

Article
Amrit Gangar

The Moon, Men, Movies and The Momentous Georges Méliès: Valorizing Violence, ‘Victory’ and Vainglory

Moon’s Mastication, Mise-en-Scene and Motion Pictures

The year 2018 celebrated the 120th anniversary of the Moon’s first mastication by Marie-Georges-Jean Méliès (1861-1938). He began with her mouth in 1898 but had actually ended up eyeing her eye in 1902. In 1898, malevolence was moving invisibly somewhere and the Satan slithering around with a woman in the game of hide-and-seek. It might sound or seem strange, but the French magician-moviemaker had discovered the cinematographic *mise-en-scene* accidentally once filming on a road. On the way, something serious was to happen too, albeit in amusement!

Méliès’s accidental-anecdotal *mise-en-scène* story goes somewhat like this: One day, he was filming at the Place de l’Opera and his camera jammed precisely when a bus was passing. After some tinkering, he was able to resume filming, but by this time the bus had gone and a hearse was passing in front of his lens. When Méliès screened the film, he discovered something unexpected – a moving bus seemed to transform itself instantly into a hearse. ([*FILM ART: An Introduction*, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, 1997: The McGraw Hill, New York, p.171) David Bordwell, the eminent American film theorist and historian, variously describes Méliès as “cinema’s first master of technique” and “the father of cinematic spectacle”. (ibid, and in *On the History of Film Style*, David Bordwell, 1997: Harvard University Press, p. 21)

Well, many moons ago, Méliès had found the magical powers of *mise-en-scene* and then he was to devote most of his efforts to cinematographic conjuring, including sending his ‘Men’ to the Moon. But I would venture to assume that Méliès movements to and on the Moon had a certain historicity attached to them. In this essay, I would try and attempt to explore this political-aesthetic phenomenon symbolized by a certain visual iconicity of our times, the iconicity of invasion and violence, of technical felicity acquired by the motion picture machine! The ways of controlling and concentrating ‘power’ carry their own logistics and legitimacies!

The Mandate and the Mission

The history of Western Europe is also the history of invasions on and the colonization of the weaker and naïve national-geographical-anthropological entities in the continents of Asia, Africa and the Americas! And to my mind, Méliès's Moons or the Moon-movies fit into this power-centric self-mandated missionary *mayajaal* / illusion. The *Mission civilisatrice* or 'The Civilizing Mission' was the prime-mover as it seems in retrospect when Méliès set his mind on the moon. Not only on the Moon but also he would soon set his voyaging ambitions on the Sun! In 1904, he would make *La voyage a travers l'impossible* or *The Impossible Voyage*! and make the Sun swallow an entire train (wasn't it a reminding echo of the Lumieres' train?!). Méliès wanted to enter the blazing Sun through Jules Verne's play *Journey Through the Impossible*.

A War over Colonization of the Morning Star: A Lucian story

Within our Moon-Sun stories, a reference to Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120-190CE) could be pertinently interesting to trace this European imaginary / literary lineage of colonization. Lucian, the satirist from Samosata on the Euphrates, started as an apprentice sculptor but subsequently turned to rhetoric! He visited Italy as a successful travelling lecturer. He also visited Gaul, a historical region of Western Europe during the Iron Age, which at that time was inhabited by Celtic tribes, encompassing present day France, Luxembourg, Belgium, most of Switzerland and parts of Northern Italy, Netherlands and Germany, particularly the west bank of the Rhine.

That was prior to his settling in Athens and subsequently developing his original brand of satire. He wrote in the Greek language and he was one of the first novelists in Occidental civilization. He is noted for his scoffing of nature though wittily. Among his best works is *A True Story*, the 'tallest of tall stories about a voyage to the Moon.' The first printed edition of a selection of his works was issued at Florence in 1499. The novel begins with an explanation that the story is not at all 'true' and that everything in it is, in fact, a complete and utter lie. The narrative begins with Lucian and his fellow travellers journeying out past the Pillars of Heracles (the phrase that was applied in antiquity to the promontories that flank the entrance to the Strait of Gibraltar).

Blown off course by a storm, they come to an island with a river of wine filled with fish and bears, a marker indicating that Heracles and Dionysus have travelled to this point, and trees that look like women. Shortly after leaving the island, they are caught up by a whirlwind and taken to the Moon, where they

find themselves embroiled in a full-scale war between the King of the Moon and the King of the Sun over **colonization** of the Morning Star. Both armies include bizarre hybrid life forms. The armies of the Sun win the war by clouding over the Moon and blocking out the Sun's light. Both parties then come to a peace agreement. Lucian then describes the life on the Moon and how it is different from life on Earth. (Emphasis added)

After returning to Earth, the adventurers are swallowed by a 200-mile (320 km)-long whale, in whose belly they discover a variety of fish people, whom they wage a war against and triumph over. They kill the whale by starting a bonfire and escape by propping its mouth open. (*LUCIAN* with English translation by M.D. Macleod, VII of the Eight Volumes, 1961: Harvard University Press; also see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_True_Story)

Méliès's Mandate

Nevertheless, it was Méliès, who, for the first time ever, brought the Moon (and the Sun) from the sky on to the screen or flew men to the Moon - in a funny way, but fun could also turn dangerously serious, as the Moon could be made maleficent! Obviously, the Civilizing Mission was the euphemism for the Colonizing Mission and it has been in operation in many different forms for over centuries, submitting many smart justifications for acts of commission!

When Georges Méliès made his and the world's first sci-fi films, France was already one of the major colonizing powers. At its apex, she was one among the largest empires in history. In 1939, the total amount of land under French sovereignty had reached 11, 500, 000 square km or 4, 400, 000 sq. miles with a human population of 110 million. Méliès had passed away in 1938, just a year before this colonizing climax. The West European 'Civilizing Mission' had its logical justification and legitimacy as it had presumed that the rest of the world was savage and barbaric and needed to be civilized and hence ruled and educated in the manners of civility (read servility). The West had the power over waters, air and earth with both their cunning and the canon! Seemingly, Méliès's 1902 silent moon-movie has all these signs and the implicit historic mandate as it seems; he had the mastery of technique and conjuring power. What is perhaps interesting is the case of the pioneer Eadweard Muybridge whose act of homicide was not only condoned but justified, and that perhaps becomes an alibi for our larger argument, too.

A Quick Transient Shift from Méliès to Muybridge: Homicide justified

As noted above, the discovery of the laws of 'motion' vis-à-vis the invention of 'motion pictures' has behind it a personal story of a 'justification' to homicide;

and for a brief while, let us move from Méliès to Muybridge. While Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) was to thrill us with his pioneering experiments with animal-locomotion twenty years prior to Méliès's first forays into the Moon, he had already undergone a real thrilling episode of life himself and was strangely rescued from a penal punishment! Two years after his marriage (in 1872) with Flora Shallcross Stone, Muybridge suspected that the child Flora had given birth to was actually fathered by a drama critic Major Harry Larkyns. Muybridge had spotted the lovers' correspondence in evidence.

As it happens in the so-called reel and real life, Muybridge, in his rage, tracked down Larkyns and shot him dead point blank. He was arrested and put behind bars. During the trial, he pleaded guilty but reasoned impassive indifference and uncontrolled explosions of emotion, besides becoming insane. The jury dismissed the insanity plea, but acquitted the photographer on the grounds of "justifiable homicide". Exculpation! As perhaps a plausible corollary, the 'justification' story had its (personal-to-general) extension to the so-called Civilizing Mission! And as twentieth century history of the so-called 'justifications' shows, they found their ways not only to 'homicides' but also 'genocides'!

Well, on 15th June 1878, Eadweard Muybridge thrilled the world when he caught a horse in the act of flying. Muybridge used high-speed stop-motion photography to capture a horse's motion. The series of photos proved that the horse had all four feet in the air during some part of its stride. This settled an old argument and helped start a new medium and industry. Eadweard Muybridge was the "Man Who Stopped Time!" as Mitchell Leslie said in his *Stanford Magazine* (May / June 2001) article.

Back to Méliès and the Moon: With Paradoxes of History and Humanity

However, in this essay, my attempt would also be to see how the history of motion pictures begins as the history of both an 'arrival' and the 'exodus' in the same French coastal town of La Ciotat! And how the history of motion pictures is inaugurated by one of the most violent images that has gone on to become a visual 'icon' of our times! We begin with this image that has perpetuated the inherent violence treated as visual amusement and that perhaps is the greater tragedy of our time, of humanity at large!

The Iconic Image: Violence as Entertainment



This image circulating in global minds has even turned ‘violence’ iconic; the iconicity that we have been imbibing within ourselves generations after generations. Our children applaud at the deadly rocket dashing right into the Moon’s eye, and perhaps we are awaiting the next rocket about to attack the Moon’s remaining eye! Will her complete blinding entertain us more? In the era of multiplexes, as my gut feeling indicates, largely during last decade and a half, the production of thrillers (with violent scenes) has gone up. This could largely be the result of what I call the politics of ‘viewing’ space (impacting production), largely emerging from the American capitalism!

Méliès’s Moon: 1898

The image that we just saw above is the image made iconic-on-earth in 1902, but Méliès had already masticated the Moon four years prior to that. It was an astronomer’s dream that needed a Satan and an army of ghosts, and semi-naked women! In 1898, Georges Méliès released *La Lune a un Metre* or *The Moon at a Meter* aka *The Astronomer’s Dream*; this three-minute film (still extant) was heralding the birth of sci-fi or space films.

For Méliès, the Magician, the Moon was an emotionally malleable disc with a face – eyes, mouth, lips and all, and the French man had already had the fascination for celestial bodies, he would imbue them with an element of eroticism too. In the 1898 Moon film, Méliès, the astronomer is studying at his desk when Satan appears and disappears, while in turn, a woman appearing and disappearing, too! The astronomer draws a figure of globe on a blackboard and

the globe turns into a sun-like head with limbs and starts moving on the board. The astronomer looks through the telescope and he sees the Moon with a large face. The Moon has eaten away the astronomer's telescope but when she opens her mouth, men begin to tumble out. Gradually, the Moon turns into a crescent and a spirit in the form of a female enticing and eluding the astronomer. The Moon's large face appears again and the astronomer jumps into her mouth

1898: The Astronomer jumping into the Moon's Mouth



This gaping mouth of 1898 seems to be at the Moon's volition but four years later, Méliès wanted to take away the Moon's sovereignty and yet wanted her mouth wide open. How? Shove a deadly rocket into her eye!

1902: the Moon and her Mouth Gaping in Pain



When Dadasaheb Phalke made *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, Méliès had already made 520 films! Phalke reinstalls Kamsa's severed head, Méliès's rocket in the Moon's eye sticks, stays!

When Lumiere Brothers launched their three-in-one Cinematographe (printer, projector, camera) in 1895, Méliès was spellbound by the invention. He purchased a film projector and, combining his flair for magic with his interest in cinema, he would screen his 'magical' films at his own Theatre Robert-Houdin. He had also set up his own studio of the Star Film Company, and acted in some of his productions. Between 1896 and 1913 when D.G. (Dadasaheb) Phalke made his and India's first silent feature film *Raja Harishchandra*, Méliès had already made about 520 films and pioneered techniques of special effects, including stop motion, slow motion, dissolve, double exposure and split screen, vanishing tricks, explosions, severed limbs! His films, some of them inspired by Jules Verne's books, were among the first works of science fiction.

But I would argue that Georges Méliès also introduced and launched an unprecedented violence in motion pictures that imbibed and endured it, turning it as entertainment and hence becoming more problematic, like the racist, violent Disney cartoons made later!

Phalke had also trained himself as a magician and he employed magical tricks in his films. In *Shree Krishna Janma* (Birth of Shree Krishna, 1918), for instance, he severs the evil Kamsa's head and tosses up outside the frame but he doesn't keep Kamsa in pain for perpetuity, he brings the head back and reinstalls firmly on his neck. It was a humanitarian act, so to say. On the contrary, shoving the rocket deep down the Moon's eye, Méliès prefers to let it be there, causing the Moon an everlasting bloody pain! He has given us a one-eyed Moon forever!

Evil Kamsa in Dadasaheb Phalke's silent *Shree Krishna Janma* (Birth of Shree Krishna, 1918)



Kamsa's severed head returning to its roots: Phalke's compassionate reinstallation. Kamsa also got his consorts (they are males impersonating as females) to caress him. Concept: Amrit Gangar; screen shots and collage by Jay Kholia.

India's Trip to Moon or Chand par Chadayee

Only two years ahead of the Americans landing on the moon, was released a 'B' grade Indian / Hindi film *Chand par Chadayee* (Dir. T.P. Sundaram, 1967), which, true to its tradition of 'B' grade films, called itself *Trip to Moon*, with grammatical imperfection. It had nothing to do with Méliès's silent film, not even as its lousy imitation. The Hindi word 'Chadayee', in its title, would literally mean 'invading' or 'attacking' or simply 'climbing' or perhaps more appropriately 'a fight on the moon'.

In fact, going by its narrative-schema, it has nothing to do with the moon either. The moon is just a hilarious 'prop'. With five songs and dances besides ample sprinkling of fight scenes with thumping background score, this 'B' film stars the well-known actor-wrestler Dara Singh (Captain Anand) with his side-kick Bhagu (Master Bhagwan) and the villain (Nazir Hussain) along with woman-astronauts played by Tamil actresses G. Ratna and Kanchanmala; the iconic Bollywood cabaret girl Helen joining them in a dance number. There are sword fights, fist fights, wrestling fights, one-man successfully fighting against many and mighty including a ferocious rhinoceros, a Godzilla and a robot! But the moon is left unhurt because these are basically men's fights over women. On the moon and amidst mountains, melodrama needs to be produced, and for that we have the mandatory Mā (Mother). The film almost begins with the son, the macho Captain Anand repeatedly crying the word Mā! Mā! Mā! For Indian *nakshatra* mythology, the Moon (Chandra or Moon God) is husband to 27 star-constellations (nakshatra) and for Indian children; the Moon is Māmā (Maternal Uncle)!

In Hindi film *Chand Par Chadayee* (Trip to Moon, 1967), fighting on the Moon for the Loved and the Be-loved!



Before Mā enters melodrama, the film, by default, has to have a song and dance within five minutes of its narrative-launch: and we have the kitschy astronaut-

heroin cavourting amidst plaster of Paris Himalayas. Thus the film predictably turns the *sci-fi* into a *sus-thri* (suspense-thriller with a four-corner love-story) accentuated by the table-top-trick celestial actions! The presumption, however, universally remains that the Moon was inhabited by savages – the earth- and human-centric view! Unlike the Indian film, in his trip to the moon, Méliès remains more seriously and rationally ambitious as he carries behind him the long French history of colonization and rationality.

French Colonial Empire: Méliès's Legacy of Conquering the Moon

Just to reiterate, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the French colonization had spread across the world, across continents. France was the second largest colonial power after the British. The French colonial domain extended over 12,898,000 square km or 4,980,000 sq. miles of land at its height in the 1920s and 1930s. The Moon's total surface area is measured at 38 million sq. km (14.6 million sq. miles), which is less than the total surface area of the continent of Asia – 44.5 million sq. km (17.2 million sq. miles). Comparatively, we can have an idea of the largeness of the French colonial control over the world. Eyeing the Moon early on in the history of motion pictures was perhaps within such historical colonizing ambition and the desire to rule!

Here, my initial story of 'Mandate and the Mission' completes a full circle. Just around the time Méliès had made his first moon movie in 1898, France had already annexed Tunisia, and in "the ten years that followed, she participated with Germany, Great Britain and Italy, in the race for territory in Africa." Between the years 1830 and 1850, France had acquired the whole of Algeria and Constantine. In fact, the French colonial enterprise in Africa had begun in 1637, when Claude de Rochefort built fort St. Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River on the west coast and explored the interior for 100 miles. [*French Colonial Expansion in West Africa, the Sudan and the Sahara*, Norman Dwight Harris, North Western University, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3, August 11, pp. 353-373]

From North Africa to South-East Asia, the Middle East to the South Pacific, millions were subjugated, repressed and murdered as French rulers scrambled to secure resources and markets for manufactured goods and profitable investments. (*The Crimes of French Imperialism*, Liz Walsh, Op-ed, *War and Peace*, 25 November 2015)

Méliès's French men on the moon and perpetration of violence: Celebration of Triumphalism

I would like to call *mise-en-scene*, the *mānas-en-scene*, where *mānas* is *mind*, and the new term would indicate the mindset behind conceptualization and construction of certain scenes, with reference to Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). When the team of French moon-voyagers land on the moon and begin their exploration of the land there, they eventually confront resistance of the local inhabitants, who have to be obviously 'savages' with primitive sticks and spears.

The more powerful, advanced and 'civilized' French keep 'explosively' shooting the local 'savages' but at some moment beat a retreat and start their return journey to Earth in their space ship, one of the moon-inhabitants jumps over and is taken with them as an obvious booty. Back in France, each one of them is crowned by the king and there is a royal reception with beautiful, scantily-clad girls and brass bands cheering them. It is a huge celestial victory over the moon. As it appears, this was a possible extension of the French colonial power!

The last scene with finger raised victoriously towards the sky in Méliès's 1902 film indicates the French supremacist sign! (See the last frame in the collage given below). The great achievers, the Melies's moon-voyagers, are individually crowned by the King; the captive moon-savage is paraded as an 'exhibit' of victory. It is the French triumphalism that is being celebrated!

In 1902 when Méliès made his moon movie, the France was still expanding its ambitious colonial empire across Africa and Asia. It was in the year of Méliès's trip to the moon, the French colonialists in the so-called Indochina moved their capital in Cochinchina, from Saigon to Hanoi (Tonkin). Cochinchina (Cochinchine in French) was a region that encompassed the southern third of current Vietnam, whose principal city was Saigon. It was a French colony from 1862 to 1954. Violence was part of the fabric of French rule, so it is in Méliès's moon-movie!

The French in India

The French establishments existed in India even after she gained independence from the British colonialists, e.g. Pondicherry (1765-1954), Karaikal (1725-1954), Yanam / Yanam (1747-1954), Mahe (1721-1954), Chandannagar (1673-1952). The last European people to arrive in India were the French. The French East India Company was formed in 1664 AD during the reign of King Louis XIV to trade with India. In 1668 AD, the French established their first factory at

Surat and in 1669 AD, established another French factory at Masaulipatam. In 1673 AD, the Mughal Subedar of Bengal allowed the French to set up a township at Chandannagar. As the time passed, there came a change in their motives and they began to consider India as their colony. Note: All the years indicated in parentheses may not be precise because occupation periods were divided between the British and the French colonialists, also partly the Dutch.

Méliès's supremacist sign in 1902 – *A Trip to the Moon!* Celebration of Triumphalism!



Concept: Amrit Gangar, screen shots and collage by Jay Kholia.

Blurring the line between the Fiction and the Non-Fiction Film: Méliès's trip to the moon in 1902 and the Americans landing on the moon in 1969

Interestingly, Melies's fiction or fantasy of Man landing on the Moon in 1902 becomes an actual fact in 1969 with the Americans doing so. Apollo 11 was the spaceflight that first landed humans on the Moon. Commander Neil Armstrong and lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin formed the American crew that landed the Apollo Lunar Module 'Eagle' on 20 July 1969, at 20.17 UTC [Universal Time Coordinated; prior to 1972, this time was called Greenwich Mean Time (GMT).] Armstrong became the first person in the world to step onto the lunar surface six hours and 39 minutes later on July 21 at 02.56 UTC; Aldrin joined him 19 minutes later.

While sending 'Men' (Astronauts) to the Moon, the United States of America was also sending many more 'Men' (Soldiers) to fight a devastating war in Vietnam. Just a year prior to this moon landing 'triumph', the US massacre at Mai Lai had happened. On 16 March 1968, the US Army soldiers acting on orders from their commanding officers massacred several hundred innocent Vietnamese civilians. Many women were also raped, their bodies mutilated and their children slaughtered right in front of them. In the year of Man's landing on

the Moon, Vietnam and the world also lost Ho Chi Minh! Those were the days of Cold War between two super powers, the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and the USA (United States of America). And those were also the days of 'space race' between these super powers!

Vietnam War more significant than Man landing on the Moon: *Pratidwandi* (1970)

This reminds me of a memorable job-interview scene from Satyajit Ray's one of Calcutta trilogy films, *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970). In an interview, the young Siddhartha Chaudhury, the job seeker, is asked by one of the panelists – let me transcribe the entire text of this interview since I think it is pertinent to our discussion here:

Panelist 1: What do you regard as the most outstanding and significant event of the last decade?

Siddhartha (pondering, crossing his fingers, as tension builds up in silences and gazes between cuts): The War in Vietnam!

Panelist 1 (probing him further): More significant event than landing on the moon?

Siddhartha (Again silences and gazes building up more tension between cuts): I think so...

Panelist 2: Could you tell us why you think so?

Siddhartha: Because the moon landing... You see, we weren't entirely unprepared for the moon landing. We, we, we knew it had to come sometimes, we knew about the space flights, the great advances in space technology, so we knew it had to happen. I am not saying it wasn't a remarkable achievement, but it wasn't unpredictable.

Panelist 1: Do you think the war in Vietnam was unpredictable?

Siddhartha: Not the war itself, but what it has revealed about the Vietnamese people, about their extraordinary power of resistance. Ordinary people, peasants and no one knew they had it in them. I mean this isn't a matter of technology; it's just plain human courage. And it takes your breath away.

Panelist 1 (now the tension has gone visibly deeper): Are you a communist?

Siddhartha: I don't think one has to be in order to admire Vietnam, Sir.

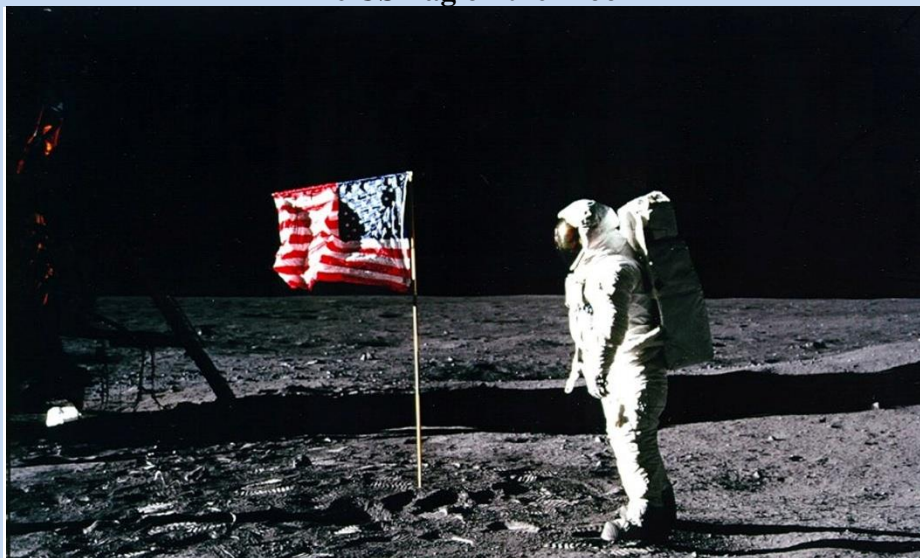
Panelist 1 (perturbed): That doesn't answer my question? However, you may go now. (Predictably, Siddhartha was rejected.)

Obviously, the Moon and My Lai co-existed cruelly. Started in the 1950s, the Vietnam War, according to most historians, had its roots in the conflict in Southeast Asia since the French colonial period of the 1800s. The countries of Asia, Africa and the Americas are still suffering the wounds inflicted by the Western colonialism.

The Lunar Flag Assembly (LFA) and a ‘nationalist’ presence on the Moon and the film *First Man* (2018)

Yet another supremacist sign! LFA was a kit containing a flag of the United States of America designed to be erected on the Moon during the Apollo programme. Six such LFAs were planted on the Moon. Deploying the flag during the Apollo 11 mission proved to be a challenge. Armstrong and Aldrin had trouble inserting the pole into the lunar surface, and they could only manage to get it about seven inches deep. When they backed away from the flag, it proved it could stand on its own. Scientists, however, found the Moon’s dust profile different from the Earth’s. (Wikipedia) Here I would like to refer to the 2018 American commercial film *First Man* directed by Damien Chazelle who earned some criticism from the conservative American politicians for not showing the flag planting scene in the film. Hoisting of the flag is also perceived as hoisting of the national pride, her triumph!

The US flag on the Moon



Buzz Aldrin on the moon on 20 July 1969. Photograph: Neil Armstrong / NASA / EPA; Wikipedia commons.

Méliès’s French voyagers were planting their umbrellas on the Moon’s surface, and those umbrellas were growing upwards into big mushrooms; mushrooming colonies?!

Méliès's fiction, NASA's fact: 1902-1969

The fictional astronaut in Méliès's 1902 film (played by him) also had timed his spaceship to its precision and had all the geometrical-spatial plans in order. These are all 'actualities' but the debate about the 'documentary / non-fiction' - 'fiction' film still survives dialectically, though getting more and more shaky in the Digital Age, which is more vulnerable to image-manipulation. Méliès's trip to the moon providing a crucial anchor in this argumentative algorithm!

I personally believe it is all tentative; the fiction remains so till it becomes a fact as in the case of Méliès's 'fictional' moon-landing and the Americans' 'non-fictional' moon-landing, the so-called fiction had actually turned a fact in just 67 years! In other words, today's fiction could be tomorrow's fact or even vice-versa could be true too!

Debating the Documentary

While curating and organizing the Retrospective programs for the 4th Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short & Animation Films (MIFF) in 1996, in the editorial of the accompanying book, I had attempted to discuss this 'problematic' within the broad propositions of 'truth' and 'reality'. Hegel said, everything is contradictory and contradiction is meant to be true. In one of the short films, Godard made in the beginning of his career, a girl is seen holding Hegel's book *Aesthetics* close to her bosom. Godard saw realism / truth in every phenomenon. (first cited in *Cinema Vimarsha*, Amrit Gangar, 2012: Gujarat Sahitya Akademi, Gandhinagar, p.108)

As it is well known, the word 'documentary' was first used by John Grierson for Robert J. Flaherty's silent film *Moana* (1926) and since then the term has been debated over and over again. In an effort to define non-fiction film, Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, in their anthology, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* include a chapter from Richard Meran Barsan's *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*, 1973. But the approach here seems to be more of a classificatory nature than philosophical.

In the post-televisionary era, its characteristic has been transformed to an extent – audio-visual reality as it seems has acquired a newer dimension. Human life has a different equation with it today than it had decades ago. The Griersonian label was perhaps the outcome of the 'documentary movement' of the 40s in Britain. The early British cinema had been much influenced by German romantic expressionism. The documentary movement was in part a reaction against this influence, and attempt to divert at least one area of cinema back to

its *realist* moorings. About Lumieres' first films Grierson noted, the "scarlet women were in... and reality and the first fine careless rapture were out."

Realism, a Sickness!

And about 'realism', Mani Kaul once told me when I asked him about his equal fondness for both Robert Bresson and Ritwik Ghatak, the two radically different temperaments and the worldviews, his answer was, "They both equally cured me of a sickness called 'realism'." (Amrit Gangar in conversation with Mani Kaul, *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & video 1913-2006*, Eds. Brad Butler and Karen Mirza, 2006: no.w.here, London, p.84)

In his *Notes on Cinematography*, Robert Bresson wrote, "Problem: To make what you see be seen, through the intermediary of a machine that does not see it as you see it. (And to make what you understand be understood through the intermediary of a machine that does not understand it as you do.)" (Cited in *The Rigour of Austerity: Robert Bresson, Luis Bunuel*, Ed. Amrit Gangar, 1989: Federation of Film Societies of India, Mumbai, p.32)

Lumieres / Méliès split: Blunting validity

The classical documentary / fiction split seen between Lumieres and Méliès, I think, no longer holds true as steadfastly as it had earlier; and the 'moon landing' (1902-1969) argument helps us blur and blunt this 'split'. The poet and playwright, James Broughton, even places Lumieres and Freud together, calling them "fellow workers". (*Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, P. Adams Sitney, 2002: OUP). The proposition of the 'documentary reality' and the fictional 'nonreality' has always been dubious and that brings to mind a question Jean-Luc Godard raises in his film *La Chinoise* (1967) through one of the five revolutionaries: "Art is not the reflection of reality; it is the reality of that reflection." (First cited in *Cinema Vimarsha*, Amrit Gangar, 2012: Gujarat Sahitya Akademi, Gandhinagar, p. 107)

La Chinoise was made in March 1967, one year before violent student protest became a manifest social reality in France, this almost echoes the equation of Méliès's men landing on the moon in 1902 through his silent 'fiction' *A Trip to the Moon* and the real American astronauts landing there in 1969, the fiction had turned into a non-fiction.



Problematizing the imaginary and the real, the fiction and the non-fiction; a scene from Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *La Chinoise*. Concept and collage by Amrit Gangar.

Karl Marx said, "[...] It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but their social existence that determines their consciousness." (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1977: Progress Publishers, Moscow) For Hegel, human consciousness was a constant process, dialectic between oppositions – thesis and antithesis. For Marx, history is an unfolding of this dialectic, the dialectic that keeps embracing and disturbing the 'moving image' directly affected as much by technology and its 'controllers' and hidden manipulators of 'minds' and hence 'reality'! The Lumieres / Méliès split could also turn imaginary! However, the Griersonian perception of 'In' and 'Out' leads me to the station and coastal port town of La Ciotat, with an enquiry.

La Ciotat: Train's Arrival is also Ship's Exodus

In 1895, La Ciotat, the railway station showing Lumiere Brothers' fifty-second *Arrival of the Train* (Port of Arrival) was also the Port of Exodus! That was in 1948, and during the time gap of fifty-three years (1895-1948), La Ciotat and Western Europe had already seen two world wars (1914-1918; 1939-1945) and suffered unprecedented devastation.

"On Monday, June 14, at 8pm, a schooner of about forty yards, painted in gray and bearing a broad white band, which erased all marks of registration and name, entered the port of La Ciotat. The semaphore alerted the police station to know the name and nationality of this ship flying no flag. He had docked along the Quai des Chantiers, piloted by the Guiraud boat at the request of the port officer. At 22.00, eight buses preceded by two private cars and loaded with about 200 Jews, arrived in the same conditions as Friday, June 11, and embarked all their passengers on the schooner. Information taken, the ship was "L'Orchideo" coming from Naples, and that departed around 4am, probably to Jaffa.

“Thus on June 11 and 14, 1948, two departures from La Ciotat took place towards the State of Israel...” [<http://www.museeciotaden.org/exodus.html>] Ciotaden Museum seems to have archived this history. Otto Preminger’s 1960 well-known *Exodus* is an American epic film on the founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948. The film was based on the 1958 novel of the same name by Leon Uris.

Only fifty three years prior to the Lumieres’, in 1948, La Ciotat was the station of arrival for a train that was also entry of the Auguste and Louis Lumierer’s three-in-one machine Cinematographe! In a much broader context of the international geopolitics, La Ciotat, I would venture to think, could possibly become a crucial location of both ‘Arrival’ and ‘Exodus’ over a period of historic time.

Back to the town of La Ciotat where a train ‘arrived’ and a ship ‘exited’: Entry and the Exodus!



L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat (translated from French into English as *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (US) and *The Arrival of the Mail Train*, while in the United Kingdom the film is known as *Train Pulling into a Station*.

Even this scene of the steam-locomotive’s arrival at the La Ciotat railway station (not constructed in a studio like Georges Méliès’s trip to the Moon) has its own fictional / imaginary / hypothetical invisible narratives embedded within it. In our anxious curiosity, we might ask, “Where has the train come from? Where will it go? Who are these passengers getting in and out? Where are they headed to? Why did the Lyon-based Lumieres go to the far away La Ciotat to

shoot their film?” Perhaps, these ‘imaginaries’ are not less important in the over-all narrative of the film.

Camera Placement and the Forced Perspective: A Fiction?

Also, I think the subtle ‘fiction’ lies in the way the Lumiere brothers place their camera, the way they create a ‘forced perspective’; the Lumiere brothers knew what the effect of their choice of camera placement would be and how could they ‘dramatize’ the normal ‘reality’ of the locomotive’s arrival at La Ciotat railway station!

The Lumiere brothers placed the camera on the platform such a way that it produced an incremental ‘dramatic’ effect by enhancing the size of the incoming train (an optical illusion?). The train arrives from a distant point and bears down on the viewer, finally crossing the lower edge of the screen. The organization of the long, medium and close shots through the static camera is ingenious. Later, they began to move the camera around their subject.

And this leads to that famous story of the spectators fleeing the screening room when the Lumiere brothers first presented this *train* film to their audiences in Paris. As the legend goes, the spectators had rushed out of the room in panic fearing that the life-sized train would hit them. Apocryphal or not but this so-called Occidental ‘urban legend’ (1895) was later countered by an Oriental one in Mumbai (1896) when the Lumiere brothers’ agent Marius Sestier showed the world’s ‘first wonders of the world’ to the audiences at the city’s Watson’s Hotel on 7 July 1896.

The counter-legend was that unlike the Europeans, the Indians never panicked at the Lumieres’ frontally rushing train on screen! The Indian audiences’ eyes, it was presumed, were already trained by the age-old shadow-plays or such ‘moving’ picture theatrical traditions. Reality also carries its own myths! It is the cinema, the product of modern science that has produced millions of myths and superstitions, more than any other means of production or communication, a contradiction in itself!

The Moon Illusion

The visible view of the Moon itself defies ‘truth’ of ‘realism’. While the Moon does come closer to the Planet Earth during its 29.5 day orbit around the Earth, and while it does sometimes look bigger than the usual to a casual observer on the Earth. However, its size does not actually increase. The apparent change in

our only natural satellite's size when it is near the horizon (yet another geometrical utopia) is an optical illusion. Scientists call it the Moon Illusion.

And essentially, as I believe, cinema can never be a realistic medium, it cuts realism and splices illusionism that we believe is the 'real'! Jean-Luc Godard said, "Every edit is a lie."

He also said that cinema is the only apparatus that could record 'death' live! Death is reality, so is birth! The life in-between is a paradox of the real and the unreal! "If you want to make a documentary you should automatically go to the fiction, and if you want to nourish your fiction you have to come back to reality." (JLG)

There is no split between the Lumieres and the Méliès! Between the train and the space-ship, between the Moon and the moons! If the cinema were 'truth' 24 frames per second, so is its death, so is ephemerality of the digital! Let us now go back to where we started from: Georges Méliès!

The Moon-Man selling toys at Montparnasse railway station!

Four years ago while at Montparnasse train station in Paris, I saw in my reverie, Georges Méliès surrounded by children. The generous old man was busy giving away toys to them from his shop. "Merci, Uncle Georges!" Children were acknowledging their gratitude to the man whose unprecedented contribution to world cinema they were not aware of! The old man had smiled at me at that Parisian train station, with two toys in his hands – one of them was the Moon! He had pulled out the rocket from her eye, releasing her from the excruciating pain! He had also taken away the finger raised to the sky, the symbol of triumphalism – from his 'magnum opus' as Peter Kobel, the author of the book *Silent Movies: The Birth of Film and the Triumph of Movie Culture* (2007) describes the 1902 moon film.

And then on one bright cold morning as I stood alongside Méliès, with all the reverence at my command to offer to his genius. The green moss deposited on his tombstone at the Paris's sprawling Pere Lachaise Cemetery, had started moving on the surface like the enamel on a celluloid strip! On that Parisian morning, Méliès had whispered into my ear, "My dear, the Moon was too kind to me; I have pulled out that terrible rocket I had shoved into her eye! It was an act of violence! I know in your culture, the Moon is feminine, and she slips into the side of Krishna!" That morning, I found Georges Méliès terribly lonely; his back was bent with the heavy load of his country's colonial history that he was carrying! His eyes were moist while lips sprouted a smile! A conjurer's trick we kept amusing ourselves with!

Kobel finds the reason for Méliès's tragic downfall, "Despite his accomplishments, Méliès's works were essentially a series of tableaux like filmed stage plays (he was unable to go beyond his theater roots). His appeal began to wane in 1908, and competitors forced him into bankruptcy in 1913. He ended up a poor man selling toys in a shop at the Montparnasse train station."

Georges Méliès was prophetic in sending his Men to the Moon way back in 1902 that became a reality in 1969! And in the very same year, he had turned a real event into a 'fiction' film, if you like, and the film was *Eruption volcanique a la Martinique* or *The Eruption of Mount Pelee*. It was a short reconstruction, using miniature models, of a real event – the eruption on 8 May 1902 of Mount Pelee, which had destroyed the town of Saint-Pierre Martinique.

Should we call it a 'documentary' film? Why not? Méliès's and his moons keep on raising the larger questions that might find their relevance even today, in this illusory Age of Globalization when on the surface of the Earth, more political walls between nations and emotional walls between peoples are being raised; when more and even economically emaciated nations are eyeing the Moon and when *akasa* (space)'s naturally essential indivisibility (*abhed*) is increasingly violated and getting precariously fragile; when ecology is facing a crisis of equilibrium; when technology is pushing *cinematography* into smaller cocoons away from larger community experience!

Méliès's moons are not as innocuous as they seem!

Amen!

©AmritGangar

Grateful acknowledgement: Jay Kholia and Bhargavi Doshi for their invaluable comments.

About the author:

Amrit Gangar is a Mumbai-based film theorist, curator and historian. He was the Consultant Curator of the National Museum of Indian Cinema (NMIC), Mumbai. He had also been an Adjunct Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT-Bombay), teaching Film Theory at its Industrial Design Centre, Animation Department.

He has presented his theory of *Cinema of Prayoga* at several prestigious venues of the world and India, including the Tate Modern, London; the Pompidou

Centre, Paris; the Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen; Santiniketan, West Bengal, the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai. Gangar writes both in English and Gujarati languages and has over a dozen books to his credit. His two books on cinema, *Cinema Vimarsha* and *Rupantar* (in Gujarati) have been awarded by the Gujarat Sahitya Akademi; *Rupantar* was also awarded with a Gold Medal by the Narmad Sahitya Sabha, Surat.

For his substantial contribution to the film society movement in India, he was honoured with a plaque by the Federation of International Cinema Clubs (FICC) in Berlin, 1989. Cinematographers' combined honoured him for his curatorial activities and writings on cinematography. He was the curator of film programmes for the Kala Ghoda Artfest, Mumbai during its first four editions and for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Between 1990 and 1996, he had curated and organized 'Retrospectives' programmes for the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) for Documentary, Short & Animation Films. At present he is being invited to be the juror at various national and international film festivals, and is engaged in writing of his own book on *Cinema of Prayoga*.



Amrit Gangar at Georges Méliès (1861-1938) grave, Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, 11 February 2015.