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LESLIE MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE

féeries or fairy plays

Féeries, or fairy plays, originally were a stage genre that became popular during the 19th century, especially in France. In other European countries there were similar kinds of magical plays, such as the *Märchenstücke* or *Zauberstücke* in Germany and Austria, or, within the tradition of popular culture, even the Pantomime in England. But contrary to the French *féeries* these did not develop a strong link to early cinema. Although stage *féeries* shared a number of features with other theatrical forms such as the *opéra comique* or operetta—in particular, the combination of music, ballets, songs, and stage action—in *féeries* these all were primarily conceived of as spectacular elements, while narrative (or dramatic conflict) played only a secondary role. The subject matter was generally fantastic or supernatural and included a number of miraculous or magical events. These were presented by means of sophisticated stage tricks, another important component of the genre. Very often the tricks were extremely complicated and had to be executed with the help of intricate machinery off stage. Visual splendor was achieved through luxurious staging, rich costumes and colorful dance scenes. In other words, stage *féeries* clearly foregrounded an aesthetic of spectacular display.

The first filmic *féeries* appeared quite early in French sales catalogues. In 1899 Georges Méliès announced his film, *Cendrillon* [Cinderella], as a "grand and extraordinary *féerie* in twenty tableaux." Among the nine categories listed in the **Pathé-Frères** sales catalogue of 1900, there was one heading grouping together *Féeries et contes* (distinguishing between fairy plays and fairy tales). Earlier still, in 1896, a hand-colored 58mm film,

photographed with a **Demeny** camera and produced for **Gaumont** by Alice **Guy**, was made to feature as a special attraction in a stage *féerie* called *La biche au bois* [The Hind in the Forest] which was given at the Châtelet theater in Paris.

The integration of filmic *féeries* into stage performances was not an uncommon practice. Stage producers apparently saw moving images as yet another spectacular trick or attraction that could be added to the show. Méliès repeatedly received orders from theaters for cinematographic interludes. He sometimes reworked these productions and released them as independent works to exhibitors of screen entertainment. Thus, in 1905, he created a film for the stage show, *Les 400 coups du diable* [The 400 Tricks of the Devil], which, one year later, he transformed into his own "grande *féerie* en 35 tableaux" with the slightly modified title, *Les quat'cents farces du diable* [The 400 Pranks of the Devil].

In other cases, filmic *féeries* were distributed under the same (or a similar) title as well-known stage plays, even though there were considerable differences in their plot lines. In 1875, for instance, the Théâtre de la Gaité in Paris presented *Voyage dans la lune* [A Trip to the Moon], and in 1882 there was a stage production of *Voyage à travers l'impossible* [The Impossible Voyage], but neither had anything in common with the two famous films with similar titles made by Méliès in 1902 and 1904, respectively. And, in the case of *Voyage dans la lune*, neither the film nor the play were adaptations of the famous Jules Verne novel.

Even though filmic *féeries* appeared as a separate category in the catalogues of numerous French production companies and were recognized by the **trade press** as a distinct type of film, it is not easy to clearly define them as a genre. With regard to subject matter, they often were based on traditional fairy tales, but this was not always the case. Nor did every film based on a fairy tale appear in the catalogues as a *féerie* (hence the distinction between *féeries* and *contes* in the Pathé catalogue). In other respects they often had much in common with **trick films**. As in the stage genre, one of the most salient characteristics of filmic *féeries* lay in the quite systematic use of trick techniques. Thus, for example, Méliès claimed in his 1907 essay,

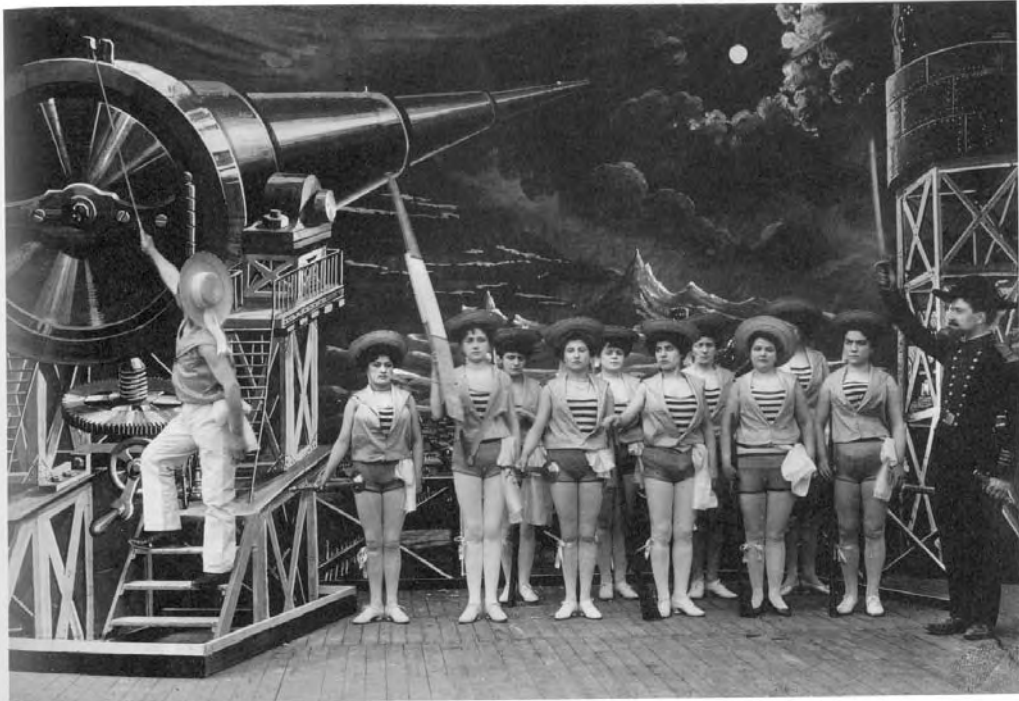


Figure 36 Production photo from *Le Voyage dans la lune* [Trip to the Moon] (Méliès, 1902).

“Les vues cinématographiques,” that his (somewhat legendary) discovery of the substitution trick, because of a camera jam when filming at the Place de l’Opéra, almost immediately led him to create his first *féeries*. Even though stage technicians, too, were capable of producing an astounding range of trick effects, including pyrotechnics, multiple transformations, and sudden changes of scenery, the cinematic trick techniques obviously enabled filmmakers to achieve these effects without having to rely on complex mechanical devices.

In spite of the obvious difficulties in constructing an exact definition, *féeries* can be described in terms of generic coherence. Most of their distinctive features are clearly linked to the fact that *féeries* relied chiefly on spectacular display, and less on dramatic conflict or narrative logic. Accordingly, as a rule *féeries* were shot indoors, using a stage-like setting, painted backgrounds, studio-built scenery, and more or less frontal mise-en-scène. With regard to the concepts forged by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault, one could say

that in their mode of spectatorial address they were much more deeply rooted in the **cinema of attractions** than in the cinema of narrative integration. Even in films based on well-known tales such as “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” the narrative mainly served as a framework within which visual attractions could be presented.

The two filmic versions of *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs* produced by Pathé-Frères in 1902 (directed by Ferdinand **Zecca**) and 1907 are a case in point. The 1902 film consists of seven shots, each preceded by an **intertitle** announcing the main theme of the *tableau*, the narrative being presented in both an elliptic and a fragmentary way. Without prior knowledge of the tale, it is impossible to reconstruct the story as it is told in the *Arabian Nights*. But even though the 1907 version includes 23 shots (and 8 intertitles), it depicts more or less the same events, with each scene now broken down into several shots. In both cases, the narrative is reduced to a series of key moments. At the same time, both versions introduce a number of purely

spectacular elements that do not serve any narrative function, namely elaborate dance scenes (absent from the original tale) and a “grand finale,” the so-called “apotheosis,” which is announced explicitly in the last intertitle. The term “apotheosis” stems from the stage tradition and refers to a splendidly arranged image (or *tableau*), where all the characters were grouped into ornaments and where a number of additional effects were displayed in order to produce a powerful and spectacular conclusion, presenting to the audience an overwhelming wealth of visual stimuli. The dance scenes and the apotheoses thus can be seen as strong elements of attraction.

In their sales catalogues, production companies such as Pathé Frères highlighted the spectacular elements of their *féeries* as well as the production value of these films, particularly the sets, costumes, ballets, and also the apotheoses. Occasionally even those responsible for the **set design** or **costumes** were credited, especially when their names, such as V. Lorent-Heilbronn, were well known in connection with their professional activities for the stage. The apotheoses in particular were presented as a major attractional feature. Thus, to quote but one example among many, the 1907 Pathé-Frères catalogue describes another *féerie* based on an *Arabian Nights* tale, *Aladdin ou la lampe merveilleuse* [Aladdin’s Lamp] (shot by Segundo de **Chomón** and directed by Albert **Capellani**): “This scene ends with a magnificent apotheosis.”

Besides the visual splendor of the *mise-en-scène*, there was yet another attractional feature in *féeries*, even though it was not always present, nor was it exclusive to the genre: namely, **color**. Many *féeries* in the Pathé sales catalogues were available in stencil-colored prints (and both of the *Ali Baba* films have been preserved in colored versions). In some cases it was only the apotheosis that was offered in colors. Coloring, of course, made *féeries* a more expensive type of film, as did their often quite considerable length. Some of Méliès’s films belonging to this genre reached the then rather exceptional length of more than 400 meters. In the sales lists of other companies, *féeries* also generally were much longer than the rest of the titles that were advertised.

So, compared to fairy tale films, *féeries* privileged spectacular attractions over narrative; compared to

trick films, they were more complex and longer, and their tricks were motivated by the fantastic and miraculous subject matter. This, of course, by no means constitutes a definitive definition, but both the trade press and catalogue descriptions suggest that such distinctions were made in production and distribution practices. Individual films might include features that would appear to make them *féeries*, and yet be categorized differently in a sales catalogue.

Given these relatively high production values, exhibitors would have to invest more money when acquiring a *féerie* than was the case with most of the other productions—and apparently they were willing to do so because of the visual attractions such a film could offer. Pathé-Frères, however, occasionally also tried to provide *féeries* for clients who did not have the means to purchase the more expensive versions. The company’s 1907 catalogue offered *La fée printemps* [The Spring Fairy], which was only 80 meters long and available in either colored or uncolored copies. The catalogue description ran as follows: “This *féerie* is a very attractive act and particularly suited when a limited number of spectators does not allow the purchase of longer films.” Quite obviously, *féeries* were seen as an important component to a program, and Pathé apparently wanted to ensure that it could offer a full range of products to all segments of the market.

In spite of the relative prominence accorded to *féeries*, evident even in contemporary discourses in the trade press, few companies were involved in their regular production. The two main producers clearly were Méliès’s Star Film and Pathé-Frères. Other French companies such as **Lux** or Gaumont only occasionally advertised *féeries*. Outside France, *féeries* appeared irregularly. In fact, the term itself was used chiefly in France. The Méliès films that were sold in France as *féeries* were announced in the American sales catalogues as “spectacular productions” or “spectacular pantomimes.” Likewise, Pathé’s 1902 *Ali Baba* was advertised as a “New and Original Moving Picture Spectacular Production.” Interestingly, the marketing of *féeries* in the USA highlighted their most characteristic feature, namely their attractional qualities, whereas the link to fairy tales, so prominent in the French term, was absent.



Figure 37 Poster for *La Poule aux Oeufs d' Or* [The Hen with Golden Eggs] (Pathé 1905).

For almost a decade *féeries* were highly prestigious. From 1908 or 1909 on, however, their importance gradually declined, and *féeries* appeared less and less frequently in sales catalogues, even though articles in the trade press continued to hold them in high esteem. Audience preferences shifted to other kinds of films where narrative logic and dramatic conflict played a more important role. In 1912 and 1913, there were only four titles categorized as *féeries* in the Pathé sales catalogues. One of them was a remake of an earlier title, and two others were produced by Méliès for the company. These marked the *féeries*' definitive decline.

See also: editing: early practices and techniques; editing: tableau style

Further reading

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FRANK KESSLER

Fengtai Photography Studio

Founded by Ren Qingtai in 1892, Fengtai was the first **photography** studio and motion picture enterprise in Beijing, gaining fame for its theatrical studio pictures and group portraits. Starting in 1905, the Studio produced several of the first Chinese-made films, in particular filmed performances of famous Peking **opera** actors, including Tan Xinpei. Shooting was done in the Studio's courtyard in broad daylight, mostly by the photographer Liu Zhonglun. Shown at the Studio's own Daguan Yuan theater and elsewhere, these films were popular among Chinese audiences. The Studio was destroyed in a fire in 1909.

ZHEN ZHANG

Ferrez, Julio

b. 1881, Rio de Janeiro; d. 1946,
Rio de Janeiro

sales agent, exhibitor, cameraman, Brazil

The son of Brazil's most important turn-of-the-century photographer, Marc Ferrez, Julio became interested in the cinema early. He was **Pathé-Frères'** representative, selling the company's equipment and films and, from 1907, running the Pathé cinema in Rio de Janeiro. He was one of the most accomplished pioneer cameramen, with films such as Antonio **Leal's** *A mala sinistra* [The Sinister Suitcase] (1908)—a reconstruction of a famous crime—and his own *Nhô Anastasio chegou de viagem* [Mr. Anastacio Arrived from a Trip]