

BROAD UNDERGROUND FILM SERIES



Méliès, Magic, and the Avant-Garde

8pm • Friday • 29 September 2017 • Broad Art Museum Sculpture Garden
Michigan State University

Given the rediscovery and current exhibition of Georges Méliès' *Match de Prestidigitation* (1904) at the Broad Art Museum, we have put together a screening that looks at this early French filmmaker's wondrous work and its influences on the development of the trick film (an important genre in the period), and on the avant-garde that learned much from his magic. Films by Méliès, Chomón, Deren, Brakhage, and others. Live music by Lyn Goeringer and friends.

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Match de Prestidigitation**(Georges Méliès, 1904), 1min**

A film lost until 2016 when the Czech Film Archive discovered it on an anonymously donated reel. It now features prominently in the Broad Museum's current exhibition "The Transported Man," which has inspired this program. Circulated in the United States as *A Wager Between Two Magicians, or Jealous of Myself*, the film presents a conjuring duel between Méliès and himself as he divides in two through double exposure. In so doing, he gets to the uncanny core of what film is: a fetching medium of duplication, of the world and of oneself, of shadowy copies and doppelgängers. Can one's filmic double be more perfect than oneself? A jealous obsession that fascinated not only Méliès but also many of the avant-garde represented here.

L'Homme-Orchestre**(Georges Méliès, 1900), 2min**

The eponymous "one-man band" plays its tune when Georges Méliès transforms himself from solo performer to the conductor of a lively—if familiar-looking—musical sextet in this virtuoso example of seven perfectly synchronized separate exposures.

Le Dirigeable fantastique**(Georges Méliès, 1906), 3min**

Released in the United States as *The Inventor Crazybrains and His Wonderful Airship*, this hand-colored film print shows the fantastical dreams and disturbing nightmares that trouble the completion of an especially demanding dirigible project

Sculpteur Moderne**(Segundo de Chomón, 1908), 7min**

This stencil-colored film was made by Segundo de Chomón, acknowledged master of early "special effects"; it combines cinematographic illusions of scale with remarkably fluid clay animation and features Chomón's wife Julienne Mathieu in the title role

The Thieving Hand**(J. Stuart Blackton, 1908), 5min**

A magnificent example of vernacular surrealism, Blackton's Vitagraph short features a one-armed beggar who becomes attached to a new appendage with a mind of its own. The film's trickery offers an anarchic and playful vision of the human body disorganized by desire.

It's a Bird**(Harold L. Muller and Charley Bowers, 1930), 8min**

After spending his childhood with the circus, Charley Bowers worked as a newspaper cartoonist, and became interested in film, combining slapstick and puppet animation in sophisticated ways. His first sound film, *It's a Bird* exemplifies the wildness of Bower's imagination in its metal-eating avian wonder, which delighted the surrealist André Breton. Bowers was hailed as "Bricolo" by the French for his irrational, Rube Goldberg-esque film assemblages.

***Thimble Theater* (Joseph Cornell & Larry Jordan, 1938), 2min**

One of modernism's greatest magpies, artist Joseph Cornell became famous for the marvelous, imaginary worlds of his box constructions. But he was also a cinephile and filmmaker who turned his collage technique toward cinema in the 1930s. Playing with themes of transformation and wonder, *Thimble Theater* is one of a series of Cornell's magical found-footage films that he asked filmmaker Larry Jordan to finish before Cornell's death.

***Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren & Alexander Hammid, 1943), 18min**

A home movie of sorts in which dreams blur into reality and objects reveal their uncanny, "malevolent vitality" through cinematographic tricks. Doubles abound with terrifying consequences in Deren's defining work.

***Neighbours* (Norman McLaren, 1952), 8min, original score**

A wonder of pixilation (the stop animation of live bodies) that playfully bears the weight of apocalyptic dread and pacifistic ideals at midcentury. Near identical neighbors go to war over a golden flower; neither returns home happy.

***A Game with Stones* (Jan Svankmajer, 1965), 9min, original score**

A paean to the alchemy of the imagination by the legendary Czech surrealist. The film is a strong example of Svankmajer's mastery of stop-motion technique, and his philosophical interest in the uncanny vitality of the object world, especially antiquated and "outmoded" things.

***Dante Quartet* (Stan Brakhage, 1987), 8min, silent**

An epic of hand coloring that took six years to complete, in homage directly to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and indirectly to Méliès, whose hand-colors Brakhage once noted "vibrate [his images] into another dimension of thought." In four sections, the quartet recycles material from different formats—IMAX, Cinemascope, 35mm, and 16mm—and abstractly layers tints on top that submerge and transform the original images into abstract explosions of color. These pulsating hues thus becomes another dimension of Mélièsian doubling.