in 1902, already familiar with the trick films Méliès had produced for the last four years, this window dressing of plot may have seemed like a compelling narrative. Richard Abel has chronicled the enthusiastic reaction American audiences had to the "French spectacular films" such as Méliès's fairy-tale films and *A Trip to the Moon* in the vaudeville theaters, where most films were shown in the United States before 1905 (*Red Rooster Scare* 10–19). They caused a similar stir among the French *forain* cinemas, the mobile film theaters that traveled along the route of French rural festivals and that provided perhaps the major market for Méliès's product. With their simple fairy-tale plots and exaggerated performances, these films also enthralled children at another of Méliès's faithful customers in France, the cinema specially designed for children set up in the Dufayel department store, so that mothers could park their kids while they shopped. The greater popularity accorded these longer films, compared to the shorter films based purely in tricks, indicates that the story line, while perhaps only a pretext, served to renew audience interest in the tricks and attractions and create a stronger viewing experience. Therefore, although the narrative form of *A Trip to the Moon* may differ from the character-based stories of later cinema, it is worth analysis.

Méliès's style of editing develops a strong sense of continuous action. The complete film consists of seventeen shots (some versions are missing the final shots of the triumphant reception of the moon voyagers and the celebrations that greet their return). The original Méliès catalog described the film as consisting of thirty "tableaux," but these tableaux indicate key actions in the film and do not correspond to

cinematic shots, since several shots include more than one tableaux (Malthête, Maltete-Méliès, and Quevrain 107–11). Nonetheless, seventeen represents almost twice as many shots as any previous Méliès film. It has been claimed (especially by French film historians Georges Sadoul and Jean Mitry) that given Méliès's reliance on rather distant theatrical framing, his lack of close-up, and the often patently theatrical inspiration in his sets, performances, and even certain tricks, he should be considered a man stuck in the ways of the theater rather than a visionary of the cinema's possibilities. Although his theatrical inheritance is unquestionable, an analysis of Méliès's editing between scenes (not to mention the substitution splices discussed earlier) reveals him as a filmmaker who thought deeply about the possibilities of his medium, even if he did not create a style identical to the later narrative film.

Although each of the shot changes corresponds to a change in decor, seventeen scene changes in less than seventeen minutes would be unusual for theatrical practice in Méliès's era, even in a period (or genre, such as fairy pantomime) in which scene changes were frequent due to their spectacular nature. Furthermore, in many prints these shot changes are linked by overlap dissolves, or "lap dissolves," a device impossible in the theater and that Méliès borrowed from magic-lantern shows, which linked their projected views in this manner (and in which a change of one slide in less than a minute would be common).

What cues Méliès's shot changes? Not simply the change in decor, but also the passage of characters. From shot 1 to shot 2, the engineers move from the lecture hall to the workshop where the projectile is being fabricated. From the workshop, they proceed to the view of the casting of the giant cannon. Shots end with the scientists departing from the set, and the next shot usually begins with their being led in by Méliès, playing the wildly bearded Professor Barbenfouillis. Even the cut from shot 3 to shot 4, as the astronauts board their projectile, is bridged partly by the group's coming onto the platform at the opening of the shot, although months presumably take place between the casting of the cannon and the actual launching. Thus Méliès employed a basic principle of continuity editing, linking shots closely together by having them follow the progress of a continuous action.

This is even stronger in the part of the film that takes place on the moon, in which clear action bridges each shot in a simple trajectory of movement. After awakening from their nap because of the lunar frost

(end of shot 7), the voyagers seek shelter in the lunar cave (setting for shot 8), in which they encounter the first Selenites and, in the long tradition of Western colonizers/explorers, immediately destroy several of them. Other Selenites appear and chase the party. In the throne room of the moon king (shot 9), the invaders are led in as prisoners. They escape from their captors and are chased over a lunar landscape (shot 10) until they reach the projectile, perched on the edge of an abyss (presumably the edge of the moon itself) (shot 11). The projectile plunges through space (shot 12), pierces the surface of the sea (shot 13), and lands on the bottom of the ocean (shot 14). Each of these shots falls into a line of continuous action, as it follows a simple trajectory of characters (the explorers) or objects (the projectile) as they move through space. Thus a synthetic cinematic space could be said to dominate over the simple theatrical tableaux filmed from the viewpoint of the man seated in the orchestra seats. Or, at the very least, cinema must be said to interact with theater in this style of editing. In particular, as Gaudreault has pointed out (in a pioneering article that questioned the relegation of Méliès simply to the category of filmed theatricality), the descent of the lunar ship in three brief shots lasting a total of less than fifteen seconds seems to anticipate the rapid rate of later film editing (213).

There are other cinematic devices used here, including, of course, the use of stop-motion/substitution splices, especially for the effect of the poor Selenites' vanishing in a puff of smoke after being manhandled by the scientists. The approach of the projectile toward the moon and its landing is accomplished by a complex trick shot that includes the appearance of camera movement, as the moon becomes larger as the spaceship approaches it, and at least two uses of stop-motion/substitution splices. First we see the moon at some distance as a two-dimensional image, which grows a bit bigger. Then, thanks to a substitution splice, the moon becomes more three dimensional and gains a strongly human face (an actor, of course, encased in full moon makeup). This moon face too grows bigger on the screen until, after another splice, we see the projectile apparently embedded in the moon's right eye.

The apparent camera movement was not achieved by actually moving the camera, since Méliès was not sure he could maintain a steady image in the frame while moving the camera. Therefore, while

having the camera anchored in a steady position, Méliès brought the moon face slowly closer to the camera, realizing, as an experienced visual illusionist, that the audience would not be able to distinguish the difference. (He used this device also in *The Man with a Rubber Head* [1901], filmed a few months earlier, to create the impression that a head was inflating to gigantic proportions.)

Further, as Gaudreault points out, Méliès portrayed the lunar landing with one of the devices of editing unique to earlier cinema (and rediscovered by later avant-garde filmmakers): the repeated action cut, or temporal overlap between shots. This device is best known from Edwin S. Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* (1903), in which we see the fireman's rescue of a family repeated twice from two different points of view. Here we see the spaceship land twice: first we see it hitting the moon in the eye in the shot of the moon's face; then, viewed from the surface, we see the projectile land again. Clearly we are not supposed to think the ship actually landed twice; we simply see the action repeated, once seen from above the moon, once seen from the surface. Later, continuity editing would come to smooth over such switches in point of view by eliminating these repetitions and overlaps. Certain critics, looking back at this earlier practice from the perspective of modern principles, have denounced it as primitive or even foolish. From a historical perspective, however, it is simply another sign that *A Trip to the Moon*, while clearly establishing certain ideas of filmic continuity, was still from a different era. In the realm of spectacular attractions, seeing the spaceship land twice might simply double one's pleasure.

Conclusion

There is no question that *A Trip to the Moon* caused a sensation when it appeared in 1902. Abel has quoted the vaudeville theater managers in the United States who generally proclaimed the film the most spectacular and funniest they had ever booked, holding it over to play for weeks as part of their vaudeville programs (*Red Rooster Scare* 7-8). The film found equal success in France, especially among the fair exhibitors. The film was available both in a black-and-white print and in a more expensive colored version that was tinted by hand to increase its visual attraction. However, it was certainly the much larger American

audience that Méliès had his eye on when he produced a film of such unparalleled length and budget (reportedly 10,000 francs). And it was here that Méliès encountered the unregulated business practices that characterized early American cinema.

Throughout 1902 and 1903, *A Trip to the Moon* was shown across the United States. As Abel has shown, rival American companies such as Biograph, Edison, Lubin, and Vitagraph all advertised copies of the film for purchase (*Red Rooster Scare* 9). But since it was relatively easy to make photographic copies of a film, the practice known as duping, very few of these copies were being purchased from Méliès. Instead, American companies absorbed the profits that Méliès's ambition and artistry garnered, by simply selling copies they made from a single original. As a new medium, film was not covered under existing copyright laws (and would not be until 1912). Méliès sent his older brother Gaston to investigate the business conditions in the United States, and his report of widespread film piracy through duping led not only to the establishment of a U.S. branch of the Méliès business, but to Méliès's establishing Star Film as the name and logo for his production company. Since the trademark could be legally protected, Méliès incorporated it into the sets of his films. But American dupers, such as Philadelphia film producer Sigmund Lubin, simply patiently scratched the logo out frame by frame before they made copies. Méliès also began to deposit prints of his films on rolls of bromide paper with the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where they could be copyrighted as photographs, a practice followed by many early American film producers. Certain film companies also tried to exploit the success of Méliès's film by remaking it shot by shot. I have seen two such versions of uncertain origin, one quite elaborate and possibly produced by Charles Pathé, Méliès's main commercial rival.

Perhaps most important, as I stated at the opening of this essay, *A Trip to the Moon* endures not as a fossil of a forgotten early history of the cinema, but as a film whose energy and imagination, visual design and sense of humor, technological innovation and sense of wonder still delight audiences today. Perhaps more than any other early film, it embodies the high spirits that marked early cinema, the excitement of discovery and innovation that marked the new medium. Méliès's tongue was lodged firmly in his cheek as he presented his fairy-tale vision of the future, in which scientists still dress as wizards and the

inhabitants of the moon perform acrobatic stunts. But he also expressed the human desire to reach the moon, to walk the surface of the earth's satellite, to find wonders where no one had gone before.

Credits

France, 1902, Star Film

Director, Screenplay, and Set Design: Georges Méliès

CAST:

Professor Barbenfouillis	Georges Méliès
Phoebe	Bleurette Bernon

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