

KIRIKI – ACROBATES JAPONAIS



FILMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

Direction: Segundo de Chomón (F 1907) **Produced by:** Pathé Frères

Length: 3 minutes **Format:** 35mm **Image/sound:** b/w and colour, silent

Piano accompaniment: Günter Buchwald



CONTENT & FILM AESTHETIC

KIRIKI shows an appearance consisting of eleven numbers by an eleven-person putatively Japanese acrobatic troupe. At the beginning of the film four men, four women and three children enter the stage area and arrange themselves according to colour: at the front are the children in pastel

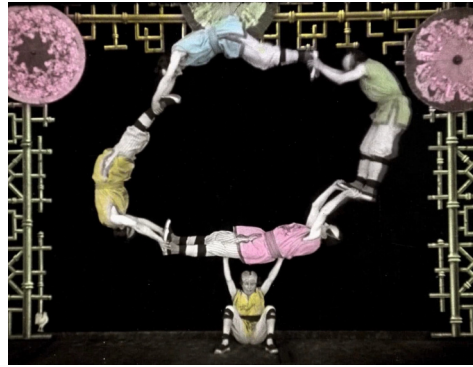
yellow costumes, behind them the women in a delicate pink color and the men in light green costumes. As if posing for a group photo, the acrobats, framed by the scenery and standing in three rows, take a bow – and the show begins.





In the first number four women and four men appear, forming a star-shaped human pyramid sending coloured rays out in front of the black backdrop. The men's bodies form a cross of yellow and blue rays, those of the four women forming pink and green diagonal rays. Only one of the men is standing with both feet on the floor, while everyone else, holding each other by the hands, seems to be floating freely in the air. It is a perfect sensation when the floating lady acrobats even raise and lower their legs! The next number begins after a cut; this time four men climb up each other and form a circular shape with their bodies. A boy sitting on the floor with his arms raised holds them in the air. It is amazing how, in KIRIKI, the relationships between weight and strength make no sense, nor the do laws of gravity apply; impossible stunts become a source of astonishment and laughter.

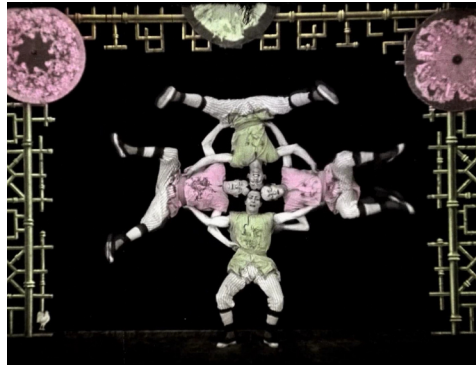
With each shot a new and seemingly more daring number begins, in which the various acrobats appear each time with different coloured costumes. With each number new kinds of human pyramids are formed, held aloft by a standing or sitting acrobat. The acrobatic numbers amaze with their visual inventiveness; it is as if Segundo de Chomón had preceded the shooting with sketchbook ideas of how to create progressively more complex and simultaneously



more incredible human pyramids. Thus, in the third acrobatic number, the figure supporting all the rest is standing on his head while, in this delicate pose, holding three other men in the air. In the fourth number half of the acrobatic troupe is kept balanced in the air by just one child.

Although the camera provides a theatrical point of view, the film owes its effect to a simple trick of perspective, which alters the spectators' impression: while the acrobats were standing on a perfectly normal stage at the beginning of the film, for their spectacular performances they lay on the floor and were filmed by a camera suspended above the action. It thus only appears that the human pyramids are actually standing. In fact, not a single trick takes place in the air; everything happens on solid ground. The illusion arises from the identical scenery and the editing which links the two perspectives together.

The actors' exotic costumes, white made-up faces, artificial-looking wigs and colourful garments, with upper parts reminiscent of kimonos, are a further visual attraction of the film. The enthusiasm of the time for the exotic – for the foreignness of Asiatic cultures – is here displayed in an especially artificial way. The impression is emphasised by the harmonic arrangement of shapes and colours. The patterns of bodies that



make up the pyramids are largely symmetrical and contrasted by both sex and costume colour. Figures standing opposite one another are thus of the same sex and wearing costumes of the same colour. It is as if the film were using this harmonic visual design to emphasise the inversion of the relationships of balance and strength. Additionally, the costume colours shine against the black stage background, a sensory attraction that focuses the viewers' attention on the action taking place within the film frame.

Throughout the film, in accordance with the symmetry of the images created, the camera also takes a central vantage point, giving viewers the illusion of a theatrical perspective. The centrally oriented image of the acrobatic performance is framed by the scenery, which also provides it with the sense of a spatial boundary. A chronological frame is also provided by the repeated group picture at the end, for which all the acrobats stand up once more and take a bow before leaving the stage.

The show is over, at least that of the Japanese acrobats. In the early cinema, however, where the venues for screening were fairgrounds and vaudeville theatres, KIRIKI would surely have been surrounded by a series of unconnected numbers, both films and cabaret-style live performances.





ARTISTIC DESIGN AND HISTORICAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE FILM

Cinema of attractions

The film KIRIKI belongs to the early phase of the cinema, historically referred to as the „cinema of attractions“. The „cinema of attractions“ was dominant till approximately 1906/07 and was an exhibitionist cinema, a cinema that wanted to show things. The films were aimed at their audience's visual curiosity, astonishment and amazement – in other words, at their thirst for sensation.

In the years that followed, however, a narrative cinema would be established, which prompted audience identification with the plot and the characters of the film. As, in the narrative cinema, audience and camera were focused on the same things, the audiences thus also identified with the film apparatus. In the „cinema of attractions“, on

the other hand, the camera behaved in a largely neutral manner; it served the fabrication of special, and thus, magical, effects, causing more amazement than identification, a catalyst for dreams.

In KIRIKI, the camera's central vantage point keeps the viewers at a distance from the action. In particular, their senses are appealed to by the apparently impossible acrobatic numbers, the exotic costumes and make-up, as well as by the use of colour, which was spectacular for the period. The theme of acrobats was one that recurred often in the „cinema of attractions“; this was also linked to its fairground origins. The use to which the camera is put and the exaggeration of the depiction additionally pushes KIRIKI into the realm of the comic.



Instead of real acrobats, there are amateurs at work here, who merely imitate the artistic achievements of professionals, by turning somersaults on the floor and simply clambering up the bodies of the other acrobats, instead of swinging themselves gracefully into the air. Especially worthy of attention is the bottommost figure in the pyramid; lying with feet placed on the walls instead of standing with both feet on the ground. It is precisely the simplicity and transparency of the camera trickery, together with the guileless performance, that help the film retain its charm today.

Colour in early film

The astounding colour concept of the film KIRIKI, in which the colours are assigned by sex, giving the image a stabilising balance, is among its visual display values. This fits well with the assumption, made by film historians, that Segundo de Chomón had already planned the colour concept in his head before shooting began on the film. At the time of the film's production, the use of colour was still something special, as colour film had not yet been invented and colouring films by hand or by a stencil process was time-consuming and complex. At the same time, however, interest in films with colour existed early on; at the beginning of film history, the black and white images could alienate with their lack of colour. The writer Maxim Gorki, for example, wrote, after attending a screening of Lumière Brothers films in 1896, that he had visited a kingdom of shadows. Everything in the film was gray; the sunlight in the gray sky, gray eyes in a gray face, leaves on trees as gray as ash. It was not life that he had seen, but the shadow of life.

In KIRIKI the colours have been manually applied in great detail, directly onto the film.

Hand-colouring of film was considered a job for women and in 1906 the Pathé company had about 200 female employees working on nothing else. In order to insert colour into the black and white image, using a technique that had already been



introduced before 1900, each individual picture on the film strip (which passed through the projector at a rate of between 16 and 18 frames per second) was hand-painted with a fine brush. The hand-painting led to irregularities, which meant that during projection the contours of the colours would often seem to flicker. However, with the first mechanical colour process, stencil-colouring, it was mainly the production of the stencils that constituted the real investment. The colour itself was applied by means of a rotating velvet band which stamped the colours through the stencil onto the film strip, enabling a consistent distribution of colour. Segundo de Chomón was a master at playing with colour. He was well-acquainted with the various techniques for colouring films and is supposed to have been significantly involved with the development of the stencil-colouring process which was patented by the Pathé company. The great effort involved in colouring by hand or with stencils also helps to explain why Segundo de Chomón only directed short colour films at this time.

The pastel tones of the colours in KIRIKI could also be the result of the film's aging. Film historians assume that in the course of over 100 years, the colours of many early films must have faded. When a film is copied to new stock, the delicate pastel colours are normally not artificially strengthened, but remain as they were found.

Silent film

The demand for colour led to it being added to black and white films in cinema's first years; similarly, silent films were never really silent. Film screenings were usually accompanied live on a piano, the music being spontaneously improvised to match the images. The version of KIRIKI before us is accompanied on the piano by Günter Buchwald.

In KIRIKI, as in other silent films, the focus of attention is directed especially upon the actions of the figures. There is no dialogue, no plot, no camera movement to single out any one of the acrobats from the context of the troupe and thus offer the audience a chance to feel identification. As a silent showpiece, KIRIKI gives the use of the body priority over language, thus anticipating a significant comic component that would be turned to such cinematic advantage by the main figures of silent film comedy, like Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin, in their work.

Pathé Frères

The company Pathé Frères, run by former fairground exhibitor Charles Pathé, monopolised film production between 1903 and 1909 in almost all European countries and in the United States. Pathé had brought modern industrial methods to film production and during these years it set the standard for the international film market. The

director of KIRIKI, Segundo de Chomón, was among the masters of film colouring and Pathé had brought him to Paris from Barcelona early on in order to use him as an expert in colour and trick effects, as well as in direction.

Pathé began to lose its primacy in the market from 1910, when rival undertaking Gaumont finally began to gain influence.

THE DIRECTOR

Segundo de Chomón (1871–1929)

Segundo de Chomón (full name Segundo Víctor Aurelio Chomón y Ruiz), born in 1871 in Teruel (Aragon), was a Spanish director and expert in film colour and trick effects who has often been described as the Spanish Georges Méliès. There was indeed a rivalry between the two extremely productive directors of early film trickery. Chomón began his work in the film industry before the turn of the century in Paris, continuing it between 1901 and 1905 in Barcelona, where he worked colouring films for Pathé and as a rental agent for French films, particularly those of the Pathé company. In 1905 Pathé invited Chomón to return to Paris, which he did, heading the department specialising in trick films. From the second decade of the century, Chomón once more worked in Barcelona, first with his own company and then for the Ibérico company, for which he directed eleven films between August 1911 and May 1912. In eight of these films he employed his own mechanical film-colouring process, which in 1913 was listed in the Pathé company's catalogue under the name Cinemacoloris. Although Segundo de Chomón directed many of his own films, he also worked with other directors as a cameraman or special effects expert.



A CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

The strangeness of the early film KIRIKI – on the one hand, due to the historical distance and unfamiliar film aesthetic, on the other, because of the make-up and exotic costumes – will amaze children of any age and perhaps also cause laughter. Depending on their ages, children may be able to recognise the inverted situation concerning strength in the film (a child carrying the entire troupe of acrobats) or even achieve the abstract thinking required to figure out the film's displaced perspective. The latter will probably require concerted explanatory as-

sistance, not only for pre-school children, as the consciousness of one's own point of view, as well as the ability to extrapolate what is perceived from a different one, is one that a child develops only gradually. Perhaps the decisive lesson taught by this film is that film and cinema broaden our outlook and can turn our accustomed view upside-down. To understand that we are not looking at the stage of a theatre from the front, but from above at a floor, would be a first step of awareness for children.





FROM SEEING TO CREATING



Experiments with perspective

Impulses: Reconstructing, staging, bodies, ways of seeing, experiments with perspective, altering the point of view

Material: Polaroid or digital camera, cube seats, stools or chairs, people, possibly costumes

Following the film KIRIKI, the children think about film tricks and try out ways of playing with perspective. It will thus be asked, after the film, how it is possible that the smallest acrobat can so easily support all the others.



With a Polaroid camera the children make a direct visual comparison: first they stand on cube seats and are photographed from the front. Later, they lie on their backs on the floor, touching the seats of the cubes or chairs, which are also lying on the floor, and are photographed from a higher vantage point. The pictures enable the children to see the effect directly: correctly framed, the children will also seem to be standing on the cubes, even when they are actually lying down. In the next step, the children form further acrobatic shapes lying down, staging and photographing them from above as in the film. It will thus be possible for even the smallest child to balance many children on his/her arms.

FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

Annette Groschke: *Kurz und in Farbe*.

Deutsche Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen.

DVD: *Fairy Tales: Early Colour Stencil films from Pathé*. Published by the British Film Institute (bfi).

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