

Méliès and McLaren: Motion Moving the Story

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WRITER'S COMMENT: This essay was remarkably smooth to write. My largest difficulty was settling on a topic. At first, I was caught between pairing Méliès or McLaren with a different filmmaker, but either idea was problematic. Then, I hit upon the idea of combining the strengths of each topic and focusing on the pixilation (live-action animation) shorts of Méliès and McLaren. As these filmmakers belonged to entirely different epochs of film, to my knowledge they had never been analyzed together before. Writing about two filmmakers from very different backgrounds was the largest hurdle for me to overcome, but I believe the unusual combination is also the greatest strength of my essay. I soaked in what I could from my resources on the history of each filmmaker, but critically responding to their works together was a blank stage for me to dress. To top it off, I had admired the work of both of these filmmakers before the start of the class. I'm thankful that as an Art Studio and Technocultural Studies major, I can mold my term papers around topics I personally love.

—Mikaela Watson

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Mikaela Watson's essay, "Melies and McLaren: Motion Moving the Story," was written in response to the final term paper for Art 24, Introduction to Experimental Video and Film, in which students were asked to select two filmmakers of different generations that share some commonality. Students were asked to elaborate on the filmmakers' shared attributes but also identify the differences between their works by contextualizing the time in which their films were made and by focusing on a few works of each artist. Mikaela provided an excellent example, as was no surprise, since she has proven to be an intellectually curious and hard working student in this and other studio art classes where she has been my student. In class dialogue, she is astute and forthright, often helping to clarify complicated ideas and asking thought-provoking questions. I'm extremely delighted that her writing has garnered some attention.

—Darrin Martin, Art Department

LONG BEFORE COMPUTER-GENERATED special effects, filmmakers sought to portray the extraordinary with the camera, often using no more special equipment than the camera itself. The results were films that contained fragments of live action, recorded at the same pace as the actors performed, along with carefully reshuffled frames to portray scenes that could have existed only within the camera. Typifying such films as animation neglects the presence of live-action footage, yet the filmmakers become animators when they manipulate the sequence of frames to distort and exaggerate the motion of their subjects. Georges Méliès and Norman McLaren were two such filmmakers, and though they entered their filmmaking careers roughly forty years apart, Méliès's short films and a selection of McLaren's most favored work both employed this mix of live action and animation. Both filmmakers were highly experimental, relying primarily on cinematic effects, optical tricks, and alternative processes of shooting. Their technical experimentation drove their narratives, and their cinematic methods determined the shape and flow of their films.

Georges Méliès came into his filmmaking career in the 1890s, when the movie camera was very young. The Lumière brothers were making their first films, documents of everyday events, like factory workers leaving their shift, a train rolling into a station, and a baby being fed. Méliès's films, which ran concurrent with the Lumières', experimented more with narrative. Paul Hammond warns against typifying Lumières' films as realist and Méliès' films as fantasy,¹ as the Lumières made their share of trick films as well. Still, the Lumières were best known for their short films that read as the first documentaries, objective recordings of everyday life, while Méliès explored cinematic tricks, special effects, and fantastic settings almost exclusively. For him, the camera was not a tool to record events as they unfolded, but—with the camera's ability to freeze and resume time—a tool for distorting that record for magical effect.

Méliès was one of the earliest practitioners of pixilation, a type of stop-motion animation, where real-life actors, objects, and settings are photographed frame by frame. As long as the actors can hold a pose for the time needed to take a photograph, pixilation allows the filmmaker to create a number of improbable effects. Disembodied body parts, rapid transformations, and inanimate objects that move and replicate with a life of their own were a few of many visual feats Méliès portrayed in his

1. Hammond, *Marvelous Méliès*, 29.

films. Most of Méliès's films were very short, around a few minutes in length, and so his narratives were simple. Before filmmaking, Méliès had been a stage magician, and so many of his short films play like a magic show brought to cinema. His 1896 film *The Vanishing Lady*, for example, portrays the popular theatrical trick of disappearing and reappearing props and people: a lady instantaneously changes into a skeleton and then back again. While the stage version of such transformations required a complex scheme of trapdoors, replicated props, and impeccable timing, the film version of such tricks is simple: stop the camera after filming the object, switch the object with another in its place, resume filming, and the object appears to instantaneously transform into something else (or disappear entirely). *The Vanishing Lady* is Méliès's experiment in adapting the existing field of stage magic into the new form of cinema. Like stage magicians, he primarily sought to amaze his audience with tricks that relied on processes carefully tucked out of the audience's view.

Méliès's fascination with visual trickery guided his production of films. Each film was a puzzle on how to bring to life his imaginative schemes of inflating heads, dancing chairs, and even an epic rocket trip to the moon. *The Man With the Rubber Head*, made in 1902, is a substantial development from *The Vanishing Lady*, as Méliès filmed events only obtainable by cinematic tricks, with less obvious roots in pre-existing stage magic acts. In the film, Georges Méliès portrays an apothecary who makes a miniature version of a head grow to about half his height by pumping a bellows. Méliès engineered this trick by seating himself on a wheeled chair before a black background. As his chair rolls towards the camera, his head appears to swell. The story continues to reach a humorous, if slightly masochistic, climax when the apothecary's clown assistant pumps the bellows so much that the inflatable head explodes, and the apothecary kicks the assistant out. The story revolves around the fundamental illusion of an inflating and deflating head, yet by this time Méliès's films functioned more as self-contained cinematic stories than as simple adaptations of stage tricks into cinema.

Méliès's films were largely self-engineered endeavors. Film was not an industry but a novelty practice, undertaken by individuals who filled in the roles of writer, producer, director, distributor, and sometimes lead actor all in one. As cinematic technology improved, filmmakers took on projects of more ambitious length, and their crews took on more specialized jobs, from production to financing to cinematography

to sound editing. Celebrated animator Norman McLaren entered into a career in animation in the late 1930s. At this time, the Western film industry was well established. Corporate studios were producing the majority of films, and the filmmaking process was organized into a process of discrete steps, from the first drafts of screenwriting to the printing of the film. McLaren typically worked outside of large animation studios like Disney and pursued independent projects under the sponsorship of the National Film Board of Canada.

Like Méliès, McLaren was primarily interested in experimental filmmaking processes. He used a large variety of media: paper drawings, pastel drawings, a “direct method” (drawing, painting, or scratching on film), and pixilation. He often scratched or painted over the soundtrack grooves in film to create his own sound, for films that were hand-made in every aspect. After doing occasional commissions for pro-war films during World War Two, Norman McLaren worked primarily within the National Film Board of Canada’s experimental film division. His eclectic variety of visual styles made him difficult to classify. Some of his films followed strict narratives and some were motion studies set to music. Some were buoyant and bursting with energy, like his camera-less scratch animations, and some were very understated and gently paced, like his slow-dissolve pastel animations. As his media was widely varied, so was his mark-making style. One may not easily guess that McLaren’s entire repertoire of films was all drawn by the same artist, as he drew in different styles to suit different mediums. His scratch animations had stark colors and sharp, angular designs, while his pastel animation had translucent layers and soft light. Yet all his films are unified by his focus on the properties of movement.

McLaren animated movement to fit the visual style of his films. Because he drew directly onto film, in an intuitive and unpremeditated way, his camera-less animation had a spontaneous, staccato-like movement. His pastel animation focused on the shifting colors and compositional layout, to reflect McLaren’s interest in the “painting process itself as the visually exciting end product.”² Yet McLaren’s animation ability truly shined in his 1953 pixilated film *Neighbours*. *Neighbours* follows the narrative of two men living in cut-out houses, who discover a unique flower between their property. Their bickering over the flower escalates into brutal war, until they kill themselves and destroy their families. The

2. Richard, *Norman McLaren*, 35.

film ends with the phrase “Love Your Neighbour” in different languages. The intense brutality stands out from McLaren’s other films, which are in general light-hearted, and McLaren admitted that his anger about the civilian casualties of the Korean War inspired the film’s escalating war and the somber end.³ Although outside events inspired the emotional core of the story, the visual style and peculiar movement of pixilation defined how the film would unfold.

McLaren’s *Neighbours*—like Méliès’s short films—adopts frantic, ludicrous, and almost sadomasochistic stories, to fit the exaggerated motions of their actors. The over-the-top action fits the premise of pixilation. Valliere Richard quotes McLaren stating that through pixilation, “creatively you are dealing with unreality. The less likely the action, the more fascinating the effect.”⁴ This “dealing with unreality” makes sense with hand-drawn animation; the drawings of the animator are not an accurate snapshot of a live-action environment, so it follows that expressionistic drawings would have exaggerated movement. But pixilation deals with live-action footage, and yet, instead of seeking to preserve any notions of realistic motion, the filmmakers manipulated the movement in a decidedly unrealistic manner. In the pixilated scenes, *Neighbours* moves in a staccato fashion that emphasizes the main action of the characters. When the men pause, such as to look at the flower, they freeze completely, which emphasizes the object of their gaze. When they move, the motion is more swift and exuberant. Strangely enough, an exaggerated motion is also a more clarified motion. When one neighbor pushes another, the fall takes slightly less time than it would in real life, and the camera pauses briefly when the neighbor collides with the ground. This version of a push is more blunt than a real-time version, with a visceral sense of impact. The balance between extreme pauses and extreme action gives the film an outlandish sense of physical energy, while clearly identifying the attitudes and emotions of the characters.

Georges Méliès did not use pixilation in all his films, but he adopted much of the same exaggerated motion, mostly to clarify his story. Before the addition of sound, filmmakers relied on physical expression to communicate the events of a story and the emotional tone. In *Four Troublesome Heads*, Georges Méliès as a magician gestures to his head several times, framing it with his hands, to focus the audience’s

3. Collins, *Norman McLaren*, 70.

4. Richard, *Norman McLaren*, 37.

attention on the primary place of action. He then gestures to the places the head replicas will appear, in the same manner that a stage magician leads the attention of the audience with carefully choreographed hand motions. Méliès's body movement and gestures actively directs the progression of the film. His wide, flourishing arm gestures convey a feeling of theatrical exuberance, setting a light-hearted tone. Although the disappearances and reappearances of the heads may have appeared gruesome to some audience members of the time, Méliès's forthright body posture and clearly communicated hand gestures demonstrate that the magician was in ultimate control.

Despite the lively action appearing within the view frame of Méliès's and McLaren's films, the camera itself typically remained static. Some of Méliès's visual tricks actually relied on a fixed camera position, like the swelling head in *The Man With the Rubber Head*. The still viewpoint placed all attention on the unfolding scene. If the camera were to move during a portion of the film, it would call more attention to the viewer's placement within the scene and less to the actual events portrayed. *Neighbours* and Méliès's longer shorts often combined shots from different angles. Still, they were often kept within the medium- to long-shot range, at a distance where the viewer doesn't feel intensely involved with the scene, but also doesn't feel totally alienated. The camera's position varied, but not so dramatically that the camera distracts from the main action of the story.

McLaren's *Neighbours* and Méliès's shorts have a staged feel, as the actors, not the set, move. In *Neighbours*, the viewer faces the two men and the houses straight on. The shots with the neighbors fawning over the flower tilt downward, to emphasize the men's proximity to the ground. Yet throughout the film, the viewer sees only the fraction of woods that are behind and to the side of the houses. Méliès's camera also typically faces the main action straight on; the camera rarely moves position in the same scene. Therefore, their films resemble a moving tableau. Méliès and McLaren's films are completely conscious of the cinema as a visual spectacle, with all aspects of staging ultimately serving the purposes of the narrative. At times, their films even openly acknowledge the presence of the audience. McLaren ends *Neighbours* with the moral "Love Your Neighbour" aimed at the audience. Méliès's own characters, such as the magician in *Four Troublesome Heads*, face the camera directly and use visual pantomime to "speak" to the audience. Since the camera motion

doesn't call attention to itself, the characters communicate to the audience on the most immediate level, as if acting in a theater.

Despite the frozen camera, the framing of the shots remained an active part of the narration. Although Méliès's shorts appear to be single shots, without any cutaways to close-ups or separate scenes, they were actually composed of separate shots, combined into one frame. In films with replicas of Méliès's body, such as *Four Troublesome Heads*, Méliès used multiple exposures to combine two or more separate shots into the same frames, blackening areas within the frame where a new segment of film would overlap. Méliès edited, not to show the progression of time, but to reveal the unity of space. Ezra remarks on Méliès's "spatially focused" editing, declaring that "whereas later film-makers would strive for variety in their shots, Méliès aimed for such precise continuity of angle and position within the frame that he created the illusion of unicity."⁵ The term "single-shot" is misleading, as it neglects the immaculately planned layers of visuals in each frame. *Four Troublesome Heads* began as several separately filmed portraits of Méliès and ended with all separate shots seamlessly combined into one. Instead of taking fragments of a filmed piece and projecting them one after another to show a succession of time, Méliès would combine fragments of shots into the same space, to make scenes within scenes.

In his longer films, such as *A Trip to the Moon*, Méliès used cross-dissolves between scenes to show the progression of time, yet he put as much information as possible within each shot, to make the action self-contained and aesthetically balanced. In *A Trip to the Moon*, the camera never moves around within an individual scene. The main action of each scene (such as the launching of the rocket or confrontations with the moon creatures) begins and ends within the frame of the camera. Each scene cuts away to the next when most of the actors begin to leave the frame, naturally compelling the audience to follow the actors to the new scene. Méliès emphasized the dichotomy of the scientist-explorers versus the moon creatures by keeping each group within different halves of the frame. The composition of the scene clarified the story and the characters' relations to one another.

McLaren framed *Neighbors* to underline character relations as well, but his films are more cinematically advanced than Méliès's as they tantalize the viewer with events taking place outside the frame as well.

5. Ezra, *Georges Méliès*, 45.

McLaren's *Neighbours* opens with a perfectly symmetrical view of the two men's houses. The neatly balanced image of the two hum-drum neighbors emphasizes their equality and their uniformity. As the story unfolds, the shots of their fight turn asymmetrical, with quicker cuts and even a small amount of camera motion, to play up the tension of the scene. Yet while Méliès's shorts tend to contain the main action within the frame, McLaren toys with the relationship between the seen and unseen. When one of the neighbors, vexed to a state of brutality, begins to club the other, he sinks and rises out of the bottom edge of the frame, emerging each time with more grotesque face paint. The central action of the clubbing of the neighbor is off-camera, although the soundtrack provides a musical cue for each violent strike. The frame emphasizes the neighbor's deeper descent into a Mr. Hyde-like ugliness, suggesting that the true horror is not so much the neighbor's actions, but the kind of fervor inside the neighbor that propelled him to continue. As he ducks in and out of the frame, the viewer receives only hints of the transformation and the beating the neighbor has undergone. In this particular scene, the frame hides more than it reveals. This narrative strategy calls for more active participation from the viewer than Méliès's films, as one is compelled to imagine what could be taking place outside of the frame.

McLaren manipulated the speed of movement in a more plastic way than Méliès, which may speak to the different backgrounds the filmmakers came from. McLaren's pixilated skits *A Chairy Tale* and *Opening Speech* deal with men struggling to cope with troublesome or misbehaving objects. Along with *Neighbours*, the films begin with the actors moving in a naturalistic manner as the main conflict (such as the irregular actions of a chair or microphone, or the neighbors' battle over the flower) is introduced. Méliès's *The Black Imp* has the same premise, when a traveller entering an inn disrupts an imp's rest, and the imp wreaks havoc on the man by having the furniture disappear, move around the room, and self-replicate. Méliès employs some clever pixilation tricks, like having the man throw away a chair, only to have another appear in its place. However, the man's arm gestures and walk never change speed. Méliès builds to an emotional climax by having the story's gags become more and more ludicrous (like a mirror falling on the man and trapping him), but the pacing of the film remains consistent. The man's frustration never seems to escalate as he is subjected to ruse after ruse. However, in McLaren's shorts, the motion of the characters often peaks in a blurred

frenzy. *A Chairy Tale* and *Opening Speech* both contain scenes where the central man, desperately trying to control the actions of the chair or microphone, works himself up to a motion blur, without noticing that the object he was chasing has been watching him from the wings of the frame the whole time. The expressive motion of the characters defines the climax of the film.

Méliès and McLaren both used pixilation for its remarkable capacity to depict fantastical and implausible events. Méliès's films, however, tended to stop there and let the visual phenomena become the primary source of entertainment, neatly framed and centered by the camera. This practice stemmed directly from the experience of watching a theatrical production, which would have been most familiar to Méliès at the start of his film career. McLaren delved further into pixilation's ability to "create caricature by altering the tempo of human action,"⁶ letting the changing pace of motion drive the emotional tone of his films. As McLaren was born when film was a well-established practice, he adapted a greater consciousness of the frame's edge as a vibrant place of action. Not only did the tempo of the actors' behavior directly affect the mood of the film, the transformation of the neighbors into brutal monsters adapted a degree of tension by showing some information to the audience, while withholding the continuation of the scene. McLaren adapted Méliès's ideas on the illusory nature of cinema and brought pixilation into films where the camera took a more active role as a storyteller.

Méliès's films were by no means primitive, as he was finding innovative techniques for a completely novel technology, without any pre-established conventions to build upon. McLaren's use of warped movement and dynamic staging sprang from his familiarity with several generations of filmmakers that dealt with similar techniques. Yet even McLaren's animation, occasionally jittery and simple in scope, now seems quaint and somewhat dated to an audience accustomed to effects created outside of the camera, in digital 3D graphics software. Modern special effects promise to break the barriers on what could potentially be brought to the screen. Yet the bare and simple technology of a single camera brings a special excitement to the screen. Audiences marvel at not only the effects, but the ingenuity it must have taken to design such effects without the aid of a computer.

6. Richard, *Norman McLaren*, 37.

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