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The Gentleman in the Stalls: Georges Méliès and Spectatorship in Early Cinema

Frank Kessler

Obviously, one should say “the lady and the gentleman in the stalls.” As feminist research on spectatorship during the early years of living pictures, by scholars such as Miriam Hansen, Lauren Rabinovitz and Heide Schlüpmann, has demonstrated, women constituted an important, if not the major part of the audience at the turn of the last century.¹ Indeed, to take just one example from the earliest years of the new medium, among the spectators depicted on posters advertising the *Cinématographe Lumière* we see numerous women seated among the spectators. However, when the French film historian Georges Sadoul, in his *Histoire générale du cinéma*, declared that Georges Méliès’s films represented “le point de vue du monsieur de l’orchestre,” that is the point of view of the gentleman in the stalls, he did not necessarily want to claim that audiences at that time were predominantly male.² His purpose, in fact, was to raise quite a different kind of issue, one which is, in the first place, aesthetic.

Discussing the work of Méliès, Sadoul explains that the owner of the Robert-Houdin theater adopted a camera position that created a unity of both space and, literally, point of view:

The camera-spectator, sitting right in the middle of the *Théâtre Robert-Houdin*, always sees the actors integrally, from head to toe, one sees the totality of the sets, from border to footlights, from prompt side to opposite prompt side, the perspective of which is organised in accordance with the eye of “the gentleman in the stalls.”³

This unity of point of view, according to Sadoul, was preserved even when Méliès started making longer films – which were in fact among the longest and most elaborate of this period around 1900. The difference being simply that he moved from one frame of reference – the rather small *Théâtre Robert-Houdin* – to another: the *Théâtre du Châtelet*. The latter was one of the biggest Parisian stages, specializing in spectacular productions, and in particular *féeries*, that is to say fairy

plays, which did indeed have many formal and aesthetic traits in common with Méliès's films.⁴



Fig. 1: *Théâtre Robert-Houdin* poster.

Sadoul's point here is, of course, that Méliès's films were inextricably bound to a stage aesthetic and thus did not fully realize the artistic potential of moving pictures. Seen as a "pioneer" by Sadoul and most other traditional film historians, Méliès is considered a forerunner, experimenting with a number of cinematic techniques, and using these to produce all sorts of trick effects, but whose creative work does not belong to the realm of film art proper. Considering him essentially a man of the theater, a characterization that is undoubtedly correct, film historiography before the 1980s tended to see him as a figure who was paradoxically both important and marginal. Important, because he opened up the road for animated photography to become a means for telling fantastic stories, creating exotic worlds, and generally making visible the impossible. Yet marginal, because Méliès did not seem to be attracted, as a filmmaker, by the medium's capacity to reproduce the outside world, a potential that came to be viewed by many as its essential quality.

This tension was raised to a theoretical level by Siegfried Kracauer, who identified a fundamental opposition at the very core of the medium. Distinguishing between a realistic and a formative tendency as the vectors that define what he called the “cinematic,” he states:

Is it by sheer accident that the two tendencies manifested themselves side by side immediately after the rise of the medium? As if to encompass the whole range of cinematic endeavours at the outset, each went the limit in exhausting its own possibility. The prototypes were Lumière, a strict realist, and Méliès, who gave free rein to his artistic imagination. The films they made embody, so to speak, thesis and antithesis in a Hegelian sense.⁵

But while Méliès’s work is taken as a defining manifestation of one of these fundamental tendencies governing the aesthetics of cinema, Kracauer also explicitly follows Sadoul and classifies Méliès in the final instance as a man of the theater: “His ideal spectator was the traditional theatregoer, child or adult.”⁶

What then characterizes this spectatorial position of the traditional theatergoer – Sadoul’s “gentleman in the stalls” – with regard to Méliès’s films? To begin with, it should be stressed that Sadoul in fact refers to this position as that of a *camera-spectator*, thus not as an institutional framing of the viewer’s attitude. There is therefore no confusion between two forms of spectacle; the difference is, to some extent at least, acknowledged. Sadoul’s (and Kracauer’s) point here is that the films are not “cinematic” enough. Secondly, the *locus* of the spectator seems to be defined not so much as a position in the literal sense of the term, but rather is *inferred* from what appears on the screen. As Sadoul explains, the actors are visible “from head to toe” and the sets appear as a totality, as a spatial entity closed upon itself (and with their edges often visible). Consequently, this is considered to correspond to a fixed viewing position, in contrast to one where the devices of camera movement or editing serve to “mobilize” the spectator’s gaze. So it transpires that Sadoul’s statement concerns the aesthetic position he attributes to Méliès rather than any historical evidence of an audience’s actual experience. And while Sadoul tries to situate Méliès’s work within a (teleological) evolutionary history, moving from a technology reproducing movement through a series of intermittently projected still photographs to the emergence of an art form, Kracauer develops a normative aesthetics of cinema, where the formative tendency that Méliès’s films are said to have pushed to one extreme needs to be counterbalanced by the realist tendency, a road which Méliès indeed did not pursue.

Framing Attractions

In the years following the famous 1978 FIAF conference in Brighton, where archivists and film historians came together in order to look at hundreds of films made between 1900 and 1906, and which prompted a major reappraisal of early cinema, both Sadoul's teleological conception of film history and normative ideas on film aesthetics such as Kracauer's have been severely critiqued by a younger generation of film historians and theorists.⁷ This, however, has been less to disprove observations such as Méliès approaching the cinematograph as a man of the stage, than to frame them differently, not as a deficiency with regard to subsequent forms of the medium, but as a positive force creating a specific aesthetic paradigm (or *dispositif*)⁸ that should be distinguished from the norms governing classical narrative cinema.

Claiming that the aesthetics of early cinema differed radically from the later, institutionalized form of the medium, and that this constitutes, as Noel Burch called it, a "primitive mode of representation,"⁹ or, in the words of André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, a "cinema of attractions,"¹⁰ means that its typical characteristics have to be appraised within a different frame of reference. The fixity of viewpoint that for Sadoul belonged to the "gentleman in the stalls" and for Kracauer to the traditional theatergoer, can thus be seen, with regard to Méliès's trick films, as serving a particular purpose, making possible a form of cinematic illusion, which not only requires a number of rather complex operations, but also the mastering of a specifically cinematic device. Many of Méliès's trick effects are indeed produced by cutting and splicing together different takes, making thus use of the so-called substitution splice. And so Gunning argues:

This concern for a unified viewpoint of the action (an act of enframing which does not vary even as the action within it is synthetically constructed by a series of concealed splices) differs sharply from the classical continuity system based on dramatic and psychological analysis and fragmentation. In the classical system a variety of viewing angles and distances are related to a larger spatial whole and these relations are regulated by the rules of continuity editing. While the continuity system maintains a consistent spatial orientation for the viewer, the variations between shots allow a dramatic and spatial articulation of the action. In contrast, the approach of early film privileges the single viewpoint and its posture of displaying something to the audience. The substitution splice is based on maintaining the apparent continuity of this single viewpoint, rather than a dramatic articulation of a story through varied shots.¹¹

So while one can indeed identify the same technical operations of cutting and splicing at work here, these are used by Méliès not to construct spatial and temporal relationships across a series of shots, but rather to create an illusory spatio-

temporal continuity that produces his trick effects and which is effectively camouflaged:¹²

Unity of point of view gives the illusion of a theatrical unity of time, when, in fact, the substitution splice creates a specifically cinematic synthesis of time. The framing of Méliès's composition, taken by historians as a sign of his 'primitive' theatricality, reveals itself as consciously constructed illusion, designed to attract attention from the actual cinematic process at work.¹³

We might conclude from this that the viewing position created, or constructed, in Méliès's films is in fact much more complicated than Sadoul's description of it as a perspective organized "in accordance with the eye of the gentleman in the stalls" suggests. It is not simply a transposition of a theatergoer's viewing mode to a new medium, whose specificity is not yet clearly understood. Rather, Méliès and his contemporaries were exploring the possibilities offered by the cinematograph in a variety of ways, not all of which can be said to "lead" toward the institution of cinema as an art form, which Sadoul or Kracauer take as their frame of reference. Even when a film actually does imitate a stage situation, complete with a proscenium arch and painted sets, the viewer can never ignore the fact that she or he is looking at a screen. The spectator watching animated pictures is, as it were, invited to imagine looking at a stage, and the experiential difference between the two is part of the attraction the film has to offer. And at the same time, the stage-like setting of the action helps to make the attraction – the trick – work, concealing the actual technical operation through which it is achieved, and which is, in this case, a genuinely cinematic one.

Staging Views

The characterization of Méliès's spectator as a theatergoer or as a "gentleman in the stalls" is in fact inadequate at the most basic level as well. The camera angle in Méliès's films never really mimics the actual viewing position of someone in a theater seat looking slightly upwards at a stage. As Jacques Malthête¹⁴ has deduced from the analysis of Méliès's sets, it is, in accordance with the stage practice of that time, a fictive point of view corresponding to no actual seat in the theater. Also, and more importantly, there is a fundamental difference with regard to the viewer's perspective looking at the space on the stage, and the field of vision in a scene recorded by a camera. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs discuss this in detail, explaining that "while for stage actors, the nearer they approach the footlights, the more room for manoeuvre they have, for film actors it is the opposite."¹⁵

As a matter of fact, Méliès manifestly was well aware of this. In his *causerie* on cinematographic views, published in 1907 in the *Annuaire général et international de*

la photographie, he addressed the point by stating the necessity to instruct the actors about the positions they have to take in order to structure the action clearly for the viewer: “It is also advisable to consider how the camera will render a gesture. In a photograph, the characters overlap each other, and the greatest care must always be taken to make the principal character stand out [...]”¹⁶ In order to stage his views and be able to control the effects he wanted to achieve, Méliès had to think through every aspect of his *mise-en-scène* in terms of the picture on the screen he wanted to present.¹⁷



Fig. 2: Méliès's glasshouse studio.

Yet, at the same time Méliès remained a man of the stage, declaring that his cinematographic career was so closely linked to his work at the Robert-Houdin theater that it would be impossible to consider them separately.¹⁸ While conceiving everything he did in the realm of the cinematograph in terms of the effects he wanted to achieve on the screen, the theater clearly was his frame of reference. Also, in the description he gave of his studio, he stressed its hybrid character:

Briefly, it is a combination, made of iron and glass, of a photographic studio (on a gigantic scale) and a theatrical stage. The camera booth and operator are located at one end, while at the other end is a floor, constructed exactly like a theatrical stage, and fitted with trapdoors, scenery slots, and uprights.¹⁹

It was the possibilities offered by exactly this combination of the cinematograph with the stage technology developed for the theater of magic, which, above all, seems to have fascinated Méliès as a filmmaker. Describing in his 1907 article the various trick techniques and devices he had invented, developed, or improved upon, he concluded by stating: “I do not hesitate to say that it is possible today to achieve the most impossible and improbable things in cinematography.”²⁰ Although by the end of the nineteenth century, theater technicians were capable of producing quite extraordinary effects on stage,²¹ Méliès obviously saw the cinematograph as a means to create even more spectacular illusions. The reference to the stage, however, is important to him, both as a cultural practice in relation to which he situates his work in cinematography, and as a formal device allowing him to foreground these “most impossible and improbable things” he is capable of achieving thanks to the new technology of animated photography. It is this tension, precisely, between stage and screen that has to be borne in mind in order to understand the aesthetic principles involved in Méliès staging his cinematographic views.

Addressing Spectators

Among the formal characteristics of early films, and particularly those of Méliès, the fact that performers directly look at the camera and seem to acknowledge the audience is often seen as a sign of their “theatricality.” For Gunning, however, in line with his argument referred to earlier, this is not a sign of primitivism, but rather a defining feature of the so-called cinema of attractions, and part of a strategy to “solicit the attention of the spectator.”²² Such an interpretation is in fact to some extent corroborated by Méliès in his 1907 article, where he deals with the direct address so frequently found in his films. Discussing the kind of challenge that playing in front of a camera proved to be for actors coming from the theater, Méliès declares:

There is no longer an audience for the actor to address, either verbally or with gestures. The camera is the only viewer, and nothing is worse than looking at it and performing to it. This is what invariably happens at first to actors accustomed to the stage but not to the cinematograph.²³

This seems quite an extraordinary remark, in view of how often Méliès himself behaves exactly in the way that he claims he does not want his actresses or actors

to. His own characters, and most notably when he plays a stage magician, not only look and gesture towards the camera, but also sometimes act as if there was an audience in front of them.²⁴ The discrepancy between what Méliès requires from the members of his troupe – to avoid looking at or playing towards the lens – and his own performance suggests that he does indeed follow a deliberate strategy here. Creating something like a hierarchy between himself and the others, he can act as the master of ceremonies, orienting the spectator's gaze, announcing the attractions that are going to be shown, and thus orchestrating all the action.



Fig. 3: Méliès performing a card trick in his LES CARTES VIVANTES (1904).

One of the most striking examples of Méliès's acting directly to the camera appears in his *LES CARTES VIVANTES* (*THE LIVING PLAYING CARDS*, 1904), which presents him in the role of a stage magician performing a card trick. He stands on a stage, dressed in an evening suit, holding up a playing card. Apparently, there is a complaint that it is hardly visible. The magician puts his hand to his ear, as if he cannot understand what is being said. Then he points to his eyes and advances a few steps. But this does not seem to have the desired effect. He throws up his arms in frustration, and then apparently finds a solution: the card can be enlarged, as he indicates with a gesture. He doubles its size, once and then once more. Now we can clearly see it is as nine of spades. Throughout the film, Méliès gestures towards the camera, announcing what he is about to do or commenting

in some way on what is happening. However, the feigned exchange with an audience in the opening part of the film constitutes a quite unusual case of direct address. If one saw this scene simply as a reproduction of a stage act, one would miss an important aspect of the film, by not taking into account the complexity of the spectatorial position that the film aims to produce.

In order to have a set of conceptual tools to describe this constellation, it is helpful to refer to the terminology created by the French *filmologie* movement, as defined by Etienne Souriau (1951).²⁵ The various terms try to distinguish the different levels at which phenomena occur in the overall process, from what is happening in front of the camera to the projection of moving images, intended to depict an imaginary world, on a screen in a movie theater. In these terms, what exactly is happening in *LES CARTES VIVANTES*?

On the level of the *profilmic* – the reality recorded by the camera, including everything arranged specifically to be filmed – there is an actor turning to the camera, looking directly at it, or gesturing towards it. On the level of *screenic reality* (Lowry's rendering of Souriau's "écranique"), the forms and shapes of light, shadow, and movement that can be observed on the screen, there is a male figure in a frontal view, addressing through his mimicry and gestures an invisible interlocutor opposite him who does not appear on the screen. For *filmologie*, this screenic reality is part of the larger *filmophanic* situation, which includes everything that happens during the projection of a film. On this level, the actor's gaze, which as a *profilmic* one was oriented towards the lens, seems to meet the spectator's gaze that is directed at the screen. This, in turn, is supposed to produce a *spectatorial effect*, that is to say one that subjectively occurs in the spectator's mind, as Souriau puts it, of these gestures being addressed to me as a member of the film's audience. And finally, with regard to the *diegesis*, the situation depicted shows a magician on a stage, turning towards his audience, which, however, never actually appears on the screen in a reverse shot, as might be the case in, for instance, a classical musical of the sound era, where the performers' addressing the camera is often recuperated by a shot showing the spectators in the theater watching in awe the extraordinary feats of the dancers. In *LES CARTES VIVANTES*, on the contrary, the address pretends to be directed at the filmophanic audience.

This rather unexpected effect of a picture on the screen turning to the people sitting in the theater is based on exactly the kind of formal features described by Sadoul when he explains what constitutes the "point of view of the gentleman in the stalls." What this description fails to grasp, however, is the complex interplay between the viewing position constructed here and the depiction of a stage-like arrangement that appears on the screen. Méliès literally plays with the different elements he mobilizes in order to produce the effects with which he wants to amaze his audience. The recreation, or rather evocation, of a stage in a theater of magic in *LES CARTES VIVANTES* results in a complex aesthetic strategy. Not only does the fixity and the unity of the point of view make possible the numerous

substitutions that occur throughout this film; it also allows Méliès to pretend to be interacting with the audience. The latter know very well that they are looking at a character on a screen. Perhaps Méliès did begin by organizing the perspective in his films according to the perspective of a theatergoer, which would have been his obvious point of departure. But as *LES CARTES VIVANTES* and other films demonstrate, this was not because he failed to understand – as Sadoul seems to suggest – the many new possibilities that the camera offered him. Rather, it seems that he wanted to invite his audience to imagine they shared the point of view of the gentleman (and, no doubt, the lady) in the stalls, so that he could create new illusions that allowed him to play with the, literally, phenomenal difference between the stage and the screen.

Spectatorship is an issue often discussed within film studies on an exclusively theoretical level, with “audiences” considered a problem of an entirely different order that belongs to empirical and historical research. But as I have tried to show, even when looking at spectatorship as a “viewing position” that is constructed by a film, this construction cannot be understood adequately outside at least some form of historical embedding (in many theoretical debates this may have remained implicit, but that does not mean that there is no frame of reference at all). By coining the phrase “the point of view of the gentleman in the stalls,” Sadoul in the first instance describes an abstract viewing position that is inferred from stylistic features he observes in Méliès’s films. But he conceives this form of spectatorship in opposition to what he sees as a more properly cinematic one, which is based on the ubiquity of the gaze in later classical cinema. However, when the viewing position of “the gentleman in the stalls” is historicized by taking into account (and taking seriously) the specific filmmaking practice that it involves, it can become a productive starting point to understand the ways in which Méliès addressed his audience (in all the different meanings of this expression). So, in spite of the anachronistic gender-bias of the term, when discussing spectatorship in a historical perspective, we should not forget the “gentleman in the stalls” – and, of course, his companions.