

# 1

## The Magician

Entertainment of Wonders and  
Conflux of Apparent Miracles

—19th-Century magic poster

The magician was King of Entertainment. In special Magic Theatres or on Grand Tours, he astounded. His shows were high spots of family trips. He turned a man into a skeleton, then back into a man. A woman disappeared in a puff of smoke, or she was burned alive on the stage, to arise presently from her ashes. The shows included robots who could play the violin or read people's minds. There were fantastic "illusions" like rocket trips to the moon, descents into hell, and visits to mermaids under the sea. **The magician let you know it was all skill, aided by science, nothing supernatural, no sorcery—but you could believe what you liked.**

As a final sensational climax, there might be a decapitation. The magician cut off somebody's head and placed it on a tray or table. Then he would go to attend to the headless body. Meanwhile the severed head would suddenly open its eyes and start to talk. This was called, long before television, the "talking head." It couldn't fail.

Some magicians did "self-capitation." One wizard even took his final bow headless, with his own severed head in one hand, his wife's in the other.

To all these wonders, in the year 1896, magicians on every continent **suddenly added a new and astounding attraction—the miracle of the century, the wonder of the world—"living pictures."** **Within months it dominated all other wonders,**



Harry Kellar poster, 1897 (Library of Congress)



Magician's grand finale, ca. 1890—A headless Carl Hertz holds severed heads of self and wife (*Library of Congress*)

The role of the magician in early cinema has been neglected by film scholars, with some notable exceptions. Many people find it difficult to think of film in the context of magic. But the first viewers had no trouble on that score. As trains rushed by them, and living images of King, Kaiser, and Maharaja walked before them, they knew they were seeing things that could not be. We today, having come to accept such things as "reality," have lost the magic of them. They knew they were seeing magic.

The magician was indeed a film pioneer. A virtuoso technician, he had already contributed importantly to the prehistory of cinema. For more than a century he had offered illusions based on projected images, which often made unsuspected use of concealed "magic lanterns." With these he could already do astounding things, and the Cinématographe was merely the next logical step. The magician at once grasped its ramifications, and he carried it within months throughout the world. **The rapid diffusion of the motion picture owes much to the magician's whirlwind travels.** Many magicians, of many countries, became involved.

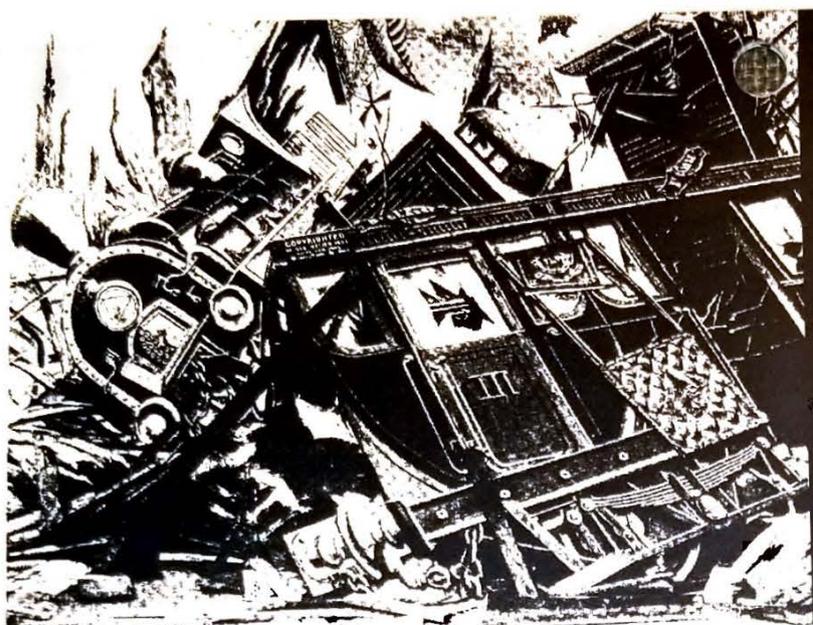


Genesis of "special effects"—above and on facing page, contributions of Georges Méliès

*A Trip to the Moon*, 1902 (*Museum of Modern Art, New York*)

Some plunged into film making, transferring to the screen some of their grandest moments—sensing, perhaps, a chance at immortality on celluloid. **They played a pioneer role in animation, and they set in motion the "trick" film, which laid the foundations for the field of "special effects" in the modern cinema.** The *Star Wars* saga derives its genes from the 1902 *A Trip to the Moon*.

Yet these early film activities of magicians are now little known, and the reason may not be mysterious. Much of the story has lain buried in the annals of magic—and for good reason. For magicians the plunge into cinema proved an eventual disaster. The touring magician who took films to South Africa or Australia or China as part of his magic repertoire found, just a few years



*The Impossible Voyage, 1904 (Library of Congress)*

*The Conquest of the Pole, 1912 (Museum of Modern Art, New York)*



Carl Hertz brings new magic to Melbourne—Australia's first film poster, 1896 (Library of Congress)

THE GREATS TO PRODUCE THE WORLD

**CARL HERTZ**

AND THE  
**CINEMATOGRAPHE**

THE TWO WONDERS OF THE WORLD

**CARL HERTZ**  
THE WORLD'S  
GREATEST ILLUSIONIST  
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**CINEMATOGRAPHE**

EVER EXHIBITED IN THE COLONIES  
FIRST PRODUCED BY  
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SELECTIONS FROM 200 SUBJECTS  
20 SCENES SHOWN AT EACH PERFORMANCE  
INCLUDING THE LATEST SENSATION  
ANIMATED PHOTOGRAPHS IN NATURAL COLORS  
POPULAR PRICES

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later, that the theatres no longer wanted the repertoire, just the film portion. Cinema had become a powerful robot ousting its former master. And the transfer to the screen of the magician's most sensational illusions—disappearances, bizarre transformations and beheadings—proved ultimately catastrophic for magicians. Anyone with a camera and a splicer could produce the same miracles, and did. The sensations ceased to be sensational. Even on stage they began to seem stale. The magician found he had been helping to destroy his own profession. Many magicians survived as magicians, in some cases by stressing the ancient skills of prestidigitation, rather than equipment trickery. Others merged into the world of film and took part in a new evolution of the extraordinary.

This book seeks to recapture the brief period when the history of magic and the history of cinema intersected, to the swift and worldwide benefit of cinema, and the discomfiture of the world of magic.

# 7

## Nitrate Magic

I pursued a maiden and clasped a reed.  
Gods and men, we are all deluded thus!

—Shelley

The record of the magic invasion can be traced through several stages. Fortunately a number of its films survive, even though theatrical films until midcentury were made on nitrate stock, unstable and combustible, and most early films have long since disintegrated, gone up in flames, or been destroyed. The fact that some survive is due to determined efforts of film archivists in many countries to salvage our world film heritage.

These efforts have included duplication of old nitrate films onto safety film—a slow and expensive process that will occupy many more years. Meanwhile many early films have also been reborn.

Until 1912 there was no legal provision in the United States for copyrighting a motion picture, but it was possible to copyright a photograph. In 1894 the Edison Company began the practice of making, on long strips of photographic paper, prints of Kinetoscope films and submitting the rolled-up strips as "photographs." Copyright law did not specify any official shape or proper dimensions for a "photograph," so the applications were accepted and a precedent established. During the next two decades about five thousand such rolls—"paper prints," they came to be called—arrived at the Library of Congress as copyright deposits. Some represented complete films; others included only representative shots or sequences. None could be projected or played on any

By that time the idea of a filmed magic act was apparently losing lustre. A year later, when Fregoli appeared in the Méliès film entitled *The Lightning Change Artist*, involving his best-known specialty, he used camera trickery to make the stage marvels more marvelous. The same was true of Méliès in numerous on-camera performances as a magician. Thus the magician-on-camera genre was giving way to a newly evolving genre, the trick film, dedicated to exploiting the magic possibilities of film technology. For the moment, though, the figure of the performing magician remained in the picture.

This hybrid form—a filmed magic act beefed up by film trickery—is represented by some curious survivals in the Paper Print Collection: *The Magician* (1900), *Allabad the Arabian Wizard* (1902), *The Hindoo Fakir* (1902), *The Necromancer* (1903). The unidentified “magicians” in these films may or may not have been magicians. In all the films, it can be seen on close examination that the camera was stopped at crucial points to accomplish the transformations and other illusions. In other words, an on-camera magician no longer needed to be a magician. Magicians, by helping to create this form, had helped to make their own skills excess baggage.

As for the trick film, if it was to evolve, it needed above all to rid itself of the constricting setting of a performance—in other words, of the magician as the occasion for magic.

That his days in film were numbered is suggested by a 1904 promotional bulletin of the Biograph Company. Advertising a newly imported trick film, *The Bewitched Traveler*, the bulletin assured exhibitors there were no magicians in it.

The on-camera magic performance was probably the unhappiest venture of the magician in cinema. Few examples survive. Those made probably undermined the image the magician had for decades enjoyed.

It was in the trick film that magicians would make a contribution to film—not by appearing in film—though some still might—but by adapting to film their peculiar heritage of technical hanky-panky and finding new opportunities for it. They became important as film creators rather than as performers. The trick film vogue was short-lived, but sufficiently intense to spur wide imitation. Magicians and non-magicians participated in its moment of glory.

Inevitably many trick films echoed the grand moments of lead-

ing magicians. Some failed in the transplantation, others succeeded. But as we have seen, a doom haunted even the successes. As any success was quickly imitated and mass-produced, success tended to destroy itself by a rapid proliferation. So it was with one of the most durable of nineteenth-century magic specialties—the apparition.

*Ghosts again.* The spectacular, century-long successes of ghosts, phantoms, skeletons, and other apparitions made it inevitable that they should come to haunt the motion picture, and they promptly did so. In 1898-99 the English technician G. A. Smith, who later invented Kinemacolor—the first successful color process—unleashed a succession of short spirit films. Like most films of the time, these were less than two minutes long. *The British Film Catalogue 1895-1970* provides descriptions:<sup>62</sup>

*The Corsican Brothers* (1898). Ghost of man's twin shows him vision of how he was killed in duel.

*Faust and Mephistopheles* (1898). Satan conjures vision of girl, for whom old man signs pact and is made young.

*Photographing a Ghost* (1898). Photographer tries to take picture of a ghost, but it won't keep still and then vanishes.

*The Gambler's Wife* (1899). Gambler is stopped from shooting himself by wife's spirit.

Walter Booth followed suit with similar films, as did others. In Booth's *Undressing Extraordinary* (1899), a hotel guest finds a skeleton in his bed; so does the traveler in the Edison film *Undressing Under Difficulties*, described in the company's 1902 catalogue. It is not surprising if the ghosts and skeletons soon wore out their welcome. Their multiplication in early trick films may finally have exorcised the public's long obsession with them. At least for a time, the ghosts were laid to rest.

*Vanishings.* Sudden disappearances, like ghosts, had a hallowed tradition in stage magic. Vanishings could involve anything—watches, elephants, rabbits; but especially honored was the Vanishing Lady. Robert-Houdin had had a Vanishing Lady, made possible by a simple but extraordinarily effective trick cabinet. Other magicians imitated it; some contrived different methods and more spectacular effects. In the 1880s the magician Buatier de Kolta introduced a new Vanishing Lady that is said to



*Undressing Extraordinary*, ca. 1899—a Walter Booth trick film for Robert W. Paul (National Film Archive, London)

have baffled the magic profession as well as the public. A self-respecting illusionist was now expected to have a Vanishing Lady. All this made it certain that she would make an early appearance—and disappearance—in film.

Georges Méliès in his very first year of film making—1896—produced a film entitled *Vanishing Lady* and modeled after De Kolta. Perhaps sensing that a disappearance on film might not have the impact it had on stage, Méliès added a detail. The lady did not merely vanish, she turned into a skeleton.<sup>63</sup>

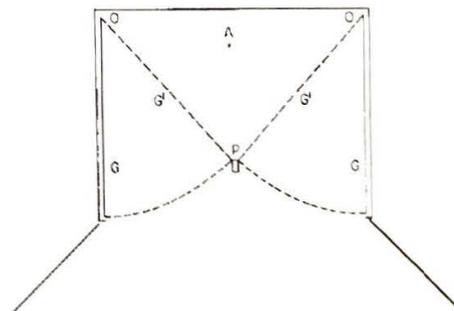
Starting as disappearances had always been, they were clearly too easy on film. Yet they had their film successes, based less on surprise than on narrative context. The hero of Hepworth's *The Bewitched Traveler* (1904) was bedeviled by a whole series of nightmarish disappearances that followed in helter-skelter sequence. As he breakfasts at an inn, his table fades away. Leaving the inn in consternation, he boards an omnibus, and the horses fade away. As he investigates this phenomenon, the bus and pas-



Robert-Houdin's Vanishing Lady

*Illusion.* We see a cabinet. Its bottom is off the floor; we can see underneath it. The cabinet is opened. The magician invites a few members of the audience to inspect its wood-paneled interior. They are then invited to seat themselves at the sides, to keep an eye on the area behind the cabinet. The Lady enters the cabinet, closing it. After an interval of banter, the magician opens the cabinet: the Lady has vanished. The doors are closed again. When they are reopened, the Lady has reappeared.

*Explanation.* After entering the cabinet, the Lady pulls toward her the hinged panels G, swinging them into the positions marked G1. The post P, which seemed to be a backstop for the cabinet doors, really serves to mask the meeting point of the swinging panels. The Lady is now at A, behind the panels. The sides of these panels facing outward (at a 45° angle) are mirrors. When the cabinet is reopened, the audience sees a reflection of the wood-paneled sides, but thinks it sees the back of the cabinet. The cabinet looks precisely as it did when empty.



## THE MAGICIAN AND THE CINEMA

sengers fade away. He tries to take a train but it vanishes. Finally the traveler and his valise go up in a puff of smoke. The Biograph Company acquired American sales rights to this British film and copyrighted it, with the result that it survives in the Paper Print Collection.

*Metamorphoses.* Like the disappearance, the transformation had a history of magic success that made its film use inevitable. Biograph's early promotion bulletins list numerous short transformation items, each less than two minutes, from various sources:<sup>64</sup>

*The Startled Lover* (1898). Girl turns to skeleton in lover's arms, but reappears again.

*The Cremation* (1898). Girl is apparently burned to a skeleton, but comes back to life.

*The X-Ray Mirror* (1899). Girl goes to mirror to try on hat; sees ballet girl, faints.

*The Barber's Queer Customer* (1900). Man sits in barber's chair, and his face changes several times.

*Pierrot and His Wives* (1900). How to make one fat wife out of two lean ones.

*Five Minutes to Train Time* (1901). Baby is packed in a trunk, and comes out completely flattened.

*The Price of a Kiss* (1902). Lady barber; customer tries to kiss her; sign on wall changes to read: "Kisses \$1 extra."

Except for *The Cremation* and *The X-Ray Mirror*, all were copyrighted as paper prints and survive.

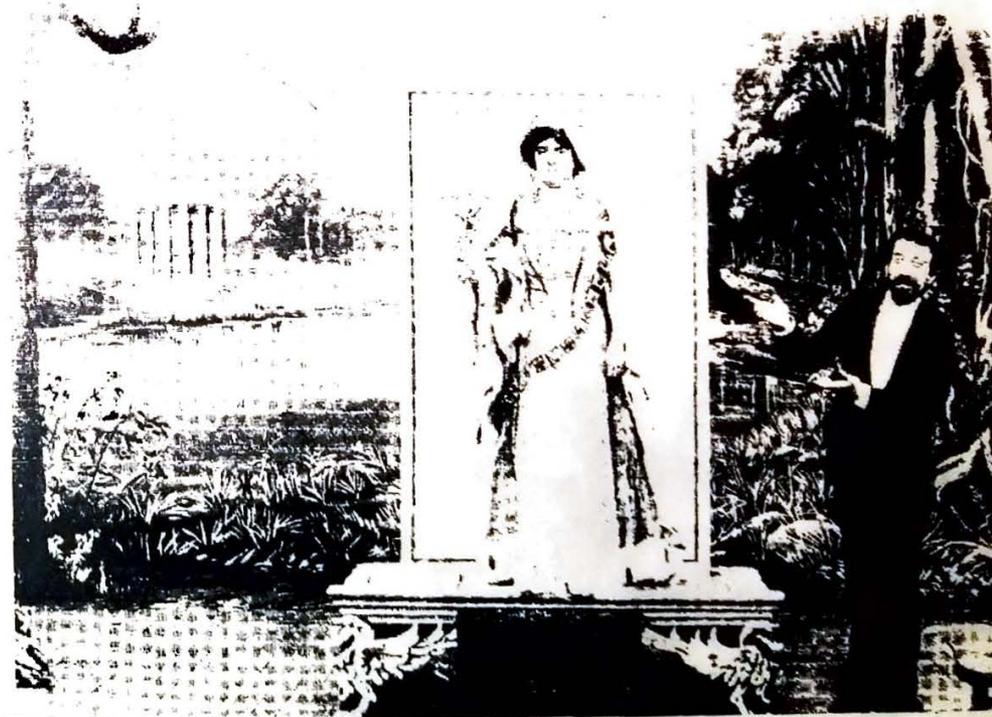
But transformations, like disappearances, needed firmer dramatic context to hold interest. A stage illusion created by David Devant in 1893, soon after his first appearance at Egyptian Hall, offered a formula echoed in innumerable early films. Entitled *The Artist's Dream*, his illusion involved a portrait on an easel that, in full view of the audience, turned into a living woman. Trick films were soon bringing all kinds of portraits to life. A surviving item of 1899:

*The Poster Girls.* Chappie stands in front of bill-board; poster girls kick his hat off.<sup>65</sup>

Méliès used the device in many films, in rich and diverse ways. In *A Mysterious Portrait* (1899) Méliès is observing and appraising a photograph of himself, noting the baldness; the portrait then proceeds to observe and appraise him. In *A Spiritualist Photographer* a girl standing before a canvas turns into a painted image of herself, which the photographer—Méliès—then takes down and rolls up. When he later unrolls it, the painted image turns back into a girl. In *The Living Playing Cards* (1905) he plays similar games with playing cards, adding various other transformations. In the work of Méliès transformations often come in disorienting profusion, sometimes suggesting meanings but never dwelling on them.<sup>66</sup>

At Biograph the stream of trick films included a 1903 transformation item by its trick film specialist, Billy Bitzer. His *Welsh Rabbit* showed a girl at a chafing dish, carefully preparing a Welsh rarebit. After it cooks briefly, she lifts the cover for a peek and finds a live and kicking rabbit, which she takes out and fondles with great glee. Biograph's promotion bulletin stressed that

*The Living Playing Cards*, 1905—by Méliès (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

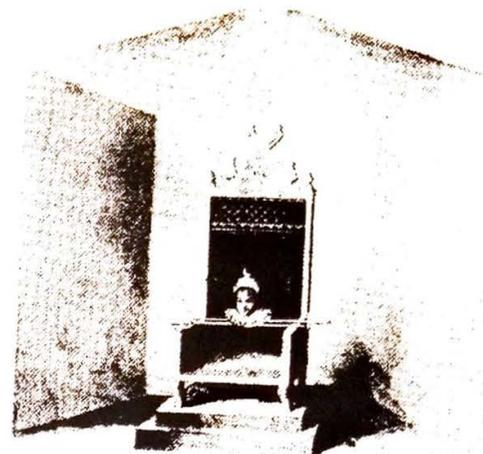


she is "decollete" and "shown very large." Apparently it was feared that film trickery alone might not carry the day; or perhaps it was a carry-over from Mutoscope peepshow experience.<sup>67</sup>

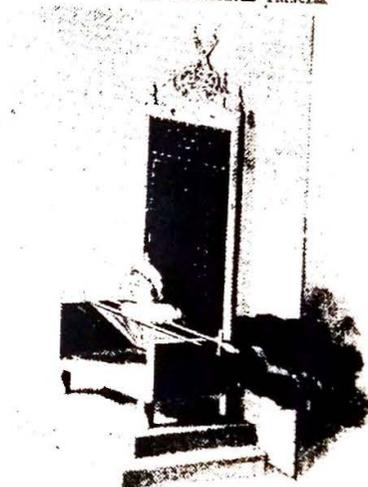
*Mayhem.* It was in the magic tradition of decapitation, dismemberment, and other cheerful mayhem that the trick film found its firmest footing and substantial success. The satisfactions derived from such ghoulish games invite endless psychological probing. One pleasure seems to lie in the repudiation of all physical restrictions of human existence. In the world offered by the magician or the trick film, a severed head on a tray could engage in witty banter, severed limbs could reassemble and spring to life. It was macabre but cheerful, a combination that was part of the magic tradition, well exemplified by the act known as *The Decapitated Princess*. It made humans wildly resilient. The wide scope offered by film technology inspired new ways of exploiting this tradition. It eventually became a central ingredient in the appeal of the animated film.

Cheerful mayhem made an early debut in film. In a film surviving via the Paper Print Collection, *The Maniac Barber* (1899), a barber apparently finds his customer too restless, so he cuts the man's head off and finishes his work at a side counter. He then replaces the man's head. The customer indicates his complete satisfaction with the haircut, pays, and departs.<sup>68</sup> In *Up to Date Surgery* (1902) Méliès has similar frolic with a surgeon. The film does not seem to survive, but Paul Hammond in *Marvellous Méliès* summarizes the plot. A surgeon, having diagnosed a digestive malady, cuts his patient into small bits, then reassembles them wrongly, with ungainly results. But he muddles through, after which the patient, fully recovered, departs in high spirits.

In a number of films the joys of mayhem were associated with automobiles. Cecil Hepworth used his own first automobile for a trick film entitled *The Delights of Automobiling* (1903), which he felt confirmed popular feelings about the automobile. Discussing this years later, he explained: "The car was shown rushing along the road at its maximum speed of twelve miles an hour, when it suddenly explodes and blows its occupants sky high. A policeman immediately appears to investigate, and is just in time to find himself pelted with a shower of arms and legs and tires and wheels and things from the heavens. It was a very popular film and its profits nearly paid for the car."<sup>69</sup> Hepworth may also have used the car in *How To Stop a Car* (1902), in which a con-



ILLUSION OF THE DECAPITATED PRINCESS



THE DECAPITATED PRINCESS'S EXPLANATION OF ILLUSION

#### The Decapitated Princess

Like the *Vanishing Lady*, the *Decapitated Princess* (and its numerous variants) used 45° angled mirrors. Under the Princess's head the audience thinks it sees to the back of the throne, but it actually sees a reflection of the similarly textured seat. The Princess rests her bosom on the back of the angled mirror; the rest of her is behind the throne. She takes this trick position at the moment the magician brings the "severed head" to the throne. His action masks the emergence of the real head. He must conceal the false head, which may for this purpose be a collapsible prop. In film all this ritual became obsolete. (*Library of Congress*)

stop on a country road tries to stop a speeding car by standing in the middle of the road. He is hit full and blown to fragments, but the fragments find each other and reassemble. A burly supervisor then shows the restored constable how it should be done. As the next speeding car approaches, the supervisor turns his back on it. Striking him full, it rebounds off the road and the culprits are arrested. The film survives in the National Film Archive of Britain.

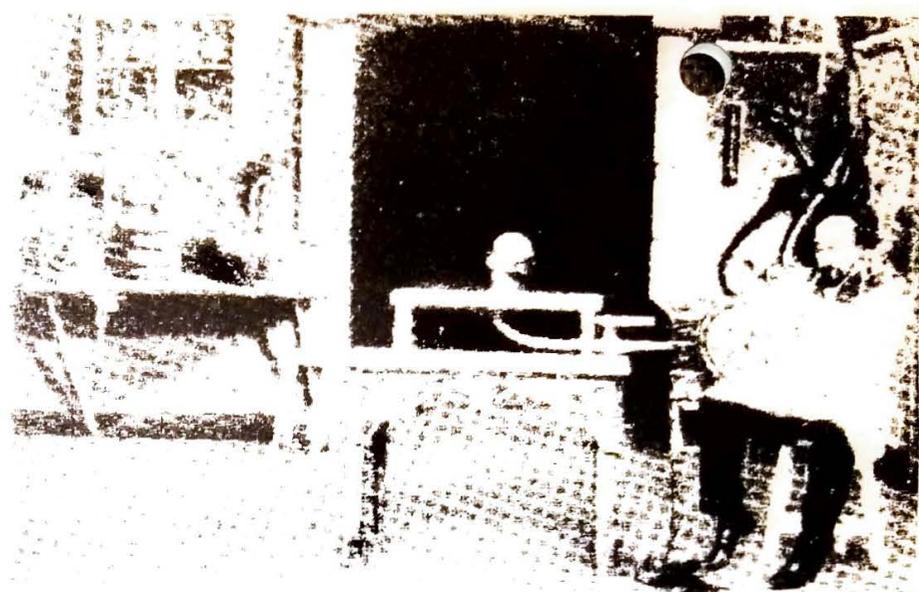
In the transplantation to film, the world of severed heads and limbs was acquiring new ramifications. The determination of severed human parts to find each other and reunite was one such aspect. Another was an extravagant notion evolved by Devant and Méliès—apparently simultaneously—in films of 1898. Devant's film, made for a provincial tour and discussed in an interview in January 1899, showed a man who "cuts off his head and puts it down beside him. Another head, exactly like the first, appears on his shoulders. He cuts that off too, and he serves a third and a fourth the same way."<sup>70</sup> The multiple cloning obviously had bizarre possibilities, which Méliès was envisaging with similar relish and proceeded to exploit in a whole series of identical-heads films. In *The Four Troublesome Heads* (1898) a conjurer punishes three uncooperative heads that sing out of tune; he hits them with a banjo. In *Tit for Tat* (1904) one head badgers another. In *The King of the Sharpshooters* (1905) a rifleman uses five duplicates of his own head for target practice.<sup>71</sup>

Adding a further detail to the strange world, Méliès in *The Man with the Rubber Head* (1902) showed an experimenter—played by Méliès—who attaches a hose to a copy of his own head and inflates it. We see the head gasp and sputter as it swells. The experimenter, having tested the procedure to his satisfaction, lets an assistant take over, but the assistant pumps too vigorously, and the hugely inflated head explodes, smashing half the laboratory. Like many of Méliès's films, this film offered exceptional technical challenges. To portray the inflating of the head, Méliès's own head was photographed. He was seated in a chair which was dollied toward the camera—which was focused on the head with the lower part of the body masked. This series of images had to be superimposed, with the necessary masking, on footage of the pumping procedure.<sup>72</sup>

One of the most exuberant and endearing of decapitation films

seems like early animation

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Méliès's *The Man with the Rubber Head*, 1902 (Museum of Modern Art, New York)



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was *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* (1904), again by Méliès. Four doomed prisoners are brought before a public executioner. A plank with four holes, a sort of stock, is placed over their heads. The executioner, after flamboyant preparatory gestures, lops off all four heads with one mighty swoop of his huge scimitar. The headless bodies sit down together. The executioner dumps the severed heads into a barrel and goes back to his lunch. But one severed head floats up from the barrel and finds its body. Springing to life, the prisoner helps the other heads reunite with their respective parts. The executioner takes alarm and rises. But the prisoners have his great scimitar and with one swing divide him at the waist. The following moments, in which the severed upper half of his torso, wriggling on the floor, tries to "put on" the lower part—like a child learning to put on his pants—form a classic sequence of the trick film. The effort succeeds; the executioner springs to life and pursues the prisoners. Chorus girls dance in for a finale. **Everyone is happy, as in most Méliès films.**

In such films, as in the better known *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Impossible Voyage* (1904), trick drama was beginning to evolve extraordinary technical virtuosity. The many composite images required complex superimposures, with precise masking to achieve perfect fit. **Masking often had to change from frame to frame.** Careful calculations were needed to ensure the correct proportions of the various images. It is not surprising that John Brosnan, in *Movie Magic: The Story of Special Effects in Cinema*, **finds their genesis in the trick film and especially in the work of Méliès.**<sup>73</sup>

**New tricks.** Most technical devices that became characteristic of motion picture special effects—dissolves, fades, substitutions, double exposures, superimposures, masking, models, rear projections, mirrored images—were familiar to the first film magicians from a century of scientific magic. **A few additional devices came from film itself.** One was the reversal, a joyous game discovered by the very first projectionists. It provided a final fillip for early demonstrations of the Cinématographe and its rivals: A wall was torn down, and rebuilt itself. A horse jumped over a fence, then leaped back in reverse. A swimmer dove in, then popped out again. At first a projectionist's game, it became the basis for many trick films, such as G. A. Smith's *The Sandwiches* (1899). In this a man eats sandwiches in a restaurant, then refuses to pay. So the film is reversed and the restaurant gets its

sandwiches back, intact. Another such film, *Reversing a Shave* (1905) showed a clean-shaven man carefully working with a razor. As he works, a beard gradually emerges.

In the Billy Bitzer film *Princess in the Vase* (1908)—a survivor via the Paper Print Collection—reversal plays an exceptionally interesting role. In ancient Egypt a princess, caught in an illicit love affair, is killed and cremated. We see the smoke from her funeral pyre mysteriously descending into a vase, which is then sealed and placed in her tomb. Centuries later the vase is in the hands of an American archaeologist, and is broken. The smoke escapes and metamorphoses back into the princess—with comic complications foreshadowing the television series, *I Dream of Jeannie*. An interesting sidelight is that the princess's lover is played by D. W. Griffith, shortly before his emergence as a director.

Likewise beginning as a game for projectionists, and later the basis for trick films, were **slow motion** (via high-speed photography) and **accelerated motion** (via low-speed photography). Walter Booth's *On a Runaway Motor Car Through Piccadilly Circus* (1899) offered audiences a dizzying "phantom ride" through busy London traffic—achieved by a quite sedate ride with the camera shooting very slowly, only a few frames per second.

Both slow motion and accelerated motion could have informational value. Thus Nevil Maskelyne's high-speed photography of artillery shells in flight is said to have enabled Britain's War Office to study their action in slow motion; and films recording the growth of plants via stop-motion—the ultimate form of low-speed photography—made it possible to view a weeks-long process of nature in a matter of seconds. Thus the technique of the trick film became a basic reference resource of documentary cinema.

A related use of stop-motion by a Biograph cameraman produced the remarkable *Demolishing and Building the Star Theatre* (1901). **The month-long demolition of a New York theatre was photographed from a building across the street by a camera set to shoot only a few frames per hour. We see the theatre disappear in less than two minutes.** The shadow of the building in which the camera is located sweeps across the demolition scene in regular rhythm, so that one can count the days. Since the shadow varies from sharp to fuzzy, we can observe weather

changes. As a final flourish, the film maker added a reversal sequence, allowing the building to rise again.<sup>74</sup>

Another innovation derived from the possibilities of film, not from stage magic, was introduced by Walter Booth in *Upside Down, Or the Human Flies* (1899). The action was shot in a room in which the floor was painted like a ceiling, the ceiling like a floor, and furnishings arranged accordingly. Booth shot the action upside down, giving a perfect "human flies" illusion.

*New directions.* The pioneer trick film moved in many directions. A film with interesting Freudian overtones was *A Pipe Dream* (1905), shot by Billy Bitzer. A Biograph bulletin described it as follows:

A novel picture showing a young woman smoking a cigarette and dreamily blowing the smoke over the palm of her hand. As she watches the smoke the figure of a young man appears kneeling on her hand and addressing her in passionate terms. The image seems to amuse her greatly, and she tries to catch it. It vanishes as her hand goes to seize it.<sup>75</sup>

She again blows smoke over her hand, apparently to coax the image back. But it does not return.

Another film credited to Bitzer involved a striking stop-motion experiment—in effect, a form of three-dimensional animation. In *The Sculptor's Nightmare* (1908) a sculptor receives commissions to make busts of various presidential candidates. Celebrating, he gets drunk and lands in jail. Sleeping there, he dreams of large masses of clay on pedestals, which take shape and become Bryan, Fairbanks, Taft, Theodore Roosevelt. They seem to come alive, smile, smoke cigars—then subside back into lumps of clay.

Several trick films involved J. Stuart Blackton in combinations of animation and live-action trickery. In *The Enchanted Drawing* (1900), perhaps a product of the Smith-Blackton magic team but made for Edison, we see Blackton at an easel drawing a cartoon face of a man, then drawing a wine bottle and a glass. Blackton apparently hankers for a drink and reaches for the bottle and glass, which become real as he does so. He drinks; the cartoon frowns, so Blackton pours another drink, giving the cartoon face a sip and causing the face to smile happily. Similar games are played with hats and a cigar.

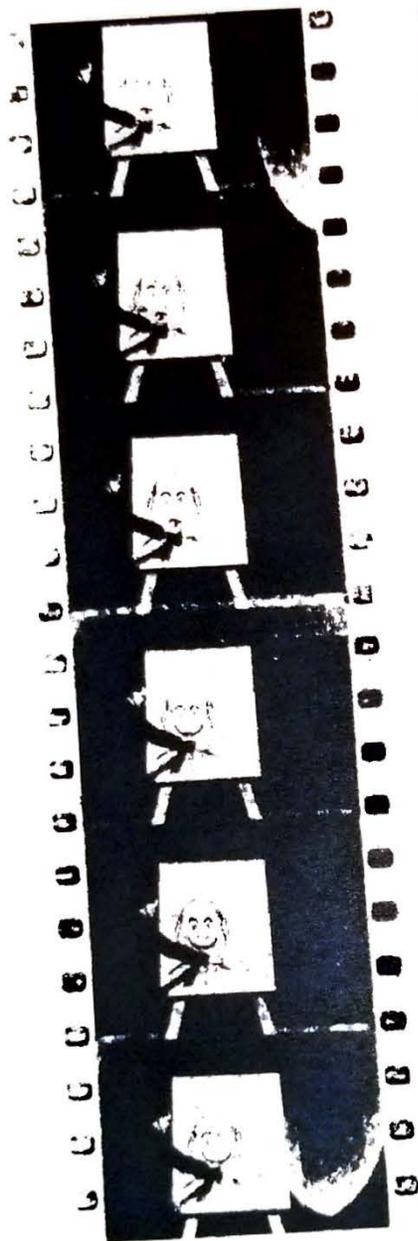


*A Pipe Dream*, 1905—a Billy Bitzer trick film for Biograph (David Reese)

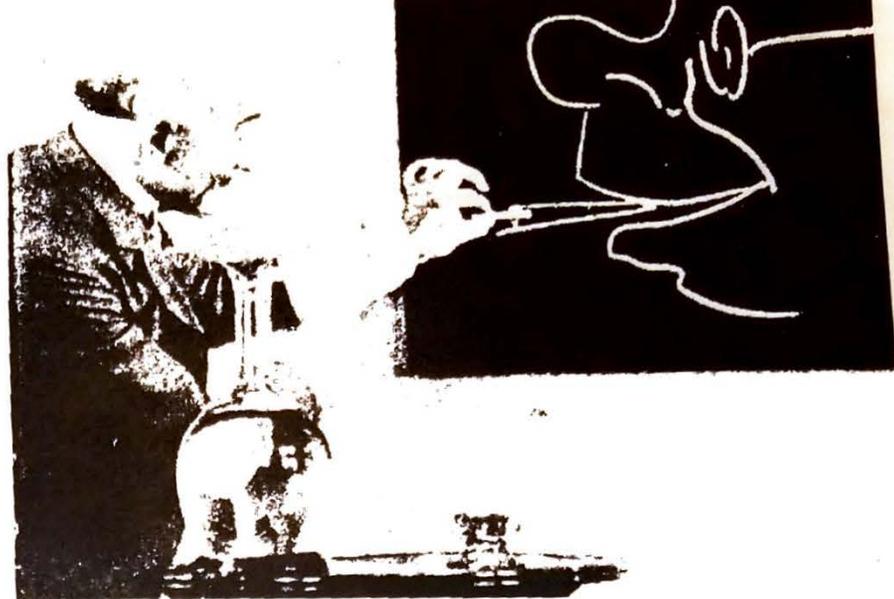
The trick film had an early involvement with advertising. Méliès made a cigarette film using trickery similar to that of Blackton's *The Enchanted Drawing*. A Méliès advertising film for Dewar's Whiskey again used a "living portrait" technique. We see a stately home where Dewar's Whiskey is served. Family portraits descend from their frames to sample the drink.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps inspired by advertising was the Pathé trick film *A Wonderful Hair Restorer* (1902), in which a barber is serving a customer with a magic nostrum guaranteed to grow hair. The treatment works. Not only does the customer get a bounteous crop of hair, but the barber gets long, bushy hairs growing from his hands.

*The Enchanted Drawing*,  
1900.  
Blackton gives his cartoon a  
drink—six frames from the  
paper print. The sequence  
represents less than a half-  
second of action. (David  
Reese)



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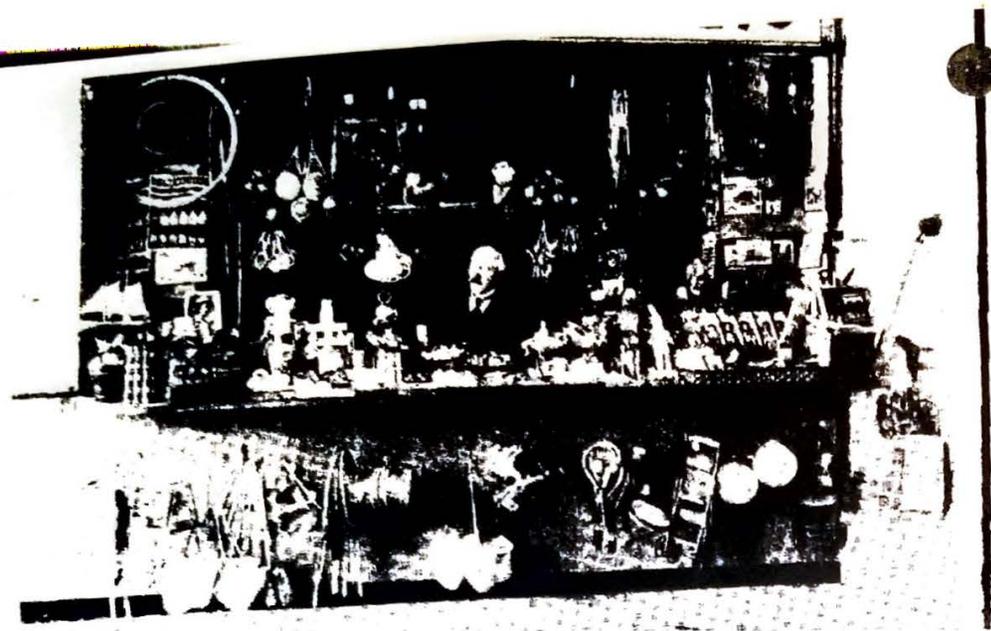


Cigarette commercial—by Georges Méliès (National Film Archive, London)

For approximately a decade, devices of the trick film encouraged explorations of the fantastic, grotesque, impossible, and absurd—just as their special-effects descendants later focused on fantasies of the future, nightmares of the past, catastrophes of the present, and the magic potions and products of industry. But the appetite for film trickery seemed to be in decline by 1905. Films were becoming longer, more serious, more romantic. Handsome heroines and heroes were becoming central concerns. Motion pictures were turning into big business. It was an arena for giant corporations, not individual artisans.

The fortunes of Méliès, whose extraordinary output had included major delights of that first decade, declined at the same time. He made no films after 1913. The closing of theatres at the start of World War I helped bring him to ruin. The Théâtre Robert-Houdin later reopened, but not for long. Méliès gave his final performance there in 1920; three years later it was demol-

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Georges Méliès in his kiosk, Gare Montparnasse, 1930 (*Museum of Modern Art, New York*)

ished. Ironically, the injection of film in 1896 had saved the magic theater and brought it a new prosperity, but in the long run contributed to its demise. By the mid-1920s magic theatres were a thing of the past. Late in life Georges Méliès and the second Mme. Méliès sold toys and candy in a kiosk in the Gare Montparnasse.

His career seemed to symbolize the brief hour of glory won by magicians in the world of film, and their final defeat. But the events can be seen in other ways also.

The appetites that drew crowds to magic theatres continued to be served—by movie palaces, Disneylands, radio, television, cable, satellites. Magic turned into “media.” The artisans became an industry. The sense of continuity has perhaps been stronger than the sense of disruption.

The elements of magic are all there—the flights into the fu-

ture, nightmares of the past, hopes that maintain us, fears that threaten, and all the mythologies that tell us of our heritage and destiny.

Does not our magic industry—via drama, documentary, docudrama—still summon up ghosts of yesterday and use them for present purposes, whether of statecraft, religion, commerce? And is the industry not expected to show prudence as to what ghosts it summons, and to what effect? Are not our electron apparitions as ephemeral as images projected on smoke—and as changeable too, suiting their mien to time and place? Our magic industry is following where magicians led.

But as we look back on the magician’s first encounter with cinema and those who flocked to see it, one question still haunts us: *How could those first audiences have thought of it as magic?*