

Julia Kim
Prof. Ann Harris
Basic Training
Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre format

*Grâce à la combinaison complète et absolue de ces deux merveilles, le phonographe et le cinématographe, on est arrivé à un résultat d'une rare perfection, dont il faut féliciter MM. Clément Maurice et Lioret. ... Quant au phonographe, c'est également une pure merveille de netteté et de sonorité.*¹

The 1900 Paris Universal Exposition dazzled visitors, introducing them to the possibilities at hand in the new age of electrification and film. While thousands thronged to see the Palace of Electricity, off to the side, past the Palace of Fine Arts there was a new medium, a new form of entertainment on display: the cinématographe. Only just invented in 1895, the form was still beginning to define itself as distinct from the other arts and sciences.² In this setting, among the other French experiments to be seen, the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre made its world debut, distinguishing itself as quite possibly the first public screening of moving images synched to sound.³ A crude amalgamation of a number of previously invented devices, the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre format existed but briefly and, historically, has been overlooked as a early sound synching format [in the favor of American inventors and films like Thomas Edison and the talkie film *The Jazz Singer* (1927)]. When the format is taken into consideration at all, it is judged a failure.⁴

However, when reconsidered within the limited timeframe around the birth of cinema, the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre can serve as a lens and focal point for understanding the development

¹ *Le Figaro*, June 18th 1900.

Thanks to the complete and absolute combinations of these two marvels, the phonograph and the cinématographe, we have a rare perfection, of which it is necessary to thank Mr. Clement Maurice and Mr. Henri Lioret...As for the phonographe, it is also a marvel of clarity and sound (my translation)

² Toulet, *Le Cinema a L'exposition Universelle de 1900*, 183.

³ Barnier, *The Controversy Over the 'Invention of the Talking Picture.'* Who deserves credit? Edison? Gaumont?

⁴ Geduld, *The Birth of the Talkies: From Edison to Jolson*, 11.

of cinema as we know it today. During its existence, it not only bridged the gap between silent and sound, it was also at the intersection of artisan-production and mass production and of theatre and (“spectacle de curiosite”)and narrative film. In the course of this paper, we will examine the historical backdrop of early French cinema, and the Universal Exposition, before moving on to a discussion on the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre’s composition, processes and films.

“Cinema had never known such a frenzy of growth since its beginning.”⁵

While the beginning of French cinema is often overlooked as a homogenous period, in a compressed timeframe of just 10 or 15 years, the period was dense with technical and cultural innovation and achievement.⁶ From pre-cinematic magic lanterns to fairground and theatre showings of actualities, from 1895, when the Lumières first presented their cinématographe at the Grand Café, to 1900, the year of the Exposition, half a dozen French formats were already in circulation vying for dominance.⁷ After only 15 years of existence, this fledgling French-dominated industry had already established itself as a source of entertainment and news to the new leisure classes to become a multi-million dollar industry (in today’s money).⁸ From almost the start, inventors attempted to link moving images to sound.⁹

In the beginning were the Lumières, Gaumont, Pathé, and Méliès. Often rivals, but sometimes partners, these personalities brought their professional backgrounds to their new cinematic achievements. For the purposes of this paper, I will provide a succinct summary of early French cinema to highlight the inter-connections among them in this, initially, small world.

⁵ Abel, *The Cine Goes to Town*.

⁶ Sadoul, *Histoire General du Cine*.

⁷ Macgowan, *The Coming of Sound to Screen*, 136.

⁸ Enticknap, *Moving Image Technology: From Zoetrope to Digital*, 1.

⁹ Gedauld, *The Birth of the Talkies : From Edison to Jolson*, 299.

Before 1910, there were 40 explicitly sound-on-disc patents filed that attempted to link sound and moving images. These do not take into account and include any of Lioret’s patents.

This will serve to provide more information regarding the development of the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre.

In December 1895, the Lumières, with projectionist Felix Mesguich, projected their first short actualité, *La Sortie des Usines Lumière* (Leaving the Lumière Factory, 1895). Mesguich later went on to tour Europe and America as the projectionist for the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre. They also worked closely with Clément-Maurice Gratioulet. Clément-Maurice (the name he went by), was a well-known celebrity photographer, who had also had worked in the Lumières factory before expanding into the world of moving images. Some of his first credited pieces include the medical films of Dr. Eugène Louis Doyen, with cinématographe Ambroise-François Parnaland. Parnaland created the 1896 Cinepar “reversible” camera, which was later chosen for the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre. Clément-Maurice lived near the theatre/studio of Méliès. In an era when the nomenclature had yet to form, the IMDB credits him as producer, cameraman, director...etc of many early films. He was also the first known recipient of an international award for cinematography.

In the then small incipient community of filmmakers, producers, directors, and projectionists, oftentimes these key initial figures worked multiple roles; these latter-day distinctions had not yet formed. It is for some of these reasons that this hodge-podge of mechanisms, stars, and cellulose has been attributed solely to the industrialist engineer Paul Decauville in many cinematic histories. In better histories ranging beyond several cursory lines, Clément-Maurice is also often put in the role as the singular creator or inventor of the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre. In records today, he is also credited as the director, cinématographe, and producer even though the reality is much more complicated. Most of these films were simply re-staged portions from pre-existent contemporary acts. In the few studies of any real depth, however, the inventor and horologist Henri Lioret is given some credit for his contributions as inventor of the Lioretgraph. Given his lack of direct involvement, Ambroise-François Parnaland is, perhaps judiciously, never credited.