
Early Cinema

Eadweard Muybridge and Pre-Cinema

A handful of documentary films in the Museum's collection deal with the long pre-history of cinema. I am not sure what prompted the Naval Photographic Center to undertake *Origins of the Motion Picture* (1956) in the lull between Korea and Vietnam. Whatever the reason, this little film, based on Martin Quigley Jr.'s book *Magic Shadows*, is surprisingly informative in sketching out eight centuries of cinematic invention before cinema in a mere twenty-one minutes. Merritt Crawford was an early twentieth-century scholar who corresponded with many significant nineteenth-century innovators, including Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904), a key crossover figure between photography and film. A still photographer, Muybridge discovered that it was possible to create the illusion of motion by shooting a sequence of photos of a horse or man at regular intervals and then projecting them in rapid succession. He lived for nearly a decade into the era of cinema, and although he never technically made a motion picture, he was well aware of what his experiments had facilitated. For serious scholars, the MoMA library holds the Merritt Crawford papers on microfilm, and for those interested in Muybridge, Thom Andersen's 1975 documentary, *Eadweard Muybridge, Zoopraxographer*, admirably explores his subject's contributions.

Early Auteurs The Lumière Brothers / Thomas Alva Edison / Max Skladanowsky / Robert William Paul / Cecil Hepworth

The Lumière brothers, Louis (1864-1948) and Auguste (1862-1954), are the closest we have to the first auteurs. Their role as "directors" largely consisted of finding a subject that interested them, plunking down their camera (or "cinématographe"), and turning it on. Eventually, virtually all directors dismissed this ultra-simple method as antiquated, but seventy years later, Andy Warhol brought it back to considerable acclaim in some circles. The Lumières' earliest films included depictions of workers leaving a factory at the end of the day, and a notorious film of a speeding train heading directly at the camera – which apparently terrified its unsuspecting audience. By sending film crews around the world to photograph the commonplace and the exotic, the Lumières effectively shrank the globe in ways never before thought possible.

One hundred and twenty years later, one of the things that intrigues me about the Lumière films is the people in them. Some of the middle-aged ones may have shaken Abraham Lincoln's hand; some of the elderly may have seen Napoleon marching through Paris. And yet on film they look and move much as we do, denizens of a world as strange to us as ours would be to them. They

have achieved some level of immortality, and they embody one of the best arguments for film preservation: keeping our past alive.

The role played by Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931) in the development of early cinema is more in the realm of mystery than romance, more about profit and litigation than art. Edison's focus on film was peripheral compared to many of his other endeavors, and he mostly left the field to associates like the wealthy independent entrepreneur George Eastman, who invented the 35mm perforated celluloid film still used to this day, and William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, who built Edison's Black Maria studio and "directed" the first films Edison showed in his Kinetoscope peepshow parlors. Edison's actual contributions are disputable, but he claimed the movies as his invention. Eastman, meanwhile, went on to become a major philanthropist and the namesake of The International Museum of Film and Photography in Rochester, and Dickson left Edison to work for the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, which was the Edison Studio's main rival at the time. The Wizard of Menlo Park went on to sue everybody not under his control, and he finally left the film industry when antitrust action and the artistic inclinations of others made it no longer lucrative. For those who have never been, the Edison Laboratory in West Orange, New Jersey is well worth a visit, and the Edison Tower now stands atop his original Menlo Park location, also in New Jersey.

Max Skladanowsky (1863–1939) was the German contender for the Lumières' throne. This graduate of Magic Lantern shows (a pre-cinema device for projecting images) went on to invent a cumbersome and unreliable projection system that provided Berliners with their first taste of the movies. These short films were once classified as "Skladanowsky Primitives," and they live up to that moniker.

Robert William Paul (1869–1943) and Cecil Hepworth (1874–1953), key figures in the early days of British cinema, both exemplify how inventors could become directors and eventually auteurs. There were no rules or training for making movies at the time, and so engineers or technicians were able to stumble into the "creative" process. After a flurry of innovative experiments involving refining cameras and inventing various tricks, Paul gave up making movies in 1910. Hepworth, on the other hand, survived until the advent of talkies, making thirty features along the way. His film *Rescued by Rover* (1905) contained plot elements that inspired many subsequent animal-loving directors, and

served D. W. Griffith three years later in his debut film, *The Adventures of Dollie*, about saving a kidnapped baby.

Edwin S. Porter, America's First Director

As Charles Musser explains in his documentary about Edwin S. Porter (1870–1941), Porter was a jack-of-all-trades who accidentally stumbled into being the first director of note in American film. A failed businessman, he began working for Edison in 1900, when "directing" movies was hardly considered a profession. His career lasted until 1916 and included twenty features, mostly co-directed with others. Among these were the now-infamous *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1913) starring James O'Neill (the film adaptation of the play that figured so prominently in the great *Long Day's Journey into Night* by O'Neill's son, Eugene) and the Mary Pickford vehicle *Tess of the Storm Country* (1922). It is doubtful that Porter ever regarded himself as an artist, but his role in the early days of film makes it impossible to totally dismiss him from cinema history.

Much of Porter's output for Edison was derivative of the immensely popular trick films made by Georges Méliès and other directors working in France. These films used primitive special effects to showcase cinema's ability to create alternate realities. What remains of genuine consequence are Porter's "actualities," or simple documentaries, whose subjects ranged from McKinley's assassination to priceless documentation of turn-of-the-century Coney Island, and two films Musser singles out: *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), which were acquired by Iris Barry for MoMA's fledgling "film library" in the mid-1930s. The former was ahead of its time in its editing techniques, and the latter anticipated the spectacular Westerns to come, even though Porter and his crew got no further west than the Hudson River. The well-paced narrative flow of *The Great Train Robbery* was atypical for its time, and the film established a model that D. W. Griffith would improve upon five years later.

Griffith himself appears in Porter's *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908), though he was soon to be rescued from such thankless roles by moving behind the camera at Biograph. A stage actor, writer and poet, Griffith did not think much of the primitive movies of the period until he later became a director. As Porter descended into

obscurity, Griffith climbed to the top. There is no record of whether the two had any further relationship, and the index of the D. W. Griffith Papers at MoMA contains no entry for Edwin Stanton Porter.

Georges Méliès and His Rivals Ferdinand Zecca / Segundo de Chomón / Gaston Velle

I see Georges Méliès (1861-1938) as a link in a continuum that runs from Jules Verne to filmmakers like Walt Disney and Tim Burton. Méliès had been a stage magician, and just as Disney and Burton would later make use of cinema's technical ability to transcend reality, Méliès's films highlighted the new and magical possibilities of the medium. Many of Méliès's films such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) were directly adapted from Verne, and his influence can be found in Méliès's *The Impossible Voyage* (1904), *Tunnelling the Channel* (1907), and *The Conquest of the Pole* (1912), among others. The author made fantasy respectable, and Méliès, more than other early auteurs, benefited from and catered to this audience. Verne lived until 1905, meaning he was very likely aware of Méliès during his heyday. I hope that the younger filmmaker found a way of expressing his gratitude to the older novelist for inspiring some of his best work. Méliès died just a few weeks after Walt Disney released the first of his epic fairy tales, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

Before he went on to influence future generations of filmmakers, the Beaux Arts student-turned-magician-turned-director was so successful that he inspired several contemporary imitators. *Excursion to the Moon* (1908), by Ferdinand Zecca (1864-1947) and Segundo de Chomón (1871-1929), is clearly a rip-off of Méliès's immensely popular *A Trip to the Moon*. Chomón, an innovator in the fields of special effects and animation, also photographed Giovanni Pastrone's 1914 epic *Cabiria*, which is famous for its fluid camerawork. Gaston Velle (1872-1948) is another significant but nearly forgotten figure in the early history of the cinema. Also a former magician, he labored in the shadows of Méliès and others, making many accomplished films that are often not easy to distinguish from those of his colleagues. As a result, there have been disputes over the attribution of several of his works. (For those with a serious interest in early French cinema, the definitive work in English is Richard Abel's *The Cine Goes to Town*.) In any event, Velle's films

speak silently for themselves, evoking an innocence that would soon be buried in the mud of the Great War. Finally, though he came later, Czech animator/director Karel Zeman was influenced by Méliès, and his feature films *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne* (1957) and *Baron Munchhausen* (1962) explicitly evoke the earlier director's style and subject matter.

Méliès's fantastical films also share a sensibility with some American literature of his period, namely L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and Garrett P. Serviss's *Edison's Conquest of Mars*, a guilty pleasure in which the Wizard of Menlo Park kicks Martian butt. He was a man of his time, a director in full command of the cinematic resources available to him. In spite of their energy and imagination, however, Méliès's films eventually wore out his audience's goodwill, and his speculative visions were overtaken by a demand for greater reality. He earned an honorable place in film history, even receiving the Legion of Honor, but ultimately faded away. At the end of his life, Méliès was hawking toys in the Montparnasse train station, a turn memorialized in Martin Scorsese's adaptation of Brian Selznick's illustrated novel *Hugo* (2011). Ever the magician, it's easy to envision Méliès adding a bit of performance and prestidigitation to his routine in order to delight young customers.

Forgotten Pioneers Ferdinand Zecca / Alice Guy-Blaché / J. Stuart Blackton / Wallace McCutcheon

A great number of films were made in the early twentieth century, and a great number of these have been lost. Though a handful survive, the puzzle of this early period is always going to be incomplete.

Ferdinand Zecca (1864-1947) was a rival of Georges Méliès who made similar films. He was a commercially oriented Parisian café performer, and much of his work was "derivative" – which is to say, stolen. Eventually, he found his true calling as head of Pathé, a major French studio.

Alice Guy (1873-1968), or Alice Guy-Blaché, went from being a secretary at Gaumont to becoming the world's first female director in a matter of months. At one point she was, in effect, the production head of that