Who was Jean Painlevé and what does a careful study of his short, surreal scientific and animal films offer to the way we approach film history and film theory? This talk answers these questions through a synoptic pass through my new book Zoological Surrealism (University of Minnesota Press, 2019) in 21 archival images. Through the bias of Painlevé’s early oeuvre, I rethink the entangled histories of cinema, Surrealism, and contemporaneous scientific research, and the value of such a trans-contextual approach for the history and historiography of cinema. I also make a theoretical argument about photographic and cinematic media, and what I call cinema’s Copernican vocation, or the use of the cinematic apparatus as an instrument of scientific discovery (Painlevé worked in research laboratories documenting biological phenomena and experiments) and nonanthropocentric displacement (his work also played a key role in the development of a sceptical anthropology in France).

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