

Centenary: The Lumiere Brothers – the Pioneers of Film

By Sophie Jackson

A train rushed towards the cinema screen and the audience cried out and ducked, thinking a very real train was headed towards them, or so the story goes concerning the first performance of the Lumiere brothers most famous film, *Arrival of a Train at a Station*. Today we have been so overwhelmed by special effects in films and TV, even on stage, that these early films seem simplistic, even dull. But this was the cutting edge of technology, the Lumieres were truly pioneers. They were creating the first moving images, all in the few short years before the greatest tragedy of the modern era was to erupt.

The Brothers of Light

Lumiere quite literally translates into English as ‘light’, an appropriate epithet for Auguste Marie Louis Nicolas and Louis Jean, now considered the earliest filmmakers in history. Born in France in the 1860s to a father who ran a photographic firm, both brothers dabbled in the family business and made improvements to the photography camera before progressing to moving images in the 1890s. It was the retirement of their father from the family business that enabled them to experiment with the hitherto unknown process of filmmaking. Louis was the technical genius and came up with many of the methods that enabled stills to be turned into films.

In March 1895 the brothers filmed workers leaving the Lumiere factory and this is considered to be the first footage ever recorded. The brothers quickly expanded their repertoire and by December they had ten short films that they could present to the public. Each film was 17 metres long, but despite the length it only played for 50 seconds. Even so the public was delighted with such charming shorts as *Fishing for Goldfish*, *Baby's Breakfast* and *Jumping onto the Blanket*. The topics might have been dull, but it was the novelty of capturing movement on film that excited people.

No Turning Back

Despite their triumph Auguste and Louis felt there was no future in filmmaking and refused to sell their camera to other early French cinematographers such as Georges Méliès. Instead they decided to focus on creating colour photography, resulting in some fascinatingly vivid images of the First World War that bring a surreal degree of realism to the conflict.

It was that same war that brought a crashing halt to most filmmaking in France for four years. The Lumiere brothers were fortunate their early films did not go the way of many of Méliès', melted down for the silver and celluloid they contained, vital for the war effort. Both brothers lived through both world wars and witnessed the rise of ‘movies’ from the technology they had described as having no future. Louis died on the French Riviera in 1948, aged 83. Auguste lived until 1954 and died in France aged 91. The sixtieth anniversary of his death now coincides with the hundredth anniversary of the war he helped photograph in colour.

Pioneers though they were the Lumiere brothers failed to realise the potential of what they had created. They saw it as a gimmick, a novelty, not something that would eventually turn into a million-dollar industry. They were only visionaries to a degree and once they had succeeded in capturing moving images they simply lost interest. Their role in filmmaking was brief, but it was also essential. Without the Lumiere brothers who knows how long it would have taken someone else to create a movie camera? What the brothers failed to realise is that once they had created the moving picture there was simply no turning back.



Lumiere Brothers 1914. This image of the Lumiere brothers was taken using their autochrome technique for colour photos in around 1914. (Public Domain)



First Movie Poster 1895. This poster advertises one of the Lumiere short films, a slapstick comedy involving a hosepipe. It is considered the very first movie poster. (Image is over 100 years old)



Autochrome 1917. The Lumiere brothers pioneered the autochrome technique enabling colour photographs such as this, taken of North African soldiers in 1917. (Public Domain)