

## Editing and Genre in Early Silent Film

Purposeful sequence gives a story its rhythm. There is no deliberate narrative without meaningful sorting; there is simply recording. Film was little more than evidentiary documentation - or *actualité* - until its pioneers began to experiment with different ways of manipulating their footage. In this essay, I will examine the early advances in film editing developed by Georges Mèliès and D. W. Griffith and how those developments contributed to separate paths of cinema.

Mèliès and Griffith understood the profound potential and importance of editing film. Through manipulation and arrangement of shots, raw footage is transformed. Narrative arises through the construction of shots to form scenes, and the way those shots are ordered can change a scene's meaning. Furthermore, special effects can be layered into film itself in order to produce fantastical elements. The combination of these techniques and how they are utilized is a defining component of distinct genres. We will focus primarily on their usage in early cinema.

Two clear paths emerged as silent film developed. The first is mainstream American film. This encompasses Hollywood-style films, produced in studios for their own theaters as a part of vertical integration. The early American film experience had an emphasis on theater: there was live music, there were vaudevillian productions, and several films would be shown in one night. The films would follow a relatively linear plot, and they would typically have a harmonious resolution. Comedic films proved popular among these early audiences. Narrative realism also emerged as a dominant genre as the medium sought to establish cultural standing (Corrigan 60). The second path of early film is art cinema, which dwells upon more psychological and internal motives. The plot lines may be less linear, and the techniques used are more experimental. Art cinema often coincides with contemporary art movements, as in the instance of German

Expressionism (Corrigan 63). As art cinema developed, experimentation became more common and radical over time.

The French director Georges Mèliès and the American director D. W. Griffith made contributions that affected each of these branches of film. Georges Mèliès is regarded as the first film *auteur*. A magician by trade, Mèliès recognized the potential of film to portray fantastical scenarios, as well as the opportunity to manipulate film in order to focus on the psychological realm. In order to portray abstract concepts and the interior world, Mèliès pioneered special effects, such as stop-motion, superimposition and dissolve. Perhaps most significantly, Mèliès also recognized the concept of cinematic time. He understood that he could start and stop the camera to his own advantage, and the footage would appear continuous to his audience (Mast 30). We can see this concept further applied in D. W. Griffith's advancements.

Griffith stated that he "owed [Mèliès] everything" (Mast 30). While Mèliès's passion and focus was on the 'magic' of cinema, Griffith recognized his achievements and built upon them in his preferred genre: narrative realism. He trusted his audience to follow the story sequences so long as they were arranged in a purposeful, logical way. Utilizing Mèliès's concept of cinematic time, Griffith spliced together unrelated scenes so that they appeared to occur simultaneously. He also demonstrated that parts of a narrative that did not advance the plot - like travel scenes - could be dropped without confusing the viewer. His manipulation of time quickly became standard practice among filmmakers, in mainstream and art cinema alike.

In essence, the differences in editing between mainstream cinema and art house cinema are that the former tends towards a seamless format in which an omniscient hand guides the story along, whereas art house cinema allows for the artist's 'brush strokes' and personal style. In art films, we expect apparent manipulation, special effects, and juxtaposition of shots for emphasis.

One might say that Mèliès influenced art cinema and Griffith influenced mainstream cinema, but the truth is not so simple. Both directors made breakthroughs which exist along either path.

In early American silent film, Griffith's editing presence is more readily observed. Narrative realism was a product of Griffith's advancements in techniques like cross-cutting, but Mèliès's more subtle special effects - like fade-outs - were also employed. Griffith's seamless editing was also a monumental influence on comedic directors Mack Sennett and his student, Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin, a perfectionist, would perform hundreds of takes and weave them together with minimal effects so that the audience could focus on the subject rather than the medium. Comedy saw an opportunity in using special effects developed by Mèliès for visual gags; consider Buster Keaton's multiple exposure scenes in "The Playhouse". The opening sequence shows a mastery of the superimposition that Mèliès developed two decades prior.

These special effects were also used to emphasize otherness and supernatural sequences in German Expressionist films like *Nosferatu* - for example, the use of stop-motion during Hutter's carriage ride to Orlok's mansion. The German Expressionism genre was defined by its fascination with the psychological - a subject Mèliès focused on at the turn of the century. Griffith's reach also extended to these art house films; as seen in Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*, his interspersing of takes with varying lens lengths had become standard practice. In spite of these early filmmakers' genre affinities, their techniques extend into further realms.

Mèliès and Griffith's editing styles can be seen all across early cinema. While their specific methods and interests often ground them in one genre or another - Mèliès in art cinema, Griffith in mainstream - there is definitive overlapping of their influences. The widespread reach of these innovations demonstrates the significance and versatility of these contributions. Their developments laid the foundation for generations of filmmakers to come.

Works Cited

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- Corrigan, Timothy, and Patricia White. *The Film Experience*. 5th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018.