

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

MOVIES BY GEORGES MÉLIÈS, MUSIC BY SXIP SHIREY

Sunday, January 16, 1:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.

Films by Georges Méliès:

The Conjurer (1899, 1 min. Video, Lobster Films, Paris)

The Doctor's Secret (1910, 9 mins. 16mm, The Museum of Modern Art)

A Trip to the Moon (1902, 11 mins., 35mm, British Film Institute)

The Conquest of the Pole (1912, 15 mins. Video, FilmArchiv Austria)

Brooklyn Bridge Song (2010, 2 mins. Drawings by Michael Arthur, animation by John Ivy, music by Sxip Shirey. Video courtesy John Ivy)

Statuesque (2009, 9 mins. Written and directed by Neil Gaiman. With Bill Nighy, Amanda Palmer. Video courtesy Endor Productions)

About Sxip Shirey:

Sxip Shirey has played exploding circus organ for the pyro-technic clowns of the Daredevil Opera Company at the Sydney Opera House and the Kennedy Center, industrial flutes for acrobats on mechanical jumping boots at The New Victory Theater on Broadway, Appalachian music for gypsies in Transylvania and gypsy music for Appalachians in West Virginia and has had audiences dancing at underground parties in NYC to mutant harmonicas for 10 years. Shirey composed the music for *Statuesque*, a short silent film directed by Neil Gaiman (*Sandman*, *American Gods*) and starring Bill Nighy and Amanda Palmer, which premiered on Sky TV in the UK on Christmas day 2009. His composition "Melody for Lizzie" was premiered by The Boston Pops on New Year's Eve 2009. He is currently working on Theodora Skipitares's adaptation of *Lysistrata*, to premiere on February 1st at La Mama. The music for his

upcoming album *Shadow Land* is a collaboration with Rachelle Garniez and was developed for a program at The Museum of Modern Art. "Brooklyn Bridge Song," from his latest album "Song New York" was featured as NPR's Song of the Day.

The Conjurer (from *Splatter Flicks: How to Make Low-Budget Horror Films* by Sara Caldwell Allworth, 2006:

Special effects existed long before the advent of cinema, astounding and shocking audiences in stage plays, magic shows, and carnivals, creating optical illusions with devices such as magic lanterns and two-way mirrors. Some illusionists were even jailed for their seemingly satanic acts of resurrecting the dead.

Cinema in a sense became a special effect itself, a spectacle of photographs in motion. It was easy to

dupe audiences inexperienced in this format with techniques such as stopping and starting the camera to make discontinuous motion appear continuous. The first known film to use this illusion was *The Conjuror*, shot in 1899 by French magician Georges Méliès. This one-minute gem shows Méliès disappearing; then his assistant turns into confetti and vanishes, an effect Méliès discovered by accident when his camera jammed on the streets of Paris, and the images he captured “jumped” in time. He transformed this stop-start motion into “trick photography,” as [special effects] used to be called. Not only could illusions be created in real life, but the now camera itself could also be the manipulating force.

A Trip to the Moon, from *Before Hollywood* by Paul Clee, Clarion Press, 2005:

The movie for which Méliès is most famous appeared in 1902. Titled *A Trip to the Moon*, it was loosely based on the stories of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, whose tales of travel in space and time were the forerunners of modern science fiction. But Méliès gave the story his own wacky comic twist, poking fun at the many scientific societies that were flourishing at that time. These societies tended to be conservative, stuffy, and deadly serious.

In the movie, Méliès plays the part of the president of the French Astronomical Society, a Professor Barbenfouillis, whose name means “whiskers in a tangle.” As the film opens, the professor is madly scrawling diagrams on a blackboard as he explains his plan to explore the moon by having himself and a group of astronomers placed inside a “space shell” and shot out of a giant cannon. The plan is voted on and accepted, with the exception of one objector who is silenced by a barrage of books and papers from the hand of Barbenfouillis. So, to much fanfare, the cannon is forged and the party is launched on its journey.

When the shell reaches its destination, it lands smack in the eye of the man in the moon, an image that has become an icon in the world of filmmaking. As the explorers emerge from the shell, they are lashed by a snowstorm and scramble to find shelter in a crater, from which they descend into the interior of the moon. They enter a cave of giant mushrooms, where they are attacked by one of the moon creatures called Selenites. ...In the confusion, the astronauts escape, pursued by the Selenites.

The explorers find their shell and make their escape back to Earth, splashing down in the sea. The shell sinks to the bottom, giving everyone a chance to marvel at the strange wonders of the deep. Finally, the air in the capsule floats it to the surface, and a passing steamship tows it to safety. Back in Paris, the crew is greeted with heroes’ welcomes.

A Trip to the Moon was much longer and more complex in plot, characterization, and special effects than anything that had been done up to that time. Méliès took what he had learned from the short trick films and blended the effects with a coherent story line. The film brought Méliès international fame, and he followed it with several others based on space travel, fairy tales, and undersea voyages. In it he combined imaginative storytelling with his trademark “trickery” and wry wit to create a landmark in the history of film.

***The Conquest of the Pole in Georges Méliès* by Elizabeth Ezra (Manchester University Press, 2000):**

The Conquest of the Pole was considered by some to be Méliès’s finest work. Georges Sadoul, for example, has written: “*The Conquest of the Pole* is perhaps his most perfect creation.” ...The parade of ridiculous vehicles in *The Conquest of the Pole* [is a parody] of the desperate desire to design

ever-more efficient machines to propel people across the globe. As the title of *The Conquest of the Pole* suggests, much of the travel in Méliès's films had to do with conquering the unknown.

...In Méliès's voyage films, the old world is shown in confrontation with the new in the inevitable collisions depicted in these films—the smashing of cars into buildings, the crash landings of airbuses and rocket ships.

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