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# Review of *Méliès to 3D: the Cinema Machine* exhibition at the Cinémathèque de Paris (October 5th-January 29th, 2017)

David Lipson

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- 1 The title might lead one to believe the exhibit is about cinematic pioneers like Méliès, D.W. Griffith and Serguei Eisenstein among others, but except for a part dedicated to Méliès at the beginning they are nowhere to be found. Neither is it about famous historic cinema actors like Gloria Swanson, Marlon Brando or Elizabeth Taylor to name but a few. The true stars of the exhibit go by the name of Mitchell BNC, Bell and Howell and Todd-AO. We learn about Technicolor, Cinemascope and the Vitaphone projector. Here, the history and evolution of cinema are shown through the lens of the machines and technology that made the filmmaking process possible. Indeed, the exhibit, with over 300 pieces on display, is replete with machines, devices, contraptions of all sorts related to the seventh art. This exhibition, the first of its kind linking technique and esthetics in cinema<sup>1</sup>, can be traced back to the Will Day collection exhibited at the Science Museum of London in 1922, which was later sold to Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque of Paris in 1959<sup>2</sup>.
- 2 The exhibit begins with an initial narrow corridor lined with old posters from France, the USA and Russia, leading up to the aforementioned Méliès excerpts and camera display. The hallway continues turning on itself and leading in the opposite direction, lined with still more posters and antique cinematic paraphernalia such as an old Pathé Gaumont 1930 clock from London or a Belgium Ciné neon sign dating back to 1950. In this second corridor, the transparent glass wall on the left gives us a glimpse of the pièce de résistance where all the action is taking place. This impression is immediately confirmed when one comes to the end of the second corridor and enters a large rectangular room where the eye is immediately overloaded by several different items that compete for attention.

- 3 Perhaps in an effort to mimic modern day media oversaturation, there are non-stop cinematic projections on numerous screens, with two TVs displaying looped excerpts as well. The two long sides of the rectangular room are linked by four individual bridge-like zones that likewise contain nonstop projections. In full center stage of the room, large old-model projectors preside over the myriad excerpts playing. At the back of the room—if you are going forward from the hall—are fragments of film indicating in great detail all the technical possibilities that the film reel can provide. The left-hand side of the exhibit tells the story of the birth of cinema. Here we find Edison’s kinetoscope as well as other bizarre obscure machines from yesteryear. The right-hand side of the room tells the story of the silent film era and as you move forward, a projection of the *Jazz Singer* lies with the original speakers hidden in a deep alcove as the exhibit proceeds into the talkie era. The back of the room is devoted to modern techniques like 3D and virtual reality.
- 4 Just in front of the cinema fragments at the back of the room, is a huge projector designed especially for this exhibition—so the guide told us—in order to show a 10-minute excerpt of *Le mépris* nonstop. The machine, open on one side, reveals its inner workings as the reel winds its way through the apparatus. It reminded me of the anatomy exhibition at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, showing the human body cut open on one side, displaying the inner anatomy of the human body. In fact, the whole exhibition had this Museum of Science-type feel to it. The show laid bare all the technical details of every aspect of filmmaking: the camera, the sound, the lighting, the evolution of different techniques, Cinerama, technicolor and 3D. It also vaguely reminded me of another Chicago museum: the Field Museum of Natural History with its stuffed animals and reconstructed dinosaur skeletons here represented by huge ancient long-forgotten film devices.
- 5 One of the more innovative aspects of the exhibit could be found in the back right-hand corner of the big rectangular room. I spotted several people sporting nifty cardboard virtual reality-style head fixtures and wearing headsets. These zombie-like individuals were moving their heads left to right, while standing on a carpet in a small area in front of the back exhibition stand. There were two hosts handing out and explaining these special devices. I went and tried one myself and learned that it could be powered by one’s own cell phone by connecting up to youtube and choosing the correct cinematograph file<sup>3</sup>. A truly rich 360-degree visual story of the history of cinema followed. Not only could lateral head movements allow you to see all around you, but moving your head up and down also enlarged your field of vision to see above and below the action on the screen. The name of the device is called “Google Cardboard”.
- 6 Despite the rich educational experience, this exhibit is not without criticism. At the end, there is a T-shirt with a series of pictures of Eadweard Muybridge’s galloping horse printed on it. Why put this T-shirt at the end of the exhibition, taking into account the chronological nature of the exhibition and that Muybridge did his experiments in 1878 (wrongly attributed as 1886 on the T-shirt)? Indeed, *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop* is considered by some to be one of the earliest silent films<sup>4</sup>. In the birth of the cinema section, Jules Marey, who did similar experiments in animated photography in 1882, is mentioned. When I asked the guide about this oversight, she simply replied “Marey is French, Muybridge is English”. Of course, to be totally fair, Muybridge is not the only one left out, there is no mention of Christiaan Huygen’s magic lantern, Joseph Plateau’s zoetrope or John Barnes Linett’s flip book, either. Another criticism is the unorthodox

visit route to follow the numbers of the exhibition. “1. The birth of cinema” was at the back of the main room on the left, then “2. The silent film era” was on the other side on the right opposite. Interestingly enough, the guide did not follow this route but instead chose a more spatial-logic approach starting at the back and moving along the walls, instead of undertaking a crisscross route inside the main room. There is no audio guide, so the exhibit-goers not fortunate enough to be present when the “*conférencier*” was there to guide them would have a harder time understanding the logic and educational aspect of the exhibit. As I mentioned at the beginning, the title is also not clear. “Du kinéscope à la 3D : la machine cinéma” certainly would have been more fitting, albeit not as commercially appealing as “De Méliès à la 3D : la machine cinéma”.

- 7 Despite these minor flaws, all in all, it was for me, someone already familiar with the history of cinema, an enjoyable and enriching experience. Indeed, the excerpts projected showcased iconic and groundbreaking moments in filmmaking history, such as the famous two-minute sequence of sound from the *Jazz Singer*, Dziga Vertov’s masterpiece *The Man with the Movie Camera*, and his use of the reflexive documentary mode, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le mépris*, where we see the Mitchell camera in action on a film set with his cinematographer, to name but a few. The guided tour was definitely of interest as well. We learned all sorts of interesting fun facts about the exhibition and the history of the filmmaking process: the guide showed us a manual camera and demonstrated the speed needed to film correctly (two turns per second), and told us that 90% of silent films were burnt and recycled. She also showed us the first TV that was made in 1926, an alien-looking contraption that nobody would identify as a TV if not for the inscription “Televisor” on top of it. It is for these reasons that I highly recommend the exhibition as the novice, the amateur and the cinematic scholar will all find something of interest for the reasonable price of 11 euros (free for children under 6).

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## NOTES

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## ABSTRACTS

The exhibition delves into the history and evolution of cinema, shown through the lens of the machines and technology that made the filmmaking process possible. It reveals how technological progress brought about new forms, and conversely, how esthetic pursuit—the desire to see new images—gave birth to new devices and techniques. <http://www.cinematheque.fr/cycle/de-Méliès-a-la-3d-la-machine-cinema-356.html>.

L'exposition explore les grandes étapes de l'histoire du cinéma, à travers le prisme des machines et la technologie qui l'a rendu possible. On verra comment la technique engendre des formes inédites, et réciproquement, comment la recherche esthétique – le désir de voir de nouvelles images – donne naissance à de nouveaux appareils ou procédés. <http://www.cinematheque.fr/cycle/de-Méliès-a-la-3d-la-machine-cinema-356.html>.

## INDEX

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