

# A FILM-MAKER'S MAGIC LANTERN YEARS

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Laurent Mannoni's article on the battle between the early cinema and the magic lantern mentions the French film-maker Georges Méliès (1861–1938). Méliès was the cinema's first true artist. He was perhaps the first film-maker to recognise that the cinema was not just a scientific novelty of temporary interest, but had a huge potential for narrative and drama. He made his first film in 1896 – only months after the first show of the Cinématographe Lumière on 28 December 1895; and before the end of the century had made scores of films, including *Cinderella* and a dramatisation of the then sensational Dreyfus trial.

Méliès began his career as a stage magician; and it was the ingenuity he had learned in this craft that led him to explore all the cinema's possibilities for trick effects. Méliès, indeed, may be regarded as the father of special effects. For that matter, he was the father of almost everything in the cinema as we know it: he built the world's first true film studio, explored every genre of story – even made the first advertising films.

His later years were unlucky. As the cinema became big business, his own one-man operation was an anachronism. Tastes had changed; the public tired of his studio-made pictures as they discovered American styles like the

Western. The First World War completed his ruin. By the late 1920s this man, who had been one of the greatest pioneers of the cinema and was in 1909 elected President of the First International Congress of Film Producers, was tending a kiosk selling toys on the Gare Montparnasse. He was rescued from this fate; his films – still as entertaining as ever – were discovered by a new generation; and Méliès died, honoured once again, in a home for cinema veterans in 1938.

Before the cinema, however, in his little magic theatre – the Théâtre Robert-Houdin on the Boulevard des Italiens – he had entertained his audience with the magic lantern. He has left a description of these shows in his *Mémoires*, written in the third person: 'For several years, and long before there was any question of animated pictures, the shows of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin regularly ended with the projection of a series of coloured photographic views on glass (generally travel subjects accompanied by some hand-painted comic scenes, and chromatropes or kaleidoscopic slides, multicoloured, revolving and very pretty in effect). These projections were made with oxyhydrogen lamps and with the aid of several Molteni lanterns, combined so that they permitted

dissolving from one image to another. The system was analogous to the present-day 'dissolve' in moving pictures. Moreover, different mechanical slides permitted different effects, such as: falling snow, lights, effects of day and night, vehicles moving along a road, railway trains, boats on a river, etc. This was all done with slides that moved horizontally. This was in fact the old magic lantern perfected, the precursor of the cinema. But the painted figures were immobile, unlike those of the cinema, and moved simply like the cut-outs of *Ombres Chinoises*. Despite these imperfections, the public liked these projections, because they were able to see unknown places and countries, remarkably photographed and prettily coloured. We recall this because we see that, long before the cinema, Méliès was very familiar with projections properly so-called, executed either with oxyhydrogen or oxy-ether illuminants or with electric arc lights. From this point of view his education had already been affected when he embarked on the cinema, and this was a distinct advantage for him, the illumination of cinematograph equipment being exactly the same, at least at that time.'

In 1903 Méliès made a film called *La Lanterne Magique*, depicting the projection of dissolving views.

The illustration is from Méliès's film *Au Pays des Jouets* (*In the Land of Toys*), 1908.

