DUBLIN BUSINESS SCHOOL
ALI DOYLE

THE ‘MÉLIÈS TOUCH’? : MAGIC, MYTH AND THE MAN IN THE MOON

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE (FILM STUDIES SPECIALISATION) AT DBS SCHOOL OF ARTS, DUBLIN.

DR BARNABY TAYLOR

24th MAY 2012
The ‘Méliès Touch’? : Magic, Myth and the Man in the Moon
## Contents

Acknowledgements  
Introduction  
Setting the scene...  
George Méliès: Magic, Myth and the Man in the Moon  
Myths about Méliès contribution to film history...  
Le *Voyages Dans la Lune*  
Conclusion  
Endnotes  
Bibliography  
Appendix: List of Images
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Barnaby Taylor for all of his help and encouragement, also his patience for keeping a cool head with all my ridiculous questions, sorry about that and thank you.

I would also like to thank my class, the pioneers of the first Film Studies Class to graduate from DBS if you all were not such great friends I wouldn’t have made it this far in my degree.

My sister Jennie, who helped me from day one of college to get through to my final year, and who had the patience to proof read this dissertation and take out my ‘nonsense’ and ‘waffle’.

Matthew Nolan and Piotr Sadowski, who were always around the corner for a chat, when the library got that little bit to stuffy.

Conor Murphy, for all the filmic debates we got into in class and who broadened my mind in regards to modern cinema.

Dave, who discovered the world of Georges Méliès due to my incessant talk about Méliès and early cinema, and who is now a great admirer of early cinemas greatest adventures.

To Jane and Lara, for being there when stress levels rose and keeping my spirits up.

Also, to my family who gave me support and encouragement from the word go.
Introduction

The name of Georges Méliès is so well known that it seems endowed with a sort of permanence, a presence fixed since time immemorial in some kind of original Pantheon.

- Roland Cosandey¹

We knew so well the image of the moon and the rocket that we thought we had seen the film. But when we saw the film we said, okay, we have never seen it. So many people were inspired by that movie. So many directors stole some elements from the movie and used it in their own productions. So I think the movie has much more influence from the people who got inspired by it than from itself.

- Jean Benoît Dunckel of AIR (2011, IFC.com)²

In 1993, the last known surviving coloured (hand painted) copy of Georges Méliès silent masterpiece Le Voyage Dans La Lune (1902) was found by Filmoteca de Catalunya, in Spain. The footage was badly decomposed but despite its condition restoration did not begin immediate. The film was returned to Méliès homeland, France, and it wasn’t until 1999 that La Foundation Technicolor pour le Patrimoine du Cinema and Lobster films began to restore all 13,375 frames one by one. If a frame was beyond repair, it was copied from one of the existing black and white copies of the film and simply painted to fit in seamlessly with the finished restored film. The restoration was a slow
process, taking the best part of a decade, and in 2010 the full restoration process was complete, and ready for viewing at the 2011 International Cannes Film Festival. La Foundation Technicolor pour le Patrimoine du cinema asked French dance group AIR to score the film. The group was given a deadline of one month to compose the score, but because the film was in its final cut i.e. because the film had been made, edited and released 109 years previously AIR did not have to face industry problems, for example, composing a piece of music for a certain scene, syncing it and then coming in the following day to find that in the post production process, the scene had been changed therefore rendering the piece of synchronised music unusable.

Almost 109 years after the original was released, *Le Voyage Dans La Lune* has a very modern voice. The soundtrack gives the film a contemporary feel, it is difficult to believe that it is a 109 year old silent film. Subsequently, AIR’s full length album indicates Méliès’s firm standing in our popular culture with the album recently placed in album charts respectively as no. 17 in France, no.21 in Ireland, and no.35 in the U.K (see Image 1). The album was a critical success, and is a posthumous feat for Georges Méliès.

December 8 2011, marked the 150th birthday of Georges Méliès, and it appears that seventy-four years after his death and the unfortunate turn his career took, that Georges Méliès is once again at the forefront of the film industry. As Elizabeth Ezra writes:
Although a product of his era, Méliès was heavily influenced by his origins in the magic theatre—his films were innovative and responsible for anticipating and influencing every major current of film-making in the twentieth century. Méliès has been at the centre of important debates about the development of cinematic form and style, and his work has provoked both adoration and disdain. Some dismiss him as naive, [...] an idea of the complexity—and modernity—of his work.  

With this in mind, I aim to take an in-depth look at the life and work of Georges Méliès focusing on his 1902 masterpiece *Le Voyages Dans La Lune* as this has the iconic image of the man in the moon, which is a prevalent image in the history of cinema and the world’s contemporary popular culture. Gilbert Adair recognises the image of Méliès moon with the rocket in his eye as an ‘almost too famous still’ and also that the ‘Méliès touch’ is instantly identifiable (see Image 2). What Adair means by this, is that Méliès style and essence is an intrinsic part of his work and one can decipher instantly a Méliès film from any early silent films. Considering Georges Méliès is one of the forefathers of cinema, I also intend to take a look at his legacy and contribution to current cinema traditions, also his artistic influence on popular culture.
Setting the scene...

The Grand-Cafe, No. 14, Boulevard des Capucines. It was the 28th of December 1895. Sitting inside this room, alongside specially invited guests and other intrigued spectators, was a 34 year old magician and director of the Theatre Robert-Houdin, Georges Méliès. All were present to witness an historic moment, the first screenings of a Lumiere Brothers film produced by their new invention, the cinematograph (see Image 3).7 David A. Cook believes that on this day Méliès “immediately recognised the vast illusion possibilities of the ‘living pictures’”8 Furthermore as Elizabeth Ezra continues, that Méliès later described this cinematic moment,

“No Sooner had I stopped speaking when a horse pulling a cart started to walk towards us, followed by other vehicles, then passers-by- in short, all the hustle and bustle of a street. We sat there with our mouths open, without speaking, filled with amazement”9

This screening illustrates Méliès’s proximity to the birth of cinema and is key to understanding the historical context of his work. In order to do this, it is essential to take a look at the technological advances which led to Méliès ‘transformation’ from a magician to a filmmaker.

For Bordwell and Thompson, “cinema is a complicated medium, and before it could be invented, several technological requirements had to be met”10 The nineteenth century saw a rise in demand for public
entertainment: Circuses, burlesques, magic shows, plays, concerts became common place. Staging these amusements, however, was a costly and laborious task. The 19th century was also a century of invention, witnessing the inventions of the telephone (1876) the phonograph (1877) and the automobile (1890s). It was only a matter of time before a technological form of entertainment was invented. There was a growing demand for spectacular entertainment. The idea of moving pictures became a possible reality, and so the race to invent a camera with the ability to project the illusion of movement began. Bordwell and Thompson suggest five preconditions were required for the invention of the medium. These are as follows:

1. How the human eye perceives motion
2. A surface in which to project a rapid series of images.
3. The ability to use photography to make successive pictures on a clear surface.
4. A material flexible enough to pass through a camera rapidly, in which to register ‘motion images’ on.
5. A suitable intermittent mechanism for cameras and projectors.\(^{11}\)

The first pre-condition is scientific rather than technological. It involved an understanding of the human eye and how it perceives motion. If the human eye is exposed to a series of slightly different images in rapid succession (16 per second) the human eye will detect
motion, but this is only an illusion of motion. During the late nineteenth century, there were several optical toys on the market for home use, all of which gave the viewer an illusion of movement. One such toy was the Phenakistoscope, invented in 1832 by Belgian physicist Joseph Plateau and Austrian geometry professor Simon Stampfer. A year later, the popular Zoetrope was invented using the same principals as the Phenakistoscope (see Image 4 & 5). It was a drum shaped device with slits cut into the frame work. Inside this drum was a series of drawings on a narrow strip of paper, and when this drum was rotated at a speed, when someone was looking through the slits, the human eye was hit with an optical illusion of movement. Of course, this piece of paper was part of the toy, and so the moving image was repeated over and over, and a person would lose interest with it within a matter of minutes.

The second pre-condition, was a technological requirement, and the one that proved to be the most difficult to realise. This was rather than having one viewer per ‘motion picture’, to have an audience of viewers. This required a machine with the capacity to project a rapid series of images onto a surface. ”Magic Lanterns” and shadow shows had been around since the seventeenth century, but none were able to flash images large enough nor fast enough to create the illusion of movement, i.e. a motion picture.

The third requirement was how to capture the quick succession of images onto a clear surface. Exposure time needed to be shortened so
as to take sixteen or more frames in a single second. Photography had been in practice since 1826 by Claude Niepce, but his still photography had an exposure time of 8 hours. Negatives were something that did not exist with Niepce’s camera, as photos were made on glass or metal and therefore they were the one and only copy. In 1839, Henry Fox Talbot introduced negatives onto pieces of paper. The BBC History department continue:

Fox Talbot went on to develop the three primary elements of photography: developing, fixing, and printing. Although simply exposing photographic paper to the light produced an image, it required extremely long exposure times. By accident, he discovered that there was an image after a very short exposure. Although he could not see it, he found he could chemically develop it into a useful negative. The image on this negative was then fixed with a chemical solution. This removed the light-sensitive silver and enabled the picture to be viewed in bright light. With the negative image, Fox Talbot realised he could repeat the process of printing from the negative. Consequently, his process could make any number of positive prints [...].

The fourth was continued on from the third requirement. Cinema required that the images be printed on a flexible enough base to be passed through a camera rapidly in order to secure the 16 frames a second. In 1888, Georges Eastman, developed upon Talbot paper, and
made a still camera which made photographs on rolls of sensitised paper. This camera was called The Kodak. In 1889 Eastman took another step towards cinema, with the invention of a transparent celluloid roll of film. This roll of film was flexible enough to be used in designing machines to take and project motion pictures.

The final precondition Bordwell and Thompson suggest is that cinema pioneers, needed to find a suitable intermittent mechanism for their cameras and projectors. This mechanism allowed light into the camera to expose the frame, while another shutter covered the film as a new frame was moved into place. The same process applied to the projection of these images on the screen, each frame needed a light source to project it. In 1878, Muybridge was commissioned to do a motion study on the movement of horses. Muybridge set up 12 cameras, each one of which made an exposure in one-thousandth of a second. These famous 12 frames depict only one half of a second of movement. Muybridge’s experiment was a precursor of what was to come (see Image 6). With all these preconditions realised by the 1890’s, it was a race amongst the inventors as to who would bring all these elements together to create cinema. 13

It was however, the Lumiere Brothers who invented the Cinematograph in 1895, which was a functional 35mm film camera, printer and projector and was the first film-making camera to be used and expanded upon (see Image 7). English inventor Robert W. Paul was one
such inventor who took the idea of the cinematograph and Edison’s Kinetoscope. Unlike the Lumiere Brothers and Edison who at the time were only leasing their cameras, Paul was selling his versions of their cameras, and thus started a chain reaction which in its own right started the film industry. This was because, directors such as Méliès were able to get their hands on a film camera and were free to film what they deemed worthy of filming, rather than travelogues or actualities which were restricted themes under the Lumiere’s lease of their cinematograph.

With motion pictures finally a reality, cinema needed one more ingredient to turn itself into a medium of entertainment. According to David A. Cook:

Thomas Alva Edison [...] was not interested in cinematography in and of itself. Rather, he wished to provide a visual accompaniment for his vastly successful phonograph, and in June 1889 he assigned a young laboratory assistant named William Kennedy Laurie Dickson [...] to help him develop a motion picture camera for that purpose. Edison, in fact, envisioned a kind of “coin operated/entertainment machine” in which motion pictures made by the Kinetograph would illustrate the sound from the phonograph.¹⁴
With Edison thinking fairly small in regards to cinema, and the Lumiere Brothers looking upon their invention as a ‘passing fad’ and a device to film actualities or realities for educational purposes, cinema needed pioneering filmmakers, to imagine the endless possibilities that one can create with motion pictures. As Cook continues:

Structurally, however, the earliest Lumiere and Edison films are precisely the same – the camera and point of view are static (except when moved functionally, to reframe the action) and the action continuous from beginning to end, as if editing “reality” was unthinkable to their makers.  

George Méliès was one such filmmaker and a true iconoclast, who thought beyond the boundaries of reality, and by his adventure into the unknown world of filmmaking, became one of the forefathers of cinema as we know it today.

**Georges Méliès: Magic, Myth and the Man in the Moon**

Marie-Georges-Jean Méliès (Georges) was born in Paris on the 8th of December 1861 to his Mother Johannah Catherine Schuering (Catherine) and Father Jean-Louis Stanislas Méliès (Louis) (see Image 8). Georges was the youngest of three children, and as it happened, this was good fortune for Méliès. Louis and Catherine had set up a footwear manufacturing company, and it wasn’t until around the time of Georges’ birth, that the factory started to flourish and prosper, enabling the family to send Georges (at his Mother’s request) to obtain his
‘baccalaureate’. In his early years at school, Georges showed a talent for drawing and puppetry\textsuperscript{16}.

Furthermore, according to Darragh O’Donoghue, the young Méliès had wanted to pursue a career in art and train at the École des Beaux-Arts, but first he had to complete a military obligation of three years (of which he only served one). Louis was adamant that Georges should follow in the family business, and rather than being cut off from his father, the two made a compromise. Georges would work in the factory, overseeing the mechanical functions of the boot factory and improving the machinery where he saw fit, on the condition that he have private art lessons taught by artist Gustave Moreau. This again was another stroke of luck for Méliès, because his time spent at his father’s factory, repairing and improving machinery, led to technical/mechanical skills which with his artistic eye, and talent for drawing, helped him further his creativity in film-making after the advent of 28 December 1895. \textsuperscript{17}

In 1884, at the age of 23, Georges was sent to London with the purpose of improving his English and to make business contacts, as his father intended to set up a branch of the family business\textsuperscript{18}. According to Ezra, this year spent in England “was to alter the course of Méliès life\textsuperscript{19}”. London was like Paris in regards to Theatrical spectacles and entertainment. As Méliès’s English at this point was not adequate enough to socialise, Méliès spent most of his evenings in London going to the Theatre to see ballets, pantomimes and magic shows. Language
in these styles of stage performance was of secondary importance, and so Méliès understood with a much greater ease. Méliès was captivated most by the magic shows he saw, especially that of Maskelyne and Cooke’s Egyptian Hall, where he was a re-occurring spectator (see Image 9).

John Nevil Maskelyne was one of the most renowned illusionists in Britain at the time. His magic shows had a narrative structure to them which meant audiences were entertained with characters and a story as well as amazed by the illusions performed on stage. Méliès struck up a friendship with Maskelyne and became an amateur magician, replicating the illusions of his friend Maskelyne and also the illusions of Joseph Buatier de Kolta, who would later influence Méliès 1896 trick film The Vanishing Lady (see image 10). In 1885 Méliès returned to Paris, and pursued his new found passion for magic into a career. He practised religiously, perfecting his performances, until his first public performances at the Musée Grévin and the Galerie Vivienne.

In the same year, Méliès married his first wife Eugénie Genin, the daughter of a wealthy family friend. This marriage entitled Méliès to a large dowry, which he used to continue his interests in magic and the performing arts, without him having to solely earn a living at his Father’s factory. In 1888, Louis Méliès retired and split the factory shares between his three sons. Méliès of course had no interest in the family business from day one (except the mechanical side) sold his
share to his brothers, and combined his profit and his dowry to buy the Théatre Robert-Houdin which was named after the celebrated French magician who had died in 1871 (see Image 11).^20

Robert Houdin himself was a legend in the magician world, influencing most notably American Illusionist Harry Houdini. The Theatre was already perfectly equipped for magic shows. Méliès spent most of his time here for the next few years, creating elaborate sets, pulleys, mechanical devices, props etc. Between the years 1888 and 1895, Méliès had programmes in his theatre which included magic tricks, féeries^21 as well as spectacular performances from automatons, which were clockwork humanlike machines (see image 12). Méliès magic shows caused him to become something of a celebrity which led to his once in a life time invitation to the Grand Cafe, to witness the first Lumiere films. Unlike his films though, where Méliès was the central star both in front of and behind the camera, in his theatre Méliès remained mostly behind the curtains, co-ordinating the illusions. ^22

Méliès background in magic, theatre and his ability with machinery were the key components in his success as a film-maker. After his viewing of the Lumiere’s films in 1895, Méliès approached the Lumiere’s to purchase one of their cinematographs. At this point, the cinematograph was leased out to photographers by the Lumière’s, to film travelogues or actualities such as Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon (1895) and were not yet selling their camera to pioneering film-makers.
Robert W. Paul sold one of his cameras to Méliès in 1896, who then improved it further by reversing the mechanical principle and thus designed his own style of camera. This camera though was heavier than the cinematograph and hard to transport. By April of the same year, Méliès was showing his own production in his own theatre (unlike Edison, the Lumière’s who rented their films to theatre’s, Méliès received the full profit from showing his own productions in his own theatre). It seemed as if luck had a major part to play in Méliès finding his way to cinematic history, as another lucky occurrence happened in 1896 which was to create Méliès Universal style of film-making, which would influence the development of cinema as we know it today. Whilst filming on a Parisian street, Méliès’s patented camera ‘Méliès-Reulos Kinetograph’ jammed whilst recording an omnibus emerging from a tunnel. Although Méliès is a magician, time was something he could not magically stop, and by the time he had fixed the problem in the machine, the omnibus had moved on and a funeral hearse was just emerging from the tunnel. Without this lucky happenstance, Méliès would not have discovered the possibilities of film manipulation. This can be seen as the medium’s first form of editing; manipulating real time and real space with the use of what we call today stop motion capture.
Myths about Méliès contribution to film history...

Writing in *The Parades gone by*, Kevin Brownlow states

“When seen today these early films are interesting historically, academically, and sociologically – but seldom cinematically. Apart from the occasional breakthrough, such as the experiments of Méliès [...] Films of this very early period were not films at all.\(^{26}\)

In retrospect, Méliès early films, along with the other pioneering films of the silent era, are regarded as prehistoric. Words which have been used in regard to Méliès’s work and the work of early film-makers, are words of harsh judgement such as: Crude’, ‘fumbling’ and ‘naive’, disregarding the time period in which these films were produced and not crediting the film pioneers ability of creating ‘cinematic’ films. ‘The films exist only to be chuckled at-quaint reminders of a simple-minded past\(^{27}\) But one has to bear in mind that audiences in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, reacted differently to the spectacle that was cinema. For example Elizabeth Ezra states:

In the early days of cinema, watching a film was not the kind of experience it is today, perceived without thinking as a normal part of daily life; it was an experience unlike any other that had been known before.\(^{28}\)

Tom Gunning continues these ideas when he considers the temporal quality of silent films before the 1920’s. For him “early cinema
makes the initial error of simple reproduction and theatricality and then dramatically discovers its own nature.” In this way Gunning views early cinema as ‘primitive’. However, he does not take into account the technology of the time, which did not have the capability for full narrative structured films, and that the audiences of the time did not necessarily want to view narratives, they were more interested in the aspect of spectacle. In the first decade of cinema, audiences wanted to be shocked, entertained and to witness something, which they had not previously witnessed. Gunning is not alone in viewing early cinema as primitive. Christian Metz also dismissed early cinema as not reaching its full potential declaring that “cinema only truly appeared when it discovered the mission of telling stories”. In Méliès first trick film The Vanishing Lady (1896) narrative was secondary to the visual spectacle. Audiences, although always seeking a form of storytelling, were more inclined to be visual stimulated with the new medium of cinema. They wanted to be shocked, and amazed by the spectacle of the moving image.

Georges Méliès’s early films fascinated the curious 19th century audiences. Cinema was new, and audiences were curious. For Gunning, audiences had a “fascination with visual experiences”. The themes and or subject matters of these early films again dealt with the novel fascination, which the new medium of entertainment allowed to depict. These themes ranged from the original spectacle of actualities to physical freaks and oddities as well as the sexualised representation of
the naked female body on the screen, violence, death and other taboo subjects. 32 Edwin S Porter, who made The Great Train Robbery (1903), was influence heavily by the work of Méliès. Porter was a great admirer of Méliès work, and studied Le Voyage Dans la Lune to copy its components on an aesthetic level. He is cited to have claimed that Le Voyage Dans la Lune was a major milestone in filmmaking.33 These films satisfied the audience’s curious appetite, years before the audience started to tire of the spectacle and sought a more rich and narrative structured form of entertainment.

A re-occurring argument in cinematic circles concerns Méliès actual cinematic capabilities. Gunning does not deny the presences of narrative in early cinema of attractions, but sees Méliès’s films merely as extended theatrical performances.34 It is Méliès’s background in the theatre which led his early films to have a relatively minor narrative presence, coming secondary to the visual spectacle of trickery. Kevin Brownlow applauds Méliès early narrative efforts when he writes:

Among the first to tell a story with film, Méliès invariably provided a full-scale pantomime- with trimmings no stage manager could achieve. He and his staff produced effects which at the time seemed stupendous, and which even today appear remarkable[...]Whatever his methods, however, he told a story and was the most influential of the pioneers. 35
Despite Brownlow’s high regard for Méliès, he also does not consider him to be a true cineaste. However, in contrast to Gunning’s view on Méliès, Brownlow acknowledges the visual mindset in which Méliès was making his films. As he continues:

Méliès however was not a true cineaste. He was a dedicated showman; he regarded the camera as an invaluable prop which improved beyond measure many of his stage effects. With films he could reach a far wider audience. Although he employed new effects, such as a form of dissolve, Méliès camera recorded the customary theatrical mid-long shot-from the front seat of the stalls. 36

David A. Cook, like Kevin Brownlow agrees that Méliès put his ‘trick’ discovery to limited use, as he writes:

He went on to make hundreds of delightful narrative films; his model for them was the narrative mode of the legitimate theatre since it was what he knew best. [...] he conceived all of his film in terms of dramatic scenes played out from beginning to end rather than in terms of shots, or individual visual perspectives on a scene; the only editing therefore, aside from that used in optical illusions of disappearance and conversion, occurs between scenes rather than within them. The scenes themselves are composed of single shots taken with a motionless camera from a fixed point of view, that of
a theatre spectator sitting in the orchestra centre aisle with an excellent eye-level view of the action; and the actors move across the film frame from left to right and right to left as if it were the proscenium arch of a stage.  

However, Bordwell and Thompson are prepared to make an argument against the claim of his static theatricality. As they write:

"His stop motion effects also utilized editing. He would cut the film in order to match the movement of one object perfectly with that of the thing into which it was transformed. Such cuts were designed to be unnoticeable, but clearly Méliès was a master of one type of editing."

Despite Cook’s slight criticism of Méliès, he nevertheless considers Méliès to be the first narrative artist. Richard Abel, writing in his essay titled *The Cinema of Attractions in France 1896-1904* re-evaluates crucial discussions of Méliès in regards to his reproductions of his theatre work. For Abel, "[Méliès was not] content to simply record any of the illusionist acts he was known for [...] Instead he invented tricks that displayed the “magical “properties of the cinematic apparatus as well as his own body as spectacle.” Elizabeth Ezra argues for Méliès to be seen as a film-maker rather simply as a magician performing for the camera as a ‘prop’. Ezra dismisses the previous criticism that Méliès films were “simplistic, both narratively and technically” but does not deny Tom Gunning’s nor Noel Burch’s claim that Méliès’s films can be...
categorised as cinema of attraction. Instead, she redefines their assumptions, as she continues “There is no question that Méliès’s films contain elements of spectacle, or ‘attractions’. But the presence of spectacle in no way detracts from the films’ narrative content”. \(^{43}\) With ideas of Méliès aesthetic and creative style in mind, I will now consider Georges Méliès’s quintessential work, his 1902 *Le Voyage Dans La Lune*.

**Le Voyage Dans la Lune**

At the time, there had never been a film like it. An extraordinary adventure loosely based on Jules Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and H.G. Welles *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). By 1902, Méliès had already made a name for himself in the world of cinema, with approximately 35 films shown in various fairgrounds and theatres around Paris. *Le Voyage Dans La Lune* was the film that brought Méliès to international fame.\(^{44}\) Due to the cost of the film, Méliès’s asking price was too high to persuade fairground exhibitors to buy the film. Nevertheless, according to Ezra, Méliès who had faith in the film as a commercial success “lent the film to exhibitors free of charge for a single showing, confident that its popularity with audiences would convince exhibitors that they would recoup his asking price”.\(^{45}\)

*Le Voyage Dans la Lune* saw five men step foot on the surface of the moon, sixty-seven years before America sent Apollo 11 on the first manned mission to the moon. Méliès drew up over 30 tableaux, shot over 260 meters of film footage, and after a month of shooting, the first
science fiction fantasy film was ready to be shown to the world. As we have seen was first Méliès and foremost an artist, and cinema allowed him to use all of his knowledge and talent in these areas. This allowed his films to flourish under his artistic control. Furthermore he designed all the sets, costumes and the props, also incorporating items and costumes from his Theatre Robert-Houdin. The film was shot in Méliès’s film studio, at Montreuil (see Image 13). What was fantastic about this film, apart from its tricks and magical illusions, was its narrative content, which was perhaps the most coherent narrative audiences at the time had witnessed and been able to understand. Contrary to later commentators its narrative content was more in depth and enthralling than previous narratives of fire fighters putting out fires. Le Voyage Dans la Lune had characters that followed a motive to its resolution. Therefore the film had a narrative structure of a beginning, middle and end. Méliès camera allowed for magical impossibilities. Méliès created a face for the mythical man in the moon. Without stepping foot on the moon, Méliès brought the Moon down to earth, so the human race could take a glimpse at the surface of the Moon and its inhabitants which man has dreamt of since the dawn of time. The film itself is full of stunning episodes, and of Méliès trademark illusions.

The film begins in a classroom of astronomers, dressed in various eras of clothing. By 1902 it had been 7 years since Méliès had created his first trick film The Vanishing Lady, and Méliès was no longer frugal with his trickery. One early example from the film is when Barbenfouillis
(the head astronomer/wizard) played by Méliès, enters the classroom. Through the use of substitution splicing, Méliès transforms the astronomers’ telescopes into chairs. Without dialogue, the argument between the astronomers seems to be incoherent; there is a lot of movement, which Méliès seems to have prolonged before transitioning to his next shot of the marvellous rocket being constructed.

The next sequence is notable for a series of dissolves. The first dissolve brings us to a workshop (which bears a resemblance to Méliès own studio) where labourers are constructing the rocket. This rather mundane scene has no trickery or illusion; it is rather an establishing shot for what is to come. There is a brief moment of slapstick comedy when one of the astronomers loses his balance and falls over. Next, another dissolve, reveals a beautifully painted perspective view over a city. The astronomers stand on a rooftop looking out over the roofs of the city at the casting of the rocket launcher. Steam erupts from the elaborate set, creating the appearance of an even greater depth. A further dissolve brings us to the launch itself. Here we see another reoccurring theme of Méliès work, scantily dressed women, who push the rocket into the launcher.

The rocket is launched, and Méliès’s voyage to the moon is underway. As Dan North explains, this iconic scene shows Méliès use of depth, by showing movement along the axis of the camera. The moon can be seen in the distance, and as Méliès brings it towards the camera
the surface becomes more anthropomorphic, changing through splicing, from a painted surface to a human face. Through the use of another substitution splice, Méliès creates the illusion of the rocket flying from the left of the frame and into the Moon’s right eye. The Moon’s face grimaces in pain.

At this time editing was still an imperfect method but despite claims from Gunning labelling him as a ‘primitive’ filmmaker, North makes an argument for Méliès to be seen as an innovator of early camera techniques as he continues:

It was Méliès in particular who innovated in-camera techniques such as multiple exposures [...] dissolves, fades and wipes to exploit the technical possibilities of the cinematographic equipment and produce visual effects which rendered physical impossibilities on screen. But he, along with other magicians who moved into filmmaking, can also be seen as the founders of the kinds of spatio-temporal strategies employed and subverted by early trick films.50

Dissolves work seamlessly for Méliès, as he dissolves from the shot of the rocket in the moons eye, to the rocket sweeping in from the left hand side of the frame onto the rugged surface of the moon (see Image 14). Without spacesuits or oxygen tanks, the astronomers exit the rocket ship in a hustle of excitement. They watch the dark sky as the Earth rises above them. A flame sparks before them, but does not deter
the adventuring astronomers. The limitations of early film stock did not stop Méliès from showing the audience the vibrant colours of the moon’s surface. Méliès footage was hand painted so the flame was a fiery red, and the aliens were a shade of greeny-blue.

As the astronomers sleep, stars appear, looking inquisitively down upon them. The planet Saturn appears along with two girls who represent the North Star, and a goddess sitting on a crescent moon (see image 15). The goddess, the North Star and Saturn play a trick on the astronomers by sprinkling moon dust on them. Disturbed from their slumber, the astronomers continue on their adventure. They climb down through a crevice in the surface of the moon, through which a dissolve brings us to a world, which had a strong influence on Henry Levin’s 1959 *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (see image 16). Méliès transforms an astronomer’s umbrella into a mushroom which begins to grow, towering over the excited astronomers. A selenite jumps out from a crevice in a movement similar to Méliès demons in later films such as *The Infernal Cauldron* (1903). With one fell swoop of an astronomer’s umbrella, the selenite combusts into a puff of smoke. It isn’t long before there is a ‘selenite attack’, which far outnumber the five astronomers. They are taken captive and taken to the ‘King Selenite’ to await judgement (see Image 17). One of the astronomers breaks free, picks up the King and throws him to the ground, causing him to evaporate into smoke. The selenite’s then chase the astronomers through the landscape of the moon, but the astronomers find their saviour, in the shape of their
rocket ship, conveniently waiting at the side of cliff. All it takes is a push, and the rocket plummets back to earth, and is submerged in the ocean, another alien like place deep beneath the oceans waves. The astronomers return safely to earth to applause and joy from the crowds, with them a captive alien.

**Conclusion**

One of the reasons this film survives is because due to its popularity it was duplicated by many American companies, when Méliès started to distribute his work in New York with the help of his brother Gaston, in 1903. These American companies made duplicates of *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* and sold them without his permission and without compensating Méliès financially.52

By 1913, Méliès was bankrupt, and by the end of the 1920’s, Méliès had disappeared into obscurity, after suffering bankruptcy with reduced profits to his production company due to piracy and the competition coming from Charles Pathe. As Ezra continues, "*[Le Voyage Dans la Lune]* was thus one of his most fantastical films, set on the moon, that brought Méliès crashing down to the harsh reality of international competition".53 It was by chance Méliès was rediscovered by Leon Druhot, and editor of a film magazine. This rediscovery led to a gala held in Méliès honour at the Salle Pleyel in 1929, which screened his few surviving films (many of which Méliès himself burnt in despair, or stock footage which was sold to be melted down to create the soles of
shoes), including his most famous film *Le Voyage Dans la Lune*. This recognition of Méliès achievements in the world of film led to Méliès receiving the award of Legion d’honneur in 1931. Georges Méliès, a pioneer of cinema, died in 1938, and over 74 years later Méliès is still thought of highly in Film academic circles.  

AIR’s composition of a contemporary score for the restored colour version of *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* coincided with Martin Scorsese’s release of his adaption of Brian Selznick’s 2007 graphic novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Sir Ben Kingsley plays Méliès with an eerie resemblance (see Image 18) According to Andrew Osmond in his review in *Sight and Sound* magazine, “Hugo becomes a colourfully garnished history lesson about the figure in question, and an ode to silent cinema. It’s a well-meant trick on Scorsese’s part, and a novel way of promoting early film history to a multiplex audience”.  

Scorsese, who is an enthusiastic historian of film and film preservation, “plunges us into a kaleidoscopic celebration of Méliès as pioneer cinema magician – the patron saint of all filmmakers aspiring to create a self sufficient fantasy world.” Scorsese himself in an interview with Paul Byrne has this to say:

> It's all about trying to capture the magical wonder of his work [...] and making people feel it in their bones. This incredible imagination, coupled with his skills as a magician, meant Méliès
just kept coming up with these fantastical films that were pretty much like capturing dreams on celluloid.\(^{57}\)

Amongst Selznick, Scorsese and AIR there are numerous other popular culture references to Georges Méliès. In 1996 American alternative rock band *The Smashing Pumpkins* released the video for their song *Tonight Tonight* (see image 19 & 20). The video was directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. The video pays homage to *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* and Méliès later film *La sirène* (1904) with an appropriation of Méliès images. The music video which won numerous MTV awards, introduced a new audience to some of silent cinema’s most profound images. In 2011 as well as the commercial release and success of Martin Scorsese’s Hugo, a French documentary film *Le voyage extraordinaire* directed by Serge Bromberg and Eric Lange had a limited release. This documentary featured some of France’s contemporary giants of film making such as Michel Gondry and Jean-Pierre Jeunet.

Dan North in his BlogSpot *Spectacular Attractions* writes an entry on HBO’s 1998 mini T.V series *From the Earth to the Moon*, which focuses the Apollo space expeditions to the Moon during the 1960s and early 1970s. In the last episode of this miniseries, Méliès is featured with *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* (see image 21 & 22). North writes:

What piqued my interest in *From the Earth to the Moon* was the final episode, *Le Voyage Dans la Lune*. Nice title, and an unusual way to end a series so firmly rooted in a particular period of
American history. Intercut with scenes of the Apollo 17 moon landing and exploration (the last moonwalk to date) are recreations of the shooting of Méliès’ *Le Voyage Dans la Lune / A Trip to the Moon*. Now, the parallel is obvious – the end of the Apollo program is viewed through its opposite bookend of an imaginative “beginning” seventy years earlier. They could’ve gone back to Jules Verne, H.G. Wells or German rocket scientists in the 1920s and 30s (whose discoveries fed directly into American rocket science of the post-war period), but Méliès’ film is positioned as a thought experiment that made conceptual room for the later excursions into space (cynics might say that GM is a “safe” antecedent to the space program that avoids formalising the debt to Russians and Germans).58

In yet another blog entry from North, in regards to the appearance of Méliès in popular culture is North’s entry 16 May 2010, in which North describes a scene from *The Simpsons* (see image 23-30). North writes:

Last week’s episode of *The Simpsons* [...] “Moe Letter Blues”, featured a scene that gave *Spectacular Attractions* a bit of a thrill. The interlude for Itchy and Scratchy, psychotic cat-and-mouse masters of escalating violence, was titled *La Mort d’un Chat sur la Lune* (“The Death of a Cat on the Moon”), and delivered an affectionate pastiche of Georges Méliès’ *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* [...] Adding to a long list of tributes to the film [...] when the prop
moon falls down from its cables and smashes, Itchy again improvises a solution by decapitating his cameraman, inflating his head with bellows (perhaps another homage to Méliès’ *L’homme à la tête de Caoutchouc*, made the year before *A Trip to the Moon in 1901*) [...]. The team of bearded mouse explorers light the fuse on their rocket... launching it right into Scratchy’s eye. It’s a tribute to the enduring appeal and renown of Méliès’ film that its key image of the Man in the Moon with a rocket in his eye is still recognisable after more than a century. [...] This is the second time *A Trip to the Moon* has been referenced [...] in the Simpsons.

It is not just Méliès iconic work which is remembered to this day, it is also his long standing influence on the film industry as a whole. Méliès had essentially been the father of special effects for the cinema. *Le Voyage Dans la Lune* is invariably considered to be the first science fiction film, and so for Dan North Georges Méliès is a ‘kindred spirit’ of Georges Lucas the creator of *Star Wars* (1977). Indeed as Adair continues, “Films such as: Buster Keaton’s 1924 *Sherlock Jr*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack. 1933 King Kong and James Cameron’s 1991 *Terminator 2* were all films made in the Méliès tradition.”

Today’s film industry is indebted to Georges Méliès and his contribution to the early years of cinemas history. A strong aesthetically influential character, who is in some way a part of all fantasy, horror...
and science fiction films of today. Despite all the hardships which Méliès fell upon, and the loss of hundreds of his films, his legacy still strongly withstands against the decades of the ever changing filmic landscape. As Martin Scorsese (see Image 31) concludes:

[Méliès] films haven't really dated. You watch *A Trip to the Moon* or *The Impossible Voyage*, or any of the other films that were rescued, and you can still feel the same tingle that French audiences must have felt over 100 years ago.

- Martin Scorsese⁶²
Endnotes

1 Roland Cosandey  *George Méliès as L’inescamotable Escamoteur A Study in Recognition* p 57, Ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai *A Trip to the Movies* (International Museum of Photography, Great Britain, 1991)
2 Melissa Locker ‘AIR on Méliès Le Voyage Dans La Lune, and the art of soundtracks’ IFC.com, 8/02/2012, date accessed 6/04/2012
4 “There was a huge response from the French press. We had a lot of articles. They thought the style of AIR with Méliès was worth writing about. But some people were shocked by the anachronism that our music is modern and the movie is old, but I think it’s a good thing, actually. To run some risk. It’s good to do a sort of new make up to the movie.” - Jean Benoît Dunckel (2011, IFC.com) The Warm reception which the film and score received at Cannes inspired the duo to expand on their work and write further tracks to create a full length album.
5 Elizabeth Ezra *George Méliès* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, p21)
6 Gilbert Adair *Flickers An illustrated celebration of 100 Years of Cinema* (Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995)
7 Elizabeth Ezra *George Méliès* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, pp.1)
9 Ezra pp.1-2
11 Thompson and Bordwell p. 4
12 The BBC *William Henry Fox Talbot (1800 – 1877)*
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/fox_talbot_william_henry.shtml 2011-02-17, date accessed 22/05/2012
13 Thompson and Bordwell p.5
14 Cook p 5
15 Cook p 11
16 Ezra p.6
17 Darragh O’Donoghue *George Méliès* Senses of Cinema, Issue 32, 2004
18 O’Donoghue
19 Ezra p.7
20 Ezra p.9
21 A fantasy genre including the magical, mystical and fairies
23 Cook p.14
24 Paul Hammond *Marvellous Méliès* (Gordon Fraser Gallery, London, 1974 p.34
25 Ezra p.13
Kevin Brownlow *The Parades gone by...* (Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, Great Britain, 1968, p11)

Brownlow p.1

Ezra p.2


Gunning p42

Gunning p44

Gunning p.44


Gunning p.41

Brownlow p.10

Brownlow p.10

Cook p.14

Thompson and Bordwell p.25

Cook p. 14


Abel p. 64

Ezra p.2

Ezra p.5

Ezra p.120

Ezra p.120


Dan North *Performing Illusions* ( Wallflower Press, Great Britain, 2008, p.54

Ezra p.123

North p.54

Selenite is the name given to the crustacean like aliens which appear in *Le Voyage Dans la Lune*.


Ezra p.120


Christie *Sight and Sound*

Paul Byrne *Martin Scorsese interview for HUGO*

http://www.movies.ie/interviews/martin_scorsese_interview_for_hugo, 11/12/2011, accessed 19/05/2012
58 Dan North *From Earth to the Movies*
59 Dan North *Georges Méliès in Springfield*
http://drnorth.wordpress.com/category/georges-melies/a-trip-to-the-moon-georges-melies/ 16/05/2012, accessed on 23/05/2012
60 North p.26
61 Gilbert Adair *Flickers An illustrated celebration of 100 Years of Cinema* (Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995)
62 Paul Byrne *Martin Scorsese interview for HUGO* Movies.ie, 11/12/2011, accessed 19/05/2012
Bibliography

Books

Adair, Gilbert Flickers An illustrated celebration of 100 Years of Cinema (Faber and Faber, Great Britain, 1995)

Brownlow, Kevin The Parades gone by... (Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, Great Britain, 1968)


Brewster, Ben and Jacobs, Lea Theatre to Cinema (Oxford University Press, Great Britain, 2003)


Dickinson, Thorold A Discovery of Cinema (Oxford Universtiy Press, Great Britain, 1971)

Ezra, Elizabeth George Méliès ( Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000)

Hammond, Paul *Marvellous Méliès* (Gordon Fraser Gallery, London, 1974)

Kemp, Phillip *Cinema The Whole Story* (Thames and Hudson, United Kingdom, 2011)


North, Dan *Performing Illusions* (Wallflower Press, Great Britain, 2008)


Robb, Brian J. *Silent Cinema* (Kamera Books, Great Britain, 2007)

Telotte, J.P *Science Fiction Film* (Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2001)


**Journals**

Byrne, Paul, Martin Scorsese interview for HUGO Movies.ie, 11/12/2011, accessed 19/05/2012


Donoghue, Darragh O’ *George Méliès* Senses of Cinema, Issue 32, 2004
Osmond, Andrew 'Hugo' *Sight and Sound*, Vol.22, Issue 2, Feb 2012

**Films**


**Websites**

BBC *William Henry Fox Talbot (1800 – 1877)*

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/fox_talbot_william_henry.shtml 2011-02-17, date accessed 22/05/2012

Locker, Melissa ‘AIR on Méliès Le Voyage Dans La Lune, and the art of soundtracks’ IFC.com, 8/02/2012, date accessed 6/04/2012

North, Dan *From Earth to the Movies*

Appendix: Images

Image 1.) AIRS album cover for Le voyage Dans La Lune

Image 2.) Méliès Iconic image of the Man in the Moon with the rocket in his eye.

Image 3.) Lumière’s first poster for their invention the cinematograph.

Image 4.) The Phenakistoscope
Image 9. Maskelyne & Cooke’s Egyptian Hall

Image 10. A still from Méliès 1896 Trick Film The Vanishing Lady.

Image 11. A poster for the Théâtre Robert-Houdin

Image 12. An Automaton
Image 13.) Méliès studio at Montreuil

Image 14.) The Rocket lands on the surface of the moon.

Image 15.) The North Star, The goddess in the crescent moon and Saturn.

Image 16.) The fantastic surface of the moon.
Image 17.) The astronomers judgement by the Selenite King.

Image 18.) Sir Ben Kinsley as Georges Méliès & Georges Méliès

Image 19.) The Smashing Pumpkins in the music video for *Tonight Tonight*

Image 20.) Still from *Tonight Tonight*, clearly shows the homage to Méliès.
Image 21.) Tom Hanks as Méliès assistant Jean-Luc Despont and Tchéky Karyo as Méliès in HBOs mini series *From Earth to the Moon*

Image 22.) A Still from HBO miniseries *From Earth to the Moon*, a recreation of the shooting of *Le Voyage Dans la Lune*.

Image 23.) Still from *The Simpsons*. Itchy and Scratchy shoot *La mort d’un Chat sur la Lune*.
Image 24.) The celluloid jams in the camera.

Image 25.) Itchy the Director substitutes the celluloid for Scratchy's intestines.
Image 26.) Scratchy grimaces in pain as he feeds his intestines through the camera.

Image 27.) The moon prop falls to the floor smashing.
Image 28.) Itchy improvises, decapitating Scratchy and like Méliès 1901 film L’homme a à la tête de Caoutchouc, inflates Scratchy’s head to replace the moon.

Image 29.) Itchy set’s off on his voyage to the Moon?
Image 30.) The Iconic image with a Matt Groening twist.

Image 31.) Martin Scorsese on the set of *Hugo*.