

# Segundo de Chomón and the fascination for colour

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In Spain the cinematographic spectacle was born in black and white, and testimony from the early years of that country's cinema history sometimes stressed that characteristic. For instance, the Spanish philosopher Eugeni d'Ors compared the cinema to the circus by referring to the values of black and white: 'The circus was light and color, and the cinematograph is gray and darkness. The circus was slow, elastic, and like the rhythm of a waltz, the cinematograph is restless and jittery. The circus was dream-like and the cinematograph is an anecdotic, almost pedagogic, lesson on reality.'<sup>1</sup> When describing the experience of projected movies, Ors stressed a dark and gloomy landscape: 'They are disturbingly staggered visions: a *convulsión gris* at the end of a lance of clarity, of brutal whiteness, among darkness. In the *convulsión gris*, a world: a world of delirium.'<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish philosopher and writer was one of Barcelona's greatest enemies of the cinema.<sup>3</sup> For him, as for many other poets and painters in the late nineteenth century, the circus was a world of vibrant and chromatic sensations while cinema was a poor copy of reality. 'The exactness of photography ignobly reveals the *comparsas* under the tunics of angels or the armor of medieval warriors ... . The circus was something for poets: the cinematograph is something for adolescents.'<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it was in response to this perception by members of the artistic and cultural elite of the dominance of grayness in films, of the absence of life, that the fledgling cinematographic industry soon added a supplementary device to offer the spectator colored films. Colour in moving images aimed to escape from Gorky's *Kingdom of Shadows*: it sought to flee from the grayness, from the darkness and delirium.<sup>5</sup> Colour's function was to seize spectators, to captivate their gaze through a fascination for images that, rather than being dark shadows, provided luminosity, gleam and brightness. Colour was wide-

spread in the popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in, for example, post-cards, dioramas, panoramas and the circus itself. In fact, the circus show frequently served as a source of reference for the new cinematographic medium. Italian critic and historian Mario Verdone's later comment that 'cinema was born out of the circus' was not unfounded.<sup>6</sup> Early cinema is full of circus themes, and films featured the finest circus performers of the time; it was not long before the popular clowns Footit and Chocolat were filmed in Paris by Lumière in 1897 at the Nouveau Cirque for the movie *Chaise en bascule*. But while the experience of being at the circus was described as 'light and color', these characteristics had yet to be associated with the new spectacle.<sup>7</sup>

The practice of coloring film is one of the elements that characterized, in the early years of the medium, the cinema of attractions. It was not the main feature of early cinematic popular entertainment, although there were times when it could be. Its presence was relevant when used in fantasy themes (trick films, 'féeries' or fairy plays, adaptations of children's tales) or in films in which the movement of figures acquired a fundamental importance (the film performances of Loïe Fuller's serpentine dance, the final apotheosis of the many films in which a group of dancing ladies appears, films of acrobats or jugglers, etc.) or in shots in which the composition of the

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frame is particularly full of grandiose and elaborate sets and decorative period costumes (from historical to religious movies). These crowded and densely filled scenes, in which the movements of the figures play a fundamental role, featured exotic characters and landscapes, items disappearing or being substituted, and all kinds of other implausible actions. They typically relied on hand-coloring to create supplementary fantasy effects, and it is here that the cinema of attractions gained its maximum splendor.

Spanish special effects artist Segundo de Chomón became renowned for his skill and dexterity at creating moving images that captivated the spectator's gaze through complex visual and chromatic effects. In addition to his work in the trick and fairy genres, Chomón was also intimately involved in colour throughout his career, from his initial contact with cinema in Paris and Barcelona, throughout his long relationship with the French company Pathé, and finally during his work in Italy with Itala Film of Turin.

### Chomón in Barcelona

Chomón was born in the Spanish province of Teruel in 1871, and likely came into contact with the Parisian cinema industry through his wife, Julienne Mathieu, whom he met in 1895 and with whom he would have one child.<sup>8</sup> Between 1897 and 1899 Chomón traveled outside of Europe when he was enlisted in the Spanish army during the Cuban colonial war between Spain and the United States. While Chomón was away Mathieu began working for the main cinematographic companies, specifically Georges Méliès' Star Films and Pathé. It seems to have been Méliès who introduced Julienne Mathieu to the art of coloring films. When Chomón returned to the French capital in 1899 his wife brought him into contact with the emerging world of cinema. And it was at this time that he made his first contact with the materials and techniques of the cinematographic industry: the distinction between negative and positive, developing film, the possibility of modifying film by translating titles and intertitles, coloring frames, etc.

It would likely have been in Paris where he learned all these subsidiary trades, but perhaps not yet those for actually shooting films. And it must have been there that he decided to take up this new trade professionally, although at first he did not do so in Paris, but in Barcelona. In late 1901 the Chomón family moved to the capital of Catalonia (in the north of Spain) and, as historian Juan Gabriel Tharrats

notes, set up a small film coloring studio and later a rudimentary *truca* for making the subtitles for Pathé movies translated into Spanish.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Chomón was in charge of distributing Pathé's films in Barcelona; we have evidence that in late 1904 he supplied several Pathé films (*Chez le dentiste*, *Au téléphone*, *Un accident d'automobile*, *Nuit de Noël*, among others) to be shown in the Sala Mercè, a theater designed by the reputable architect Antoni Gaudí and managed by the painter Lluís Graner. It is likely that this was something he had already been doing for some time, yet it is interesting to note that early on Chomón had come into contact with Catalan's artistic elite, as the Sala Mercè offered theater, music and cinema spectacles aimed at attracting a middle class audience.<sup>10</sup>

Chomón's cinematographic studio was located in Calle Poniente (today known as Carrer Joaquin Costa, in downtown Barcelona), but we know almost nothing about it: we don't know where the negatives and machines he used came from, nor how he established his business relations, nor what type of camera he used to make his first films. The possibility that Charles Pathé himself provided the material seems plausible enough, for Chomón was the French company's distribution representative in Barcelona at one point, and the Pathé catalog included some films made by Chomón in Catalonia, such as *Ascension du Mont Serrat en Espagne* (1901), *Descente du Mont Serrat* (1901), *Panorama de Tibidabo* (1903) and *Panorama circulaire de Barcelone* (1903).<sup>11</sup>

We do know that as early as 1902 Chomón was coloring films in Barcelona. An advertisement published on 12 February of that year in the Barcelonan newspaper *La Vanguardia* announced that the following day the local Cinematógrafo Martí in Las Ramblas would be opening a new film: 'Thursday. Opening at this Cinematographic Theater of the 500 meter movie *Barba Azul*, the finest example to be presented in Barcelona hand-tinted *ex professo* by the reputable film colorist, Don Segundo Chomón.'<sup>12</sup>

The announcement is, in itself, extraordinary, because at this time it was extremely rare and unusual for any newspaper reference to cinema to so accurately stress the participation of a specific member. So in his Barcelona studio Chomón apparently hand-colored a copy of *Barbe bleu* (1901) by Georges Méliès, although this was likely not his first experience working within the production branch of the film industry. We do not know for sure, but by publicly

acknowledging Chomón as a *reputado iluminador* the announcement suggests that this was an honor he had earned beforehand, perhaps in Barcelona itself, or maybe in Paris. The same ad ran in *La Vanguardia* the following day, reinforcing the significance of Chomón's talent as a 'reputable colorist'. This, in addition to the fact that the Cinematógrafo Martí was going to project the 'best example' of Méliès' film, suggests that this particular presentation of the film was indeed special. In fact, a few days earlier several theaters in Barcelona (including the Real Cinematógrafo Napoleón in the Rambla de Santa Mónica, and Cinematógrafo X, in Plaza Cataluña) had screened copies of *Barbe bleu*, but these were probably black and white reels, as I have found no evidence indicating that colour prints were shown at these venues.

So it appears possible that the only colour copy of Méliès' film presented in Barcelona at this time was the one that had been hand-colored by Segundo de Chomón. Had this work been directly commissioned by the French magician and filmmaker? Or, more likely, was it the owner of the Cinematógrafo Martí that had commissioned the work from Chomón after acquiring a black and white copy of Méliès' film, thereby hoping to attract the crowd away from other competing venues screening the film at the same time? As is so often the case when investigating early cinema, we end up with more questions than answers. Coloring work was important for the cinematographic community, both in terms of the developing industry and the relationships that were established with the audience, so either case could be argued. On the one hand, hand-colored copies were substantially more expensive, among other reasons, because they had to cover the costs of specialists like Chomón who did the work. On the other hand, spectators must have found much pleasure in viewing colored copies of films that were otherwise black and white, and especially films that took advantage of themes to chromatically highlight certain aspects of the costumes or sets (imagine, for example, the plasticity achieved by some of the Pathé studio's 'final apotheoses'). Since hand-coloring was a highly meticulous and slow process involving attention to detail, it required a level of skill and patience that can be considered equal to the level of enthusiasm it might generate in the audience. Chomón seemingly distinguished himself in this painstaking task. However, we do not know whether any of the copies that he hand-colored

survive. Coloring at this time was an anonymous art form, with the exception of the aforementioned newspaper announcement, traditionally done by women. Because Chomón was publicly credited for his work and soon became known as a consummate specialist in the art, there is little doubt that his case was unusual for the time period.

Moreover, after Chomón worked on the Méliès film, or perhaps at the same time, Pathé commissioned him to colour some of their own films. Correspondence between Chomón and the Pathé headquarters in Paris indicates that in Barcelona between 1902 and 1904 he hand-colored such films as *Danses cosmopolites à transformation* (1902), in which a pair of dancers continually change folk costumes and perform a wide variety of choreographed performances; the phantasmagoria *La fée printemps* (1902); the succession of transformations shown in *Metamorphoses du papillon* (1904); the biblical movie *Samson et Dalila* (1902); the reconstruction of the legend of *Guillaume Tell* (1903); and the comedy *La valise de Barnum* (1903), among others.<sup>13</sup> Notably, the copies Chomón coloured in Barcelona were not products intended for distribution to the Catalan or Spanish markets. When they were completed they were sent back to Paris, a costly and time-consuming process that indicates Pathé must have highly valued Chomón's work, which was apparently good enough to compensate for all of these inconveniences. And Chomón was well aware of this, and actually asked Paris to pay him more, a request that was eventually fulfilled.

We know this from a series of letters that Chomón received between 1902 and 1904, first from Jacques A. Berst and later from Charles Sattul, both managers at Pathé. This correspondence tells of the commercial dealings that the Spaniard made with the French producer; for example, Chomón earned 50 centimes for every meter of film he colored, but when he asked for a raise to 75 centimes per meter while working on the film *La fée printemps*, his request was rejected. Later, when coloring a copy of *Ali Baba*, Chomón was granted an increase. With regard to following Paris's instructions about which colours were to be selected and used, Sattul more or less left the final decision up to Chomón: 'If all of the figures are ready it matters little whether the colors are those we have decided upon as long as they are beautiful and good'. The fact is that Pathé had full faith in Chomón's professional criteria when it came to choosing and applying colours to hand-

colour a film and the fragments of a frame that had to be highlighted using these chromatic additions.<sup>14</sup>

Chomón's talent and his gift for precision facilitated his long term interest in colour throughout his career. He soon created new, more versatile, and complex colour systems that used stencil-based techniques and machinery to achieve a greater ratio between the meters of film that were colored and the time required to do so. Chomón's arduous and professional work led Pathé's managers to decide that they no longer wanted him to work for them from Barcelona, but instead they invited him to transfer to the company's Paris headquarters

### Chomón at Pathé Freres

Pathé quickly became the leading player in the international film market, opening offices in London, Moscow, Berlin, Vienna, Milan, New York, Shanghai and, as we have seen, Barcelona, the city used to distribute copies throughout the Iberian peninsula. The company made at least one film a day and sent the North American market twelve new films with a run of seventy five copies of each. Some of the copies sent to the American market may already have been colored, or they may have been colored in specialist studios in the cities where they were to be shown.<sup>15</sup> Pathé's increased rate of production and widespread distribution network required a large-scale internal structure, including a large and diverse work force of professionals who were specialized in different 'scènes' or genres, and a division of labor that could meet the schedule requirements of the different theaters around the world.

Not surprisingly, in 1905 Chomón accepted the Pathé management's offer to return to Paris and become one of the main supervisors (and shortly after, the manager) of the company's trick film section. As Richard Abel notes, the genre probably reached its highest level of production after Gaston Velle left Pathé to work in Italy and Chomón took charge.<sup>16</sup> Chomón's arrival was timely, as the company was reconstructing its studios in Vincennes in order to meet the international demand for its films. That same year Charles Pathé replaced the system of selling films outright with that of a rental system, which also helped to increase the marketing of colored copies world-wide. When Chomón moved to Paris the cinema industry there was going through one of its initial periods of change: Gaumont reconstructed its studios in 1905, and two years later Méliès built a second studio in Montreuil-sous-Bois.

So Chomón's arrival in Paris placed him in an environment that encouraged and facilitated his talent to such an extent that he played a prominent role in the development of the cinema of attractions.<sup>17</sup> Most of the films he worked on stirred the imagination through fantasy effects that could enrapture the spectator, such as double or multiple exposures, stop motion, transformations, substitutions, overhead shots, and pyrotechnical effects, all of which demonstrate Chomón's desire to surprise. Considering his previous dedicated interest in colour, we can assume that Chomón likely planned the films with coloring effects in mind. Either he did the work himself, or Pathé contracted it out to film coloring companies. Considering his new career as a cameraman and trick specialist, he would have little time for doing the work himself, but probably did give instructions regarding methods, colours and the parts of the image that should be colored.

In fact, the fantasy films that Chomón made for Pathé seem to conceive colour as an added element of magic and fascination; colour in these films functions as an added attraction, 'contributing less to realism than to sensual intensity', as Tom Gunning argues: 'The attraction of this added intensity opened the potential for color to be used as a signifier of fantasy, or as a metaphor',<sup>18</sup> Between 1905 and 1907 Chomón worked on a series of phantasmagorias in which the showiness of the sets and costumes, and more importantly the quality of the tricks, seemed to have been conceived for colored scenes. For example, in *L'écrin du Rajah* or *Le coffret du Rajah* (1906), directed by Gaston Velle, photography and tricks by Chomón, we see the thief of the casket mentioned in the title riding upon a monstrous creature, flying against a black background; both the character dressed in exotic costume and the animal with fire belching forth from its mouth almost cry out to be colored. [Plate 1] I also have in mind the splendid development of the action in *Aladin ou la lampe merveilleuse* (1906), directed by Albert Capellani, photography and tricks by Chomón, with its fabulous apotheosis at the end, in which the characters are seen before a huge lamp in the background and a large troupe of dancing girls appears. [Plate 2]

Most of the films Chomón made for Pathé suggest this tendency towards fantasy and the use of colour as a metaphor. He knew better than most how to use colour to intensify the make-believe nature of such characters as fairies, wizards, shape-

changers, clowns, acrobats, demons and so on. And Chomón was just as skillful at incorporating everyday objects, such as bottles or vases, into complex and visually fascinating fantasy scenes that recall live magic performances, but which provide a point of view which only moving images could provide for all spectators.<sup>19</sup> For example, in *Le spectre rouge* (1907) a demon moves a table with three bottles on it towards the camera, close enough for the spectator to see that some imprisoned ladies are dancing inside the bottles as the demon pours liquid into them. In *Les verres enchantés* (1907) a similar trick is used to draw the spectator's attention to a closer view of the action: again we see some transparent bottles, and when a liquid is poured inside them a group of dancers start moving. The magically fascinating nature of these shots places the spectator in an unreal, almost oneiric, world that colour intensifies.

At other times, Chomón made films in which the screen was presented as if it were a theater stage with a fixed decorative motif around the borders of the frame of the shot and a black background in the middle against which appearances and transformations were shown. These two parts of the screen, as in *Le troubadour* (1906), *Les Chrysanthèmes* (1907) and *Les oeufs de pâques* (1907), enabled (and almost required) the fixed part to be colored one way and the characters performing in the center in another.<sup>20</sup> [Plate 3]

This emphasis on the use of colour was fundamental to some of Chomón's films, such as those in which flowers or animals are transformed into people, as in, for example, *Les fleurs animées* (1906), *L'abeille et la rose* (1908), and *Les papillons japonais* (1908). At the end of this last film a worm turns into a beautiful, colorful butterfly, which then becomes a girl dressed up as a human butterfly, also colored, who starts performing the serpentine dance. [Plates 4 and 5] Even in an apparently realistic setting, such as *Kiriki, acrobates japonais* (1907), in which a group of acrobats in oriental costume perform a series of extravagant balancing acts that defy the laws of gravity (filmed on the floor using an overhead camera), the monochrome colour of the supposed stage on which they perform gives the entire composition a greater sense of enchantment. This film is an excellent example of the links between Chomón's cinema and the circus, as many of his films from this period feature clowns, not always for a justifiable cause but in response to the enormous popularity

and simple characterization of such figures: *Ah! la barbe* (1905), *Les cent trucs* (1906), *Les lunatiques* (1908). Acrobats also appear, as in *Kiriki*, noted above. Due to the power acrobats have to grasp the audience's attention, acrobatic movements are one of the characteristic features of the cinema of attractions. They function to draw the spectator's attention to the action occurring on screen, as if to acknowledge in the spectator senses and memories of watching a first class performance in the big top.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of colour combined with fantasy effects in Chomón's splendid animated films increases the visual impact of objects and figures appearing on the screen. In the marvelous *Le théâtre électrique de Bob* (1909) some children are playing in a room when Bob places a toy theater before them (and before the spectator) and waves at them, whereupon a show begins involving animated puppets: a fencing duel, a boxing bout, a fight over a pipe that one of the puppets is smoking and a series of gymnastic exercises on parallel bars.<sup>22</sup> The layout of the screen is the same as in my earlier description of other trick films, a permanent decorative border around the image and a black background in the center over which the characters appear: in this case, animated puppets. Here, however, colour doubles the attraction of this type of film. The inanimate objects that start moving by themselves produce a fantasy effect, and this effect is emphasized when, in the case of the puppets, they are colored. During his time at Pathé Chomón became a consummate specialist in animated cinema, as seen in such other examples as *Le courant électrique* (1908), *Les jouets vivants* (1908), *Sculpteurs modernes* (1908), *Le petit poucet* (1909) and *Métamorphoses* (1912). One of the most interesting movies in this genre, in which actors are combined with moving objects, is *Electric hotel* (1908), in which a couple staying in a hotel where everything works by electricity are abruptly disturbed when an operator presses the establishment's general switches and all of the hotel's devices, furniture and services seem to come to life.

Chomón later developed this specialty at Itala Film in Turin, where he made *I guanti di Rocambolo* (1912) and, most importantly, the extraordinary *La guerra e il sogno di Momi* (1916), made with director Giovanni Pastrone. *La guerra* is comprised primarily of animated battle scenes of toy soldiers which come to life in the dream of a young boy who has fallen asleep after reading a story of the same subject. It is a typical example of how Chomón's attractions were



later integrated with narrative in longer and more complex feature films.

Around 1908 Chomón began to use dream sequences, and objects or instruments (such as a book, a telescope, or a microscope) to motivate action and set up complex visual effects.<sup>23</sup> For example, attractions function within the simple narrative *Voyage au planète Jupiter* (1909) as Chomón integrates in one story a series of visual resources that until then had only been presented to the spectator in isolation. The film starts by introducing a very simple plot: in the Middle Ages, a king and his wizard look through a telescope and observe the planets; that night, the king dreams of a trip to the planet Jupiter. The plot is presented with great visual skill and sumptuousness. In the first shot we see the king, the wizard, and a jester in a room in a medieval castle; in the second, the characters look through the telescope; in the third, the spectator sees what they are looking at: a planet in the form of a mysterious face surrounded by clouds [Plate 6]; in the fourth (the same as the second), the wizard opens an enormous book that shows the heavens in permanent movement [Plate 7]. In the following shots, the king and the wizard go outside the castle and look at the sky; then a dream begins in which the king climbs up a ladder (filmed using an overhead camera), goes past the moon and the stars (all of which are in human form performed by actors and actresses) until he reaches Jupiter, from where he is expelled by the ruler. The film ends as the king falls from the ladder in the dream to land on his real-life bed, and wakes up. The story is phantasmagoric, but Chomón combines studio work with outdoor shots, establishes a comic tone, uses highly iconic sumptuousness in the images of the journey (such as enacted figures for the moon and the stars) and finally ensures that everything fits into a certain logic and continuity.

He also began to move away from single shot films to increasingly more elaborate structures. One example of this appears in *Le voleur invisible* (1909), in which he includes tricks in a considerably more complex narrative consisting of 27 shots, several of which appear in a syntagmatic chain that has a strictly illative function in order to make the story more easily understood. Moreover, because it is set in a contemporary period, the film loses the tone and typical atmosphere of phantasmagorias, which are almost always situated in ancient, exotic and remote worlds, and becomes a liberal adaptation of the novel *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells.<sup>24</sup> The story

begins with the protagonist standing next to a newsstand while taking an interest in a book that the vendor shows to him. We immediately see the cover of the book: *L'homme invisible*, then we return to the former shot where the protagonist pays for the book and leaves the scene. The following shots show the character arriving at his home, walking up the steps and going inside. He then reads the book he has bought and discovers an 'invisibility formula'. In the following scene, the character prepares the formula and gradually starts disappearing. From here on, Chomón links comical effects (the character exploits his invisibility in order to carry out a robbery and is chased by some inept policemen) and animated objects (the thief enters a house he intends to burglarize and moves the furniture, papers and jewels, but as he is invisible, all the spectator sees are objects moving by themselves, as in *Electric hotel*) with the narrative involving the police in pursuit of the thief.

So from late 1908 fundamental changes occur in Segundo de Chomón's cinematographic conception and use of colour: now there are films that appear to reduce the impact of colour as solely an attraction, i.e. colour as a signal of fascination, as an indicator of an unreal world. The Japanese, Chinese, Arabians and Europeans dressed in folk costumes, and the medieval scientists extracted from children's imaginaries, are not colored to make them seem more real or more plausible, but to stress their marked exoticism and their belonging to the kingdom of the imagination. However, this kingdom was now being depicted in different ways.

The first indications of a change in the use of colour start to appear in the coloring of some of the characters and some of the flowery or decorative motifs that Chomón carried out in Barcelona while working on early Pathé films, where we see coloring of the entire frame and not just details in it. The idea was not to colour a fragment of the frame, but to colour everything the spectator could see on the screen. This aspect is especially noted between the years 1910 and 1912, when Chomón returned to Barcelona to work for himself in a company he formed along with industrialist Joan Fuster (although he would never break contact with Pathé). In mid 1911 Chomón started working for Ibérico, a satellite of the French firm in Barcelona (similar to those that Pathé had set up in other cities around the world), for whom he made eleven films between August 1911 and May 1912. In eight of these films the director

proposed his own coloring system, known as Cinemacoloris, which was referenced in the Pathé catalog for 1913.<sup>25</sup>

Cinemacoloris was one of Chomón's inventions, the result of his obsession with finding mechanical methods for coloring films, thus overcoming the laboriousness of the hand-coloring process. The system was apparently similar to Pathécólor's stenciling method. Cinemacoloris, as Tharrats explains, consisted of projecting a film onto a 25 to 30 centimeter pane of frosted glass, whereupon the characters or objects to be colored were traced directly onto the glass and then cut out using a burin to create a stencil.<sup>26</sup> What I would like to highlight here is that, when filming for *Ibérico*, Chomón was actively considering the notion that the films would eventually be colored. These films were actually shot in Barcelona, but the undeveloped film was sent to Paris to be assembled along with strict indications about the order of the shots, their duration, and the general layout. In other words, Chomón had devised a script, or at least what over time would come to be known as a script.<sup>27</sup> In Paris, the films were assembled on the basis of the instructions they received for developing the original negatives and producing a certain number of copies. The copies that were to be colored, or at least some of them, were most probably sent back to Barcelona for Chomón to colour using his new Cinemacoloris system. These copies would have eventually been returned to Paris for distribution.

That is what must have happened to a copy of the extraordinary *Superstition andalouse*, which opened in Paris on 22 August 1912. The film is important due to the masterful way in which Chomón is able to include a series of seamlessly refined tricks in a story involving a chase, which is well resolved by the narrative, and the use of a dream or flash-forward.<sup>28</sup> The film tells the story of Juanita, who gets angry with a gypsy who wants to read her fiancé Pedro's palm. Juanita then starts daydreaming and imagines the gypsy devising a terrible plan of revenge against her. [Plate 8] In the dream the gypsy contacts a band of thieves and orders them to kidnap Pedro; a group of men start chasing the kidnappers, but the thieves set off an explosive and manage to escape. They take Pedro into a cave, which contains a phantasmagoric chamber where Pedro opens some cupboards, takes out some bottles, and sees that inside them are creatures with insect bodies and human heads; superimposed over them are threat-

ening hands, one of which turns into the gypsy, who tries to seduce Pedro. At this moment Juanita returns to reality and makes her peace with the gypsy.

The copy of this film preserved by the National Film Archive (BFI) of London is an interesting example of the results of the Cinemacoloris system, as it is not colored in isolated fragments of the frame but tends more towards the coloring of entire scenes, seeking what we refer to as a realistic contrast between the characters and the environment (an Andalusian country estate, or *cortijo*, the landscape in which the chase takes place, the cave in which the tricks happen, etc.). Considering that the BFI print was likely printed on modern day colour stock, it is difficult to properly assess the colour effects of Cinemacoloris, but it seems plausible to say that the colours were probably not as lively as those that were used in the early cinema of attractions; here the fascination for the medium of colour, colour as solely a sign of attraction, seems to have been lost (at least in the aforementioned copy, without having been able to observe the original nitrate). Or at least colour appears to have been reconciled with other uses, in the 'delicate *pas de deux* orchestrated between realistic motives and metaphorical or spectacular effects' that Tom Gunning analyzed.<sup>29</sup>

However, among the films he made for *Ibérico* there are others in which Chomón evidently did seek to continue working on solutions, including chromatic solutions, for the cinema of attractions. Among Chomón's written indications are references to the film *L'Iris fantastique* (1912) in which a succession of transformations are presented to the spectator by a magic fairy (played by France Mathieu, Julienne's sister); these transformations rise out of moving water that produces fountains, and each scene was to be associated with a specific colour. In his notes to Pathé, Chomón indicated the changes of colour that had to be produced during the successive manifestations in these fountains.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that in this period, in his Barcelona studio, Chomón was still making movies like this, or *Métamorphoses* (1912), in which he returned to trick movies *stricto sensu*, the type of cinema he had filmed to such perfection a few years earlier.

### Beyond Colour as Attraction

Unlike most of the major pioneers of early cinema, colour remained a constant for Chomón throughout his career, as confirmed by his work for Itala Film in *Cabiria* (1914) and the aforementioned *La guerra e il*

*sogno di Momi*. Chomón also worked as a cameraman, or as an effects specialist, on a series of films in which the mythological figure of Maciste was featured as one of the icons of Italian cinema; on some comedy films; and on such literary adaptations as *Hedda Gabler* (1919), directed by Pastrone, and *Cirano di Bergerac* (1922), directed by Augusto Genina.<sup>31</sup>

As late as 1923 he became associated with the Swiss engineer E. Zollinger, and from him obtained a mechanical film coloring system using bichrome (green and soft red). He used this system to make the film *La natura a colori*, which won an award at the International Exposition of Photography, Optics and Cinematography in Turin in July 1923. The Italian newspaper *Gazetta del Popolo* published an enthusiastic review of the results:

Children and animals, flowers and fruit, skies and marinas, auroras and crepuscules, and living nature appeared on the screen giving the audience the illusion of not being in an enclosed building, but in the presence of great natural spectacles. Such were the veracity of the colors, the crispness of the images and the naturalness of the movement.

The anonymous journalist writing this review perceived this colour as reaching new heights that bypassed experimental stages of early colour technology: 'We can now say that cinematography in colour has passed from the experimental field to being put into practice and it will soon be ready to be completely mastered by the industry'.<sup>32</sup>

Chomón and Zollinger made another film using the same system, *Mimosa*, which was never released. The film was forty-five minutes long, was shot on the Italian Riviera, and apparently told the love story of two adolescents in visual comparison with the flower named in the title.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, their system involved tinting positive copies in two colours, but what the industry was now after was a way of obtaining colour during the recording process and not in development.

Chomón's final involvement in the quest for colour cinema was in Paris in 1926, when he was working for the Société de Cinematographie et de Photographie-Film en Couleurs, a company that was competing with the Americans to perfect a trichrome system called Keller-Dorian.<sup>34</sup> At that moment the cinema was still being compared to the circus, as Eugeni d'Ors had done years earlier in 1906. However, writing in 1927, French poet Marcel Achard compared the cinema with the circus in very different terms by assessing the power of fascination and liberty of the circus in relation to what the audience found on screens: 'The circus dazzles but does not seduce. It fascinates the illusions of young people, but it does not divert them towards reflection or dreams in the way that theater and cinema do'.<sup>35</sup>

The cinema (and its colours) had changed; now, according to Achard, it led to reflections and dreams. Chomón persisted in his search for colour in film, but the advent of colour cinematography took much longer to arrive. As he died in 1929, Chomón would not be around to enjoy it.

## Notes

1. Eugeni d'Ors, 'Elegia', *Obra Catalana Completa. Glosari 1906/1910* (Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1950), 790–792.
2. Eugeni d'Ors, 'El cimatófago', *La Veu de Catalunya*, 30 April 1906. Ors, through the expression 'convulsión gris', literally gray convulsion, is referring to the agitation, paroxysm and delirium that, in his opinion, could be observed on cinematographic screens.
3. Joan M. Minguet Batllori, 'L'Eglise et les intellectuels espagnols contre le cinéma', in R. Cosandey, A. Gaudreault and T. Gunning (eds), *Une invention du diable? Cinéma des premiers temps et religion, Actes du Ier Colloque International de Domitor* (Sainte-Foy and Lausanne: Les Presses de l'Université Laval y Editions Payot, 1992), 12–20.
4. Eugeni d'Ors, op. cit. As we can see, for Ors, cinema was a long way from poetry and more in keeping with a frivolous world that, rather than tending towards great art, offered a false and artificial reality, a world in which the writer assimilated adolescent tastes. The word 'Comparsas' which appears in the quote refers to groups of performers dressed in similar costumes during stage shows and, most of all, in carnival celebrations.
5. 'Last evening, I was in the Kingdom of the Shadows', wrote Maxim Gorky in his first experience as a cinema viewer, in 1896, at a Lumière session in his hometown



- of Nizhni-Novgorod. See Harry M. Geduld (ed.), *Authors On Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).
6. Mario Verdone, 'Il cinema nasce dal circo', *Cinema & Circo in Italia* (Roma: Comitato Ecumenico per le Comunicazioni Sociali, 1992), 89–90.
  7. It did not take long for hand-coloured films to be seen in public in Spain, but these were the exception as most movies were shown in black and white. At least that was the impression given by some writers, many of whom opposed the addition of colour to films. As late as 1913, for instance, a Catalan poet named Josep Carner had diagnosed the lack of success of colour in cinematic narratives: 'The cinematographic theater in itself is the most Calvinist pleasure in the world: people congregate in it to see saints, black and white saints; and when attempts are made to put color into films, it is best to abandon the idea, as the preacher said'. Josep Carner, 'El bes en el cinematògraf II', *Catalunya*, 9 August 1913.
  8. Julienne Mathieu, before entering the world of cinema, was a humble actress performing in popular Parisian theaters. From 1905 she took the leading role in many of the films directed by Chomón for Pathé, playing the role of a magician, performing tricks and amazing transformations, and presenting other characters.
  9. Juan Gabriel Tharrats, *Los 500 films de Segundo de Chomón* (Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza, 1988), 61.
  10. Gaudí designed the theatre to resemble a natural cave. Its promoter, Lluís Graner, was a firm proponent of the Modernist movement and a supporter of Richard Wagner's 'Total Art Work'. The films screened there were advertised as 'spoken films' and the experiment consisted of the projection of Pathé films to which actors from dramatist Adrià Gual's theatrical company provided voices from behind the screen. Joan M. Minguet Batllori, 'La Sala Mercè de Lluís Graner (1904–1908): un epígon del Modernisme?', *D'Art. Revista del Departament d'Història de l'Art de la Universitat de Barcelona* 14 (1988): 99–117; J.M.M. Batllori, 'La Sala Mercè, el primer cinematògrafo de la burgesia barcelonesa', *De Dalí a Hitchcock. Los caminos en el cine. Actas del V Congreso de la Asociación Española de Historiadores del Cine* (Asociación Española de Historiadores del Cine/Xunta de Galicia, La Coruña, 1995): 63–71.
  11. Henri Bousquet, *Catalogue Pathé des années 1896 à 1914: 1896 à 1906* (Paris: Henri Bousquet, 1996).
  12. *La Vanguardia*, 12 February 1902. The Spanish original describes Chomón as a 'reputado iluminador', a reputable illuminator, associating the profession of adding colour to films with the artistic tradition of coloring manuscripts, engravings and photographs.
  13. Tharrats, *Los 500 films de Segundo de Chomón*, 65–68.
  14. *Ibid.*, 62–63.
  15. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: the American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 488.
  16. Richard Abel, *The Cine Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 169. Gaston Velle likely left Pathé in the middle of 1906. In July 1906 he became one of the artistic directors of the Italian company Cines. See Kim Tomadjoglou, 'Rome's premier film studio: Società Italiana Cines', *Film History* 12, 3 (2000): 264.
  17. Joan M. Minguet Batllori, *Segundo de Chomón, beyond the cinema of attractions (1904–1912)* (Barcelona: Filmoteca de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 1999).
  18. Tom Gunning, 'Colorful Metaphors: the Attraction of Color in Early Silent Cinema', *Fotogenia* No. 1 (1994).
  19. I thank Kim Tomadjoglou for pointing this aspect of Chomón's work out to me.
  20. Kim Tomadjoglou explains this contrast in her analysis of *Les glaces merveilleuses* or *The Wonderful Mirrors* (1907) in the 'Film notes' section of *Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism* (New York: PaceWildenstein, 2007), 176–178.
  21. On the relationship between Chomón and the circus, see Joan M. Minguet Batllori, *Paisaje(s) del cine mudo en España* (Valencia: Filmoteca de la Generalitat Valenciana, 2008), especially the chapter 'La memoria estética: magia, circo y cine de atracciones'.
  22. For a detailed analysis of this film see, Carlo Montanaro, 'The Strange Case of *Le Théâtre du Petit Bob*', *Griffithiana*, No. 32–33 (1988): 278–280.
  23. I thank Kim Tomadjoglou for pointing out this aspect of Chomón's work to me with regards to attractions and narrative motivation. See note 20, above.
  24. See Minguet Batllori, *Segundo de Chomón, beyond the cinema of attractions*.
  25. Henri Bousquet, *Catalogue Pathé des années 1896 à 1914: 1912–1913–1914* Paris: Henri Bousquet, 1995).
  26. Tharrats, *Los 500 films de Segundo de Chomón*, 175.
  27. Chomón's grandson conserved this documentation until his death. Some fragments have been reproduced in Tharrats, *Los 500 films de Segundo de Chomón* and Agustín Sánchez Vidal, *El cine de Segundo de Chomón* (Zaragoza: Caja de Ahorros de la Inmaculada de Aragón, 1992).
  28. On *Superstition Andalouse*, see Minguet Batllori, *Segundo de Chomón*.
  29. Gunning, 'Colorful Metaphors'.

30. Tharrats, *Los 500 films de Segundo de Chomón*, 124.
31. On Chomón's period at Itala Film, see Simona Nosenzo, *Manuale técnico per visionari. Segundo de Chomón in Italia, 1912–1925* (Turin: Biblioteca Fert, 2007).
32. 'Brillanti risultati della cinematografia a colori', *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 4 July 1923. Cited in Nosenzo, *ibid.*
33. Nosenzo, *Manuale técnico per visionari*.
34. Tharrats, *Los 500 films de Segundo de Chomón*, 277.
35. Marcel Achard, 'La philosophie du cirque', *Conferencia. Journal de l'Université des Annales* (No. 22), 5 November 1927.

**Abstract: Segundo de Chomón and the fascination for colour,  
by Joan M. Minguet Batllori**

Segundo de Chomón was one of the major figures of early cinema, and throughout his career he showed a particular dedication to colour. As early as 1902, in Barcelona, he tinted a copy of Méliès' *Barbe bleu*. Between 1902 and 1904 he also tinted several movies for Pathé. In 1905, when he joined Pathé in Paris, he became one of the finest specialists in the cinema of attractions: trick films and phantasmagorias, in which colour was used as an added element to attract and fascinate the spectator. From 1908 or 1909 Chomón began integrating his attractions into more elaborate narratives, and the function played by colour started to change.

*Key words:* Segundo de Chomón, Pathécolor, Cinemacoloris process, Pathé frères, Georges Méliès, colour film processes

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