



the “automats” and mechanical dolls, there a train whistle accompanying an early animated cartoon. Film clips play on small overhead projectors—Bette Davis and Anne Baxter spar verbally in the 1950 *All About Eve*, next to the sparkling gown and cape Baxter wears in the scene; farther along, Charlie Chaplin is whisked bodily through the cogs and gears of assembly-line hell in the 1936 *Modern Times*. One of the most thrilling sights is the female robot (of gold-painted wood) from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, poised near the eerie 1927 film clip that shows her start to move.

The current special exhibit, which runs until the end of the year, is *Méliès, Magicien du Cinéma*, an in-depth look at the work of pioneering filmmaker and special-effects wizard Georges Méliès. Unlike other early moviemakers, with their train-coming-into-the-station or running-horse realism, Méliès created a cinematic world of dreams, fantastic voyages and visions of the supernatural.

Starting out as a real magician, Méliès acquired the theater of illusionist Robert Houdini and began his career as a showman with the aid of the master’s complicated gadgets, several of which are on display, including a wooden cabinet in which a decapitated head appears to continue talking. By 1896 Méliès had bought his first camera in London and was shooting films, short clips that were both shown at his theater and sold to play at fairs.

Encouraged by his initial success, Méliès turned to large-scale production the following year, building a large glass studio in Montreuil, the first one purpose-built for shooting films. A scale model and several interactive exhibits allow visitors to virtually tour the building, which the director used until 1912. Here he created films in varying lengths, including one-minute marvels like *Un homme de têtes* (1898) in which Méliès (who usually starred in his own films) removes his head, places

it on a table next to him, magically grows a new one, repeats this several times, and sings a chorus with himself. His most elaborate production, the 29-minute North Pole adventure *A la Conquête du Pôle Nord* (1912), comes complete with a man-eating snow giant.

Perhaps his most famous film, though, is *Voyage dans la Lune*, a 14-minute enchantment shot in 1902 in which scientists (assisted by a bevy of leggy assistants in skin-tight costumes) oversee construction of a rocket in which they are shot to the moon. Captured by devilish moon-men and hauled before their ruler, the travelers make a daring escape, regain their craft and return home to be covered with medals and praise. This film and many others play constantly throughout the exhibit, surrounded by displays of memorabilia, drawings and costumes.

But the Cinémathèque is not just a museum—it fulfills its mission by making the films from its collection of 40,000 available to the public. In its main screening room, a very comfortable 415-seat auditorium, and two smaller rooms it runs international classics as well as retrospectives devoted to various artists; a fourth room is for teaching activities and lectures (in French). In the library, called the Médiathèque, anyone who pays the €3.50 daily fee can check out one of the library’s 6,000 films to view at one of the video desks. And in honor of the Méliès exhibit, the regular June film program will be enhanced by several special children’s films incorporating magic and special effects, making the Cinémathèque a best bet visit for film buffs of all ages. ■

51 rue de Bercy, 12th, 01.71.19.33.33, Métro: Bercy. Passion Cinéma: €5; Méliès exhibit, €5; films €6. Museum: Mon–Sat noon–7 pm (Thu to 10 pm); Sun 10 am–8 pm. Closed Tue. Médiathèque: Mon–Fri 10 am–7 pm. www.cinemathequefrancaise.com