

Reading 2

Skills:

- Details
- Understand referents

Getting started: Do you know if special effects have been used since the beginning of cinema history?

THE FIRST SPECIAL EFFECTS: FROM MÉLIÈS TO MARVEL



Nothing is impossible in the world of special effects. We're used to seeing practically anything imaginable on our screens: destroyed cities, explosions, aliens, or even giant dinosaurs. They're not only for action movies either. Almost all films use digital elements to simplify production. However, this isn't exclusive of modern cinema as movies have always been a visual spectacle filled with special effects.

Visual tricks have always captivated us. Whether it was mirror games, the magic lantern, or phantasmagoria. Inside a classic theatre all this was fine but seeing full-color projections of images was much more fascinating. The first animations were very simple, but they finally made it possible to depict fantasy.

When it became possible to capture reality with a camera, around 1895, the first filmmakers developed made films to fill theatres. A production's success came from the astonishing nature of real images and a touch of fantasy, so it's not surprising that a professional magician would become the father of special effects.

Georges Méliès attended the presentation of the cinematograph, the great invention of the Lumières, and immediately offered them 10,000 francs for the gadget. However, they refused. According to the brothers, their creation was for scientific purposes and they would not let a magician go away with one. But Méliès acquired a projector in England and converted it into a camera, and so he began his career as a filmmaker.

One day, filming a shot on the street, the camera stopped briefly, and then continued to roll. On seeing the footage, Méliès discovered that, when the film skipped, the objects had changed places. Thus, he discovered the jump cut. In 1895, the jump cut had already horrified spectators by showing the decapitation of Mary Stuart in an 18-second-long film produced by Thomas Alva Edison. *The Execution of Mary Stuart*, which depicts the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, is the first known film to use special effects. Nevertheless, Méliès used this technique (the jump cut) to transfer his magic tricks to the big screen. The French built the first film studio, where his effects evolved: double exposure, composition with mattes, miniatures, puppets. What many don't know is that his first competitor was a Spaniard.

At that time, a large group of craftsmen worked in Méliès' workshops, hand-coloring the frames of his films. One of them was Julienne Mathieu, whose husband, Segundo de Chomón, soon saw the potential of the magician's effects and was hired by the French production company Pathé Frères, where he learned about and became an expert in stop motion animation and colorful visual effects.

*Adapted from <https://www.domestika.org/en/blog/3287-the-first-special-effects-from-melies-to-marvel>

Answer the following questions:

1. Who are the following words making reference to?

- a. The magician: _____
- b. The brothers: _____
- c. A Spaniard: _____

2. Write the following phrases in the correct column depending on who they are describing.

Got a gadget in the UK	Was married to Julienne Mathieu	Built the first movie studio
Was born in Spain	Created the cinematograph	
Mastered the stop motion technique	Was born in France	
Worked for Pathé Frères	Was a movie director	

Segundo de Chomón	The Lumières	Georges Méliès

What do you think?

Do you think modern movies overuse special effects?