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Madeleine Malthête-Méliès, *Magnificent Méliès: The Authorized Biography*. Translated by Kel Pero. Edited by Matthew Solomon. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022. 402 pp. $90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780472132584; $34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780472039876.

Review by Aurore Spiers, Texas A&M University.

Celebrated with a nod to *Le Voyage dans la lune* (1902) during the 2024 Paris Olympics opening ceremony, Georges Méliès is well known as one of the greatest pioneers of French cinema. Countless books, museum exhibits, and screening series, not to mention many films, including *Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011), have been released in recent years that contribute to public knowledge and appreciation of Méliès.[1] Yet for scholars in French cultural studies and film and media studies, the primary reference remains *Georges Méliès, l'enchanteur*, which Méliès's granddaughter Madeleine Malthête-Méliès wrote and published in the 1970s and then revised and republished in the 2010s.[2] Thanks to editor Matthew Solomon and translator Kel Pero, Malthête-Méliès's major biography is now available in English for the first time under the title *Magnificent Méliès: The Authorized Biography*.

As Solomon explains in his thoughtful introduction to *Magnificent Méliès*, "an important part of Méliès scholarship, Méliès film preservation efforts, and custodianship of the Méliès legacy has been a continuing family affair," starting with Madeleine Malthête-Méliès (née Fontaine, 1923-2018) in the 1940s (p. xxv). Malthête-Méliès was Méliès's granddaughter from his daughter Georgette and one of the foremost experts on Méliès's cinema. Trained as a secretary, she briefly worked for Henri Langlois during the early years of the Cinémathèque française. She later founded the association Les Amis de Georges Méliès, which she ran with her husband René Malthête, and then with her children and some other close relatives. Through Les Amis de Georges Méliès, Malthête-Méliès and her family worked to collect archival materials, most importantly Méliès's films, only a few of which had been located by the time of his death in 1938. In the appendix to *Magnificent Méliès*, the English translation of "Rapatrier l'oeuvre de Georges Méliès. La Collection de Madeleine Malthête-Méliès," by Malthête-Méliès's daughter, Anne-Marie Malthête-Quévrain, gives more details about the monumental efforts of Malthête-Méliès to recover not only Méliès's lost films but also many objects, props, photographs, and drawings now housed at the Cinémathèque française. Importantly, Malthête-Méliès, two of her

children, Anne-Marie Malthête-Quévrain and Jacques Malthête, her cousin Marie-Hélène Lehérissey, and Marie-Hélène's son Lawrence Lehérissey also organized lectures and screenings around the world that further contributed to Méliès's rediscovery among historians and the public alike.

In *Magnificent Méliès*, Malthête-Méliès offers a detailed narration of Méliès's life and career, one that Solomon rightly describes as both a "pioneering historical work" and a "deeply personal and often rather touching account" (p. xxiv). To meet the demands of the book's original publisher, Malthête-Méliès was required to include several fictitious scenes and dialogues, but not permitted to provide footnotes, which calls into question the empirical validity of several chapters. Yet, as Solomon emphasizes, the book still stands on solid historical ground, not only because Malthête-Méliès herself did serious archival research, but also because two of her children, Anne-Marie Malthête-Quévrain and Jacques Malthête, provided further corrections based on their expertise and extant family archives. *Magnificent Méliès* ultimately sheds light on several key aspects of Méliès's cinema that remain little known but deserve our attention, particularly as we scholars and historians continue to examine how mass culture developed in France at the turn of the twentieth century.

In addition to a brief author's preface, the editor's introduction, and the appendix by Malthête-Quévrain, *Magnificent Méliès* contains twenty-five chapters with numerous illustrations (photographs, drawings, film stills, posters, and news clippings) from the Méliès family archives. Chapters one through six focus on Méliès's early years, during which he slowly moved away from the family business to dedicate himself entirely to the magic theater. With cobblers and shoemakers on both his father's and mother's sides, Méliès was destined to join the thriving family shoe manufacturing company. Malthête-Méliès explains that the French economic context during the second half of the nineteenth-century made it possible for small business owners like the Mélièses to become rich industrialists with access to Parisian society (p. 7). Although Méliès worked as "assistant accountant" (among other jobs) in the company for several years, he mostly enjoyed taking part in society events at the theater and other entertainment venues (p. 23). During a visit to the Egyptian Hall in London, a famous magician invited him to perform a few tricks on stage, which marked Méliès's debut as an "amateur illusionist" (p. 37-8). Back in Paris, he continued to hone his skills, appearing at the Théâtre Grévin and other small theaters. He also practiced drawing and painting, published caricatures in the satirical press, and became interested in photography, which, together with magic, would have a tremendous impact on his filmmaking career.

Chapters seven through ten begin with Méliès selling his shares of the family business to purchase the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in the summer of 1888 (p. 69). Founded by famous magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin and already known as a major Parisian venue for stage illusions, the Théâtre Robert-Houdin became Méliès's experimental ground. As Malthête-Méliès

argues, his performances at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin "foreshadowed his cinematographic career and formed the basis for all the discoveries he would make. If Georges Méliès can today be considered the creator of cinematographic spectacle...it is undoubtedly because, between 1890 and 1895, in his small venue on boulevard des Italiens, he developed revolutionary techniques that would one day give birth to the seventh art" (p. 94). Although Méliès wasn't the first and only film pioneer to experiment with special effects (as Malthête-Méliès sometimes claims), his background in the magic theater certainly shaped the visual style and spectatorial address of what Tom Gunning would later call the "cinema of attractions."[3] Not only did Méliès adapt several of his stage *féeries* for the screen, including *Les Farces de la lune* in *Le Voyage dans la lune*, but he also drew on many magic tricks to develop such cinematic techniques as double exposure and stop-motion animation.

Chapters eleven through twenty cover the bulk of Méliès's filmmaking career, from his first encounter with motion pictures in the early 1890s to his growing financial difficulties in the late 1900s. While these chapters tell a now-familiar history, Malthête-Méliès demonstrates a unique talent for bringing to life Méliès's rapidly waning success. According to her, it was thanks to the actress Fanny Manieux, also known as Jehanne d'Alcy, that Méliès became interested in Robert Paul's experimentations with motion pictures in the spring of 1894 (p. 103). After Méliès attended a screening of the Lumière cinematograph on December 28, 1895, he travelled to London where he purchased one of Paul's projection devices, called a "theatrograph," along with several films (p. 117). Méliès then organized screenings at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin while working to develop his own camera adapted from Paul's theatrograph. From 1896 through 1909, Méliès produced many original films at his new Montreuil studio, including trick films, historical reconstructions, comic films, "films d'opinion" (about the Dreyfus affair, for example), and even "boudoir" films, many of which featured Jehanne d'Alcy, who also served as the head of his costume atelier. But while Méliès became quite successful in France and abroad, he soon encountered overwhelming challenges. In Malthête-Méliès's words, "Méliès, the artist, the poet, was ill-equipped to compete with greedy and terribly realistic French or American businessmen. Cinematographic art had become an industry in which there would soon be no place for independent producers like him" (p. 242).

The fourth and final section of the book, chapters twenty-one through twenty-five, focuses first on Méliès's downfall and second on his public rediscovery. After making six final films for Pathé, including *Les Hallucinations du Baron de Münchausen* (1911) and *A la conquête du Pôle* (1912), none of which were particularly successful, Méliès returned to the Théâtre Robert-Houdin full-time. He would continue to produce theatrical shows and to perform on stage for several more years, often with his children Georgette and André, but he never again took part in the cinema. Out of financial necessity, he later became a toy and candy merchant at the Gare Montparnasse where his now-wife Jehanne d'Alcy operated a small shop. Yet as Malthête-Méliès emphasizes, Méliès was never completely forgotten. Not only was he asked to lead the

Chambre syndicale de la prestidigitation, but he also received much attention from film critics, historians, and cinephiles. In the last decade of his life, Méliès received many accolades, including the Legion of Honor in 1931, which sealed his place in French and global film history.

In addition to providing valuable information about Méliès, Malthête-Méliès deepens our understanding of early cinema in profound ways. First, she shows that early cinema developed in close connection with the popular theater and the satirical press, both of which Méliès not only worked in before making films but also continued to engage with throughout his life and career. Intermediality indeed emerges as a key takeaway from *Magnificent Méliès*, one that encourages us to think about the complex ways in which early cinema contributed to the broader mass cultural ecosystem in Belle Époque France. Second, Malthête-Méliès reveals how Méliès's film enterprise (which he never officially formed into a legal company) functioned as a family business not just centered around Méliès but also dependent upon the labor of many others, including several women like Méliès's first wife Eugénie (as accountant), his daughter Georgette (as camera operator and accountant), and his second wife Jehanne d'Alcy (as actress and costume designer).[4] As feminist film scholars continue to uncover women's contributions to French and global film history, Malthête-Méliès suggests that women were also valuable collaborators for Méliès in the very first decades of the cinema. Third, *Magnificent Méliès* offers a slight corrective to the common historical narrative according to which cinema only began to be perceived as an art form (as opposed to a form of mass entertainment) with the European avant-gardes of the 1920s. As the book clearly demonstrates, Méliès considered himself an artist whose background in the magic theater informed his cinematic practices. Malthête-Méliès in fact argues that Méliès's downfall was due to the demands of capitalism that put unbearable pressure on his artistic pursuits but came to dominate the rest of the French film industry. In other words, the dialectic between art and capitalism was already at play during Méliès's time, which changes how we might understand early cinema.

Finally, *Magnificent Méliès* tells us about the important role played by women in the writing and preservation of French and global film history. As countless other female relatives--wives, sisters, daughters, and granddaughters--did for countless other male pioneers, Malthête-Méliès worked tirelessly to ensure that Méliès wouldn't be forgotten. *Magnificent Méliès*, produced in collaboration with Anne-Marie Malthête-Quévrain, Jacques Malthête, Matthew Solomon, and Kel Pero, is the result of that labor of love.

NOTES

[1] Major publications about Méliès from the first two decades of the twenty-first century include Jacques Malthête and Laurent Mannoni, *Méliès, magie et cinéma* (Paris: Paris-Musées, 2002); Jacques Malthête and Laurent Mannoni, *L'Oeuvre de Georges Méliès* (Paris: Editions de

la Martinière, 2008); Matthew Solomon, ed., *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Laurent Mannoni, *Méliès: La Magie du cinéma* (Paris: Flammarion, 2020); and Matthew Solomon, *Méliès Boots: Footwear and Film Manufacturing in Second Industrial Revolution Paris* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

[2] Madeleine Malthête-Méliès, *Georges Méliès, l'enchanteur* (Grandvilliers: La Tour Verte, 2011).

[3] The "cinema of attractions" comes from Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde" in Gunning, *The Attractions of the Moving Image: Essays on History, Theory, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Daniel Morgan, 41-49 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025). The essay was first published in *Wide Angle* 8 (1986): 63-70 and revised and republished four years later in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrativ*e, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, 56-62 (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

[4] For more on Georgette Méliès, see Jacques Malthête, "Georgette Méliès," trans. Aurore Spiers in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2016). https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-14t0-y593.

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