The Magic of Special Effects
Cinema-Technology-Reception

Université de Montréal

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Cinémathèque québécoise GRAFICS invites you to participate in an international conference to be held in Montreal from November 5 to 10, 2013

Deadline to submit a proposal
(300 words, English or French) by completing the attached form,
along with your resume :
OCTOBER 1, 2012

Please send your proposal and your resume to the following address:
colloque-cinema-conference@histart.umontreal.ca

Conference under the direction of André Gaudreault (U. de Montréal),
in collaboration with
Martin Lefebvre (Concordia U.) and Viva Paci (U. du Québec à Montréal)

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On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Cinémathèque québécoise, a brand new permanent exhibition on special effects in the cinema is being prepared. To mark this major event, the Cinémathèque québécoise has given GRAFICS (Groupe de recherche sur l'avènement et la formation des institutions cinématographique et scénique) the mandate to organise an international conference to promote the study of the development of special effects, from the emergence of kinematography to the latest technological innovations in sound and images.

To some people, the power that cinema exercises on our senses is a result of its power as "dream factory". Throughout its evolution, many have relegated cinema to trickery or to mechanical effects or "machinations", thereby making this art the frequent topic of discourses around manipulation. At the same time, the importance of trick effects in cinema is often minimised: they are seen as serving only to accentuate the impression of reality. Whether over- or undervalued, special effects are most often subjected to an essentialist theory of cinema, and one could argue without risk of error that they have been unevenly dealt with in film theory and historiography. When is something a special effect? Is it a special effect if it transforms the content of an image or sound? What is the role of know-how? And how are we to think about special effects in relation to forms such as experimental film, animated film and other art forms?

Cinema's "tricksters" often share with their theatrical counterparts the same desire to erase the traces of the production of their effects, celebrating artifice by elevating it to an art form. Ever-larger teams of specialists strive to maintain transparency while at the same time pushing back the boundaries of verisimilitude. Christian Metz wrote that special effects cannot exist without deceit (*Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, vol. 2, 1972, p. 183), but for the special or trick effect to function fully, the viewer must know that there is artifice involved–hence his notion of "avowed machination". And this, according to Metz, holds true for all cinema. Haven't viewers accepted the fact that a film is a machination and that every film, in the end, is a special effects film? This idea fits with what each of us feels, because the essence of cinema's reproduction of movement rests on recording "image by image", a "special effect" that serves as cinema's underlying principle, such that every film, *to a certain extent*, is an animated film. Isn't this what the old expression "animated pictures" once naïvely suggested?

Is it possible that the institution pigeon-holed animated films under the label "animation" to create the illusion that cinema made out of so-called real images did not also derive from animation or that it was not a "special effect"? As Lev Manovich has written, "Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation" (*The Language of New Media*, 2001, p. 302). It's thus not surprising that Freud's expression "return of the repressed" is being used to explain the omnipresence of animation in present-day visual-effects cinema.

The magic of cinema is also a result of the illusion of reality produced by its analogue technology – moving photographic images – and of its ability to seize moments or recreate the world before the eyes of an invisible viewer. Today, digital images demonstrate the limits of these principles proper to the kinematograph and later to cinema. What remains of these conceptions? Some systems for recording video images today employ methods for motion compensation. This operation makes it possible to record both the image and the gap between it and the following image in the form of a vector. The minimal oneness of the animated image thus becomes a chunk of time inseparable from its animation. The reproduction of movement is no longer an illusion constructed image by image but well and truly a recorded fact. The digital image may thus oblige us to redefine our standards with respect to illusionism.

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These theoretical questions are echoed in the critical discourse, in film publications and institutions in particular, around the most recent technological innovations. Of these technologies, motion capture and performance capture make it possible to join the capture of movement with synthetic images: animation becomes the work of an actor and the image is synthesised by a computer. Under such circumstances, how are we to define a film such as *The Adventures of Tintin*? The question is problematic because, despite the fact that motion capture and performance capture technologies are not viewed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as animated film techniques, Spielberg's *Tintin* nevertheless made it onto the list of the eighteen films competing for the Oscar for best animated film, thereby reviving a paradox that was already present in rotoscoping. Do "capture" technologies, using new interfaces, control the puppets which "stand-in" for the heroes of graphic novels or, on the contrary, do synthesised images represent a filter, a supplementary layer, deposited on the underlying optical image? And is motion capture still a special effect when it is systematically applied to the entire film and becomes standard practice? Aren't these films, with their singular means of expression and located part-way between animation and "non-animation", not part of a form that subsumes these genres, given the way they make evident the blurring of boundaries?

There is no denying that the question of the artifice of image and sound is important to film history and theory and that the way it has been addressed at times of technological evolution has given rise to different critical perspectives, in the case of both cinema and other media. The work of filmmakers, critics and theorists has thus been shaped and fed by these different conceptions of cinematic artifice, whether this conception is entertainment-oriented, transparent or realistic, or produces supernatural effects which have made the "magical" a force throughout film history, media history and art history. Many people have been inspired by a magical conception of cinema, something that can be traced back to the earliest commentaries on the subject. In the end, as the science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke remarked, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (*Profiles of the Future*, 1984, p. 36).

The goal of the conference in which we are inviting you to participate will thus consist in examining these discourses on the magic of cinema, its special effects, trick effects and artifices. It will also be an opportunity to think about the influence of these illusionist techniques and these technologies on the way we perceive moving images and media. Finally, we will attempt to bring theoretical approaches to these questions in order to shed new light onto the essential topic of special effects and artifice in the cinema.