earlier lightning sketch–derived films, there is little sense of a stage performance. The drawings are foregrounded, rather than the artist as actor. Cohl interjects his presence into the films not so much by means of his corporeal self as by his rigorously consistent style and unique aesthetic philosophy. It is as though the viewer's attention was being diverted from the magician, toward the mechanism of the trick.

"Watch Me Move!" The Films of Winsor McCay

4

Winsor McCay and his contemporary Emile Cohl are a study in contrasts. Cohl was past middle age when he discovered cinema; McCay was still in his thirties and at the apogee of his sparkling career as a comic-strip artist. We stand in awe before Cohl's enormous output over the span of a decade; McCay's reputation as an animator rests on a handful of cartoons drawn in the privacy of his atelier in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. McCay never actually entered the film business full-time, and was content to hire out the photography and similar production chores. There was no Léon Gaumont breathing over him, so he was free to spend months, perhaps even years, laboring affectionately on each film.

Unlike the cerebral and introverted Cohl, McCay was a gregarious host, a flamboyant showman, and altogether a public personality. He took to the stage with glee, whereas Cohl kept his theatrical contributions behind the scenes. When the two artists entered the cinema, demure Cohl limited his own appearance to his hands, whereas McCay took the part of the protagonist and prominently displayed his name, known to most literate New Yorkers, above each title.

Emile Cohl all but abandoned his earlier graphic style to create a new streamlined one especially suited to the commercial and aesthetic demands of moving drawings, but

McCay's genius resided in his ability to translate the comic strips that had made him famous onto the screen with a minimum of modification (figure 33).

Cohl's life story was the patient but futile pursuit of his rightful fame, but McCay's life was one of those legendary turn-of-the-century success stories. Winsor Zenis McCay (figure 34) was born on September 26, 1871, in Spring Lake, Michigan, although there is some question about the precise year because the record was lost in a fire.[1] At his father's sawmill the boy did odd jobs before going to school in nearby Ypsilanti, where he discovered his talent for drawing. When the family moved to Chicago, McCay enrolled in a commercial art school, but it closed after a few days. This brief exposure to pens, brushes, and models was his only formal art education. His practical training came from working for a manufacturer of lithographed carnival posters when he moved to Cincinnati and designed ghastly signs and banners advertising the attractions of Kohl and Middleton's Vine Street Dime Museum. Thus, McCay was thoroughly acquainted with the world of popular amusement even before the movies invaded it. In 1891, he married Maude Leonore DuFour and, no doubt feeling pressure to land a more respectable job, went to work as an artist-reporter for the Cincinnati *Commercial Tribune*.

Armed with sketchpad, pen, and India ink, McCay (as Blackton had done before him) would rush off to record local newsworthy events, as well as to illustrate features for the Sunday editions. The job fostered drafting speed, accurate observation, and the ability to complete a drawing on the first try –talents that would also prove valuable when the time came to adapt the artist's drawings for animated motion pictures. McCay began his first comic strip in Cincinnati; by 1903 he felt ready for New York. McCay's capacity for work astonished the staff of the *Evening Telegram*. He produced not only daily installments of his

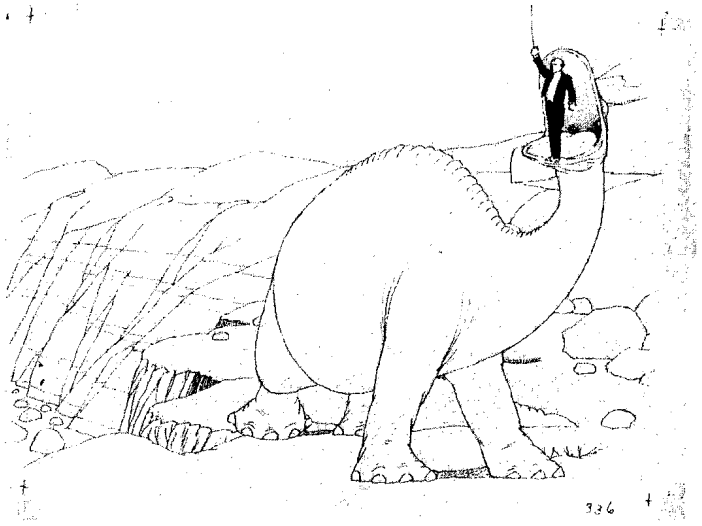


Figure 33.
Winsor McCay, original drawing for *Gertie*, 1913–14. From John Canemaker collection.

Figure 34.
Winsor McCay, circa 1908.

"Dream of the Rarebit Fiend" or "Poor Jake," but a weekly strip for the Sunday *Herald* as well. From the beginning, McCay busied himself creating a world of dreams and fantasy without precedent in comic-strip history. The protagonists were ordinary men and women with whom the readers could identify. These bewildered but calm heroes, who changed with every strip, were thrust into a world of heightened and distorted reality.

McCay's first New York weekly strips remain almost unknown, yet they were crucial in his development as a graphic artist and show early evidence of his growing interest in the cinema. "Little Sammy Sneeze" began in mid-1904 and continued for two years until supplanted by "Little Nemo in Slumberland." Every episode was a variation on a single gag: Sammy is present at some social gathering. In panels one through five he builds up to a catastrophic sneeze that destroys everything near its epicenter, embarrasses his parents, and results in his being booted out of the frame in the sixth panel. (In later strips, his punishment was less harsh.) The formal composition of the strip was as rigorously inflexible. Six squares, each bound by a thick black border with curved corners, were aligned in two rows. Sammy's position within each panel never changes. He just progresses with his sneeze, his body totally involved, while the bystanders stare helplessly in the background waiting for the final explosion. Although the word "cinematic" is often carelessly used to describe comic-strip art, here is one case in which it seems justified. The unusual black border of the strip, for instance, closely approximates the almost-square aspect ratio of early film frames. Though the repetition of a single figure or scene in consecutive panels had too many nineteenth-century graphic antecedents to be considered necessarily influenced by cinema, certainly McCay's compositions create the impression of cinematic settings. He typically employs

the knees-up framing of figures, which early film producers called the "American shot." Occasionally there seem to be reminders of specific filmic situations, as in the January 1, 1905 strip showing Sammy and his parents seated at a table in an arrangement reminiscent of Lumière's *Le Repas de Bébé* (figures 35, 36). Though McCay relied primarily on his keen observation of life for Sammy's anatomically perfect sneeze, he probably also knew the most famous sneeze of all: the one Edison's assistant Fred Ott performed for his camera in 1894, which was published in *Harper's Weekly*.[2] This "kinetoscopic record" (figure 37) revealed all the delightfully unexpected facial contortions. In his film on McCay, John Canemaker demonstrated that the artist's analysis of the sneeze was accurate enough to be synthesized into motion using modern animation techniques.[3]

While "Sammy" was still running, "The Story of Hungry Henrietta" commenced on January 8, 1905. Although similar formally and stylistically, this was essentially a very different kind of strip. It was never intended to be humorous, but rather is a work in a pathetic and highly ironic key. It was also McCay's only true serial comic, appearing in 27 consecutive weekly "chapters." Each episode was a one-line gag, but, unlike Sammy, Henrietta aged visibly from one week to the next. (McCay was evidently fascinated with the effects of accelerated growth; he explored the idea in other strips and in his films.) Henrietta was an ordinary little baby born into a thoroughly normal family. Her only distinction was that, from her earliest days, she possessed a voracious appetite. In contrast to Sammy, whose sneezing is only a comic effect unmotivated by any psychological factors, Henrietta's gluttony was clearly neurotic and induced by her well-meaning but incompetent parents. Underlying the strip is an extraordinary sensitivity to the delicate depths of the child's mind.

In the first episode Henrietta is only three months old

Figure 35.
McCay, "Little Sammy Sneeze," New York *Herald*, January 1, 1905; © 1905.

Figure 36.
Lumière and assistants, *Le Repas de Bébé* (1895).

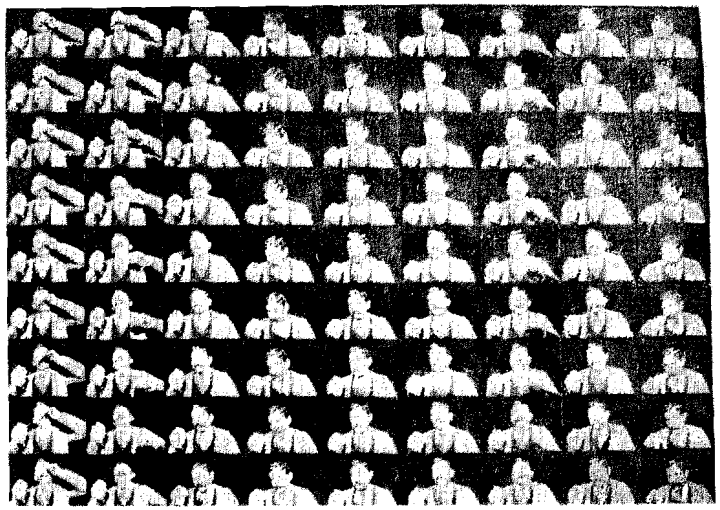


Figure 37.
W. K. L. Dickson, "Edison kinetoscopic record of a sneeze," *Harper's Weekly*, March 24, 1894; © 1894.

Figure 38.
McCay, "Hungry Henrietta," New York *Herald*, January 8, 1905; © 1905.

when she is taken by her family to have a portrait made (figure 38). The baby sits naked and frightened in a basin for the cute Victorian picture. When she begins to cry, someone immediately suggests that she must be hungry. The last panel is a moving portrait of the little girl sitting with the bottle thrust in her mouth, a substitute for the warmth she needs. Throughout her life relatives continue to placate her with food instead of providing familial bonds. Soon she has become a compulsive eater—getting up in the middle of the night, for example, to devour all the pies in the pantry. The concluding strip showed Henrietta asleep under a tree after eating the family's whole picnic lunch. She is about eight years old and is already a plump, sad, alienated girl whose chances for future happiness seem rather dismal. The total effect of the strip is a subtle but damning comment on middle-class child rearing, and McCay's vision is closer to William Blake's view of childhood than it is to that of his contemporaries, such as Outcault or McManus.

Sammy and Henrietta forecast Little Nemo, McCay's heroic dreamer who was originally patterned after the artist's son Robert. The full-page "Little Nemo in Slumberland" depicted his adventures with King Morpheus of Slumberland, the Princess, and an assortment of sidekicks. Nemo's escapades in a world in which adult authority and rationality are alien elements were comparable in conception to Ravel's 1908 operetta *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, but the scope is far grander. And the significance of the strip lies as much in its graphic execution as in its theme. The meticulous rendering of each image and the ingenious (even daring) arrangement of the newspaper page went far beyond the usual expectations of audiences and publishers. The strip continued in the *Herald* until 1911, when McCay signed with Hearst. He probably intended to continue it, but the *Herald* obtained an injunction and Little Nemo

would not reappear until 1924, during McCay's two-year return to the *Herald-Tribune*. In the meantime McCay was confined to single-panel cartoons in the Hearst papers. He remained active until July 27, 1934, when he succumbed to a massive stroke.

As the 1906 "Seven Ages" lightning-sketch vaudeville act demonstrated, Winsor McCay's interests were not confined to comics. Another theatrical venture was the Broadway production of *Little Nemo* (figure 39), a musical written by Harry B. Smith and scored by Victor Herbert. Producer Marc Klaw (of Klaw and Erlanger, also film producers) announced the project in the summer of 1907 and hoped that the operetta would "combine the qualities of fantasy and sentiment."[4] McCay was not an active collaborator, but he did sneak advertisements into his comic-strip panels. This event confirmed the characters' theatrical potential. Movies were the next logical frontier. According to McCay, "It came about in this way. Winsor Jr., as a small boy, picked up several flippers of 'Magic Pictures' and brought them home to me. From this germ I established the modern cartoon movies in 1909."[5] Knowing Blackton as a journalist and a neighbor, and perhaps seeing Cohl's films, might have been additional factors leading to his flash of insight.

Although we do not know the starting date of McCay's first film, the date of completion is certain: 1911. This corresponds to the cessation of the "Little Nemo" strip. Despite claims that he was using the completed footage in his vaudeville routine by 1909, contemporary reviews state clearly that when the act opened at Williams's Colonial Theater in New York on April 12, 1911, "the idea was being presented for the first time on any stage."[6] This same review corrects the erroneous report that a short all-animated version was used on stage: "On a screen the vitagraph shows pictures of Mr. McCay in company with

Figure 39.
Scenes from the play *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, 1908.

several friends at a club. He is telling them of his new idea. . . . The artist . . . signs a contract, agreeing to turn out 4,000 pictures in one month's time for a moving picture concern." This accurately describes the prolog that still accompanies the film. There is also internal evidence that allows us to date the shooting of the prolog. In January 1911, *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, the first movie fan magazine, was launched "principally through the energy of J. S. Blackton."[7] To garner a bit of free publicity for the new Vitagraph publication, Blackton, who was directing the live-action sequence, placed editor Eugene V. Brewster in the group holding the latest issue aloft. Obviously the prolog (and probably the animation as well) was not photographed before 1911. Vitagraph issued this synopsis of the film:

> One of the fellows asks Winsor why he has never been able to make moving pictures; he replies that he feels positive he can produce drawings that will move, and wagers that he will make four thousand pen drawings inside of one month that will move as actively and as life-like as anything ever produced by the camera, and surpass in their performance anything ever seen. His companions laugh at him and tell him he is getting foolish in his "noodle." One month later he has the four thousand drawings ready for the Vitagraph Company's camera and invites his club friends to come and see him make good. They arrive and he shows them drawings of some of the leading characters of his "Little Nemo" series. The cameraman turns the crank of the machine, and what these celebrated little cartoon characters do, would be more difficult to tell than what they do not do. The incredulous friends of McCay are surprised and puzzled.[8]

When McCay finished his drawings (probably in late 1910) and brought them to be photographed, he encountered some of the same problems that had plagued Cohl and would haunt other animators. The thin rice paper he

had used for retracing each sequential image had cockled when the ink wash was applied. The sputtering arcs necessary to provide light for the slow film emulsion caused flickering because of their inconsistent illumination. Nevertheless, when the footage was developed the drawings moved, and McCay considered it a success. Vitagraph released it on April 8 (figure 40), and a few days later McCay used it during his act at the Colonial. Today the film is generally known as *Little Nemo*.

McCay never was inclined to modesty—the title card read

> Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the New York Herald and his Moving Comics
> The first artist to attempt drawing Pictures that will Move
> Presented by the Vitagraph Corporation of America.

Among the congenial skeptics pictured in the prolog was Vitagraph's star John Bunny, considered an extra box-office draw.

In the film, McCay draws Nemo, Impy, and Flip on a sketchpad in lightning-sketch fashion (figure 41). His friends offer him a drink, but McCay makes a grand display of preferring water. (This was no doubt a private joke; McCay was hardly a teetotaler.) Next comes a hilarious scene in which workers roll barrels of India ink and bales of drawing paper into a studio (a stage set) where McCay is hard at work on stacks of drawings. He even demonstrates his homemade Mutoscopelike device for flipping the drawings on a large rotating drum. Bunny pays a visit and the projectionist starts the film within the film. Flip's outline draws itself by means of stopping the camera between strokes of the pen—Blackton's old trick. Then McCay's hand draws Flip and slides the drawing into a holder, the same one used to clamp the drawings upright during the actual photography. The camera tracks forward until the

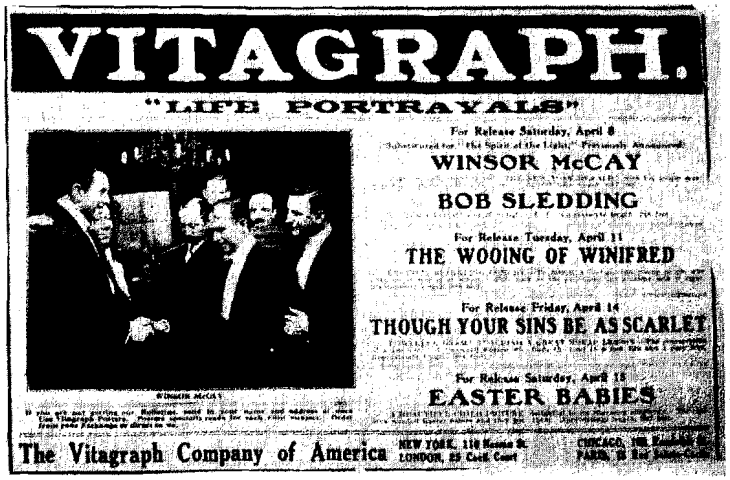


Figure 40.
Advertisement for *Winsor McCay ("Little Nemo")*, New York *Dramatic Mirror*, March 29, 1911.

edges of the holder disappear beyond the frame. The caption "Watch Me Move" is emblazoned above Flip's head, and he begins to roll his eyes and chomp his cigar—tentative movements suggesting that he is gradually awakening to his new kinetic abilities. Judith O'Sullivan has aptly characterized the remainder of the film as "abstract animism," and it is true that the four-minute sequence exploits movement for its own sake in a highly exploratory way.

Little Nemo materializes from a swirl of moving dots and, like a magician, stretches and compresses the bodies of Impy and Flip. Then he seems to become the artist's alter ego, and picks up a crayon to make a lightning sketch of a princess (his own Galatea), who comes to life. A flower grows from the lower edge of the frame, its complete growth accelerated so that it buds and matures just in time for Nemo to pick a blossom for the princess. Together they ride away in the mouth of a crawling dragon whose body diminishes in perfect mathematical foreshortening as it recedes from the picture plane toward the horizon. Impy and Flip ride up in an exploding car. The animated sequence ends with the camera tracking away from the final drawing, again revealing the holder containing the last image and providing narrative closure.

Among the early viewers of *Little Nemo* was Emile Cohl. He was still working at Pathé in France when Vitagraph released the film as *Le Dernier Cri des dessins animés* in June 1911,[9] and he wrote the following in *Ciné-Tribune*: "I recall perfectly that Zecca, Pathé's director of production, called me specially to Vincennes to show me McCay's first film when it had just arrived."[10]

Cohl must have been aware of the probable debt to his Gaumont films, as when McCay borrowed his metamorphic sequence code. But Cohl must also have realized that, although McCay used essentially the same retracing technique, his graphic conception was totally original. The

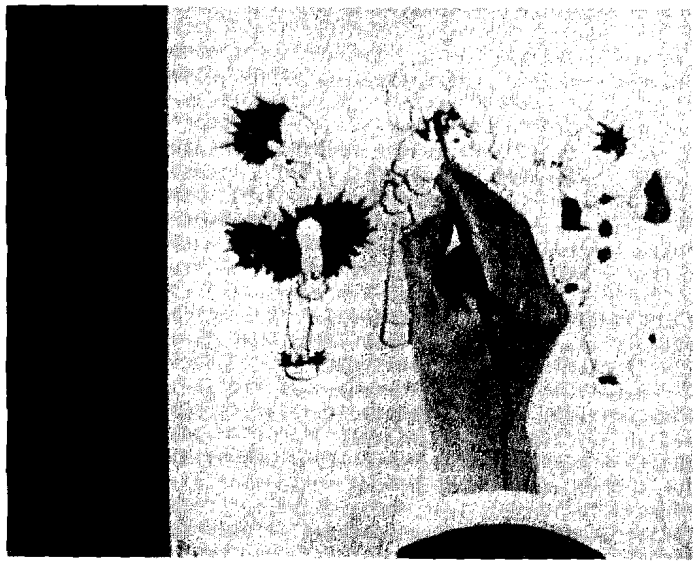


Figure 41.
McCay, *Little Nemo* (Vitagraph, 1911).

Figure 41, continued.
See also following page.

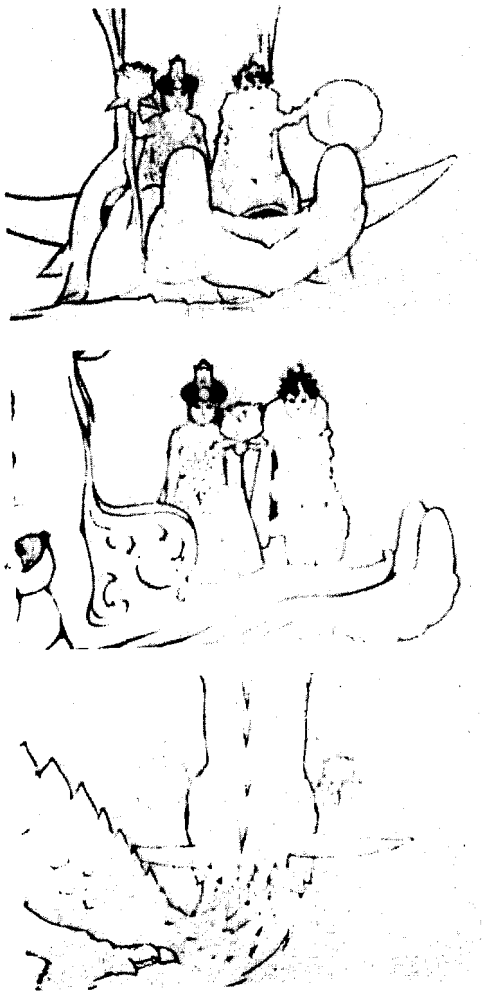


Figure 41, continued.

American had audaciously transposed his comic-strip characters without sacrificing linear detail. The short sequence had obviously required months of fine drawing, but the reward was that the characters moved as lifelike solids in three-dimensional space. Although there are no backgrounds, McCay's intuitive knowledge of perspective projection had enabled him to foreshorten the moving figures with photographic accuracy as they moved in and out of illusionistic depth. Present-day audiences still gasp when the dragon-chariot grows progressively smaller as it recedes, swishing its serpentine tail. Early viewers were similarly astonished. One wrote ". . . indeed, after watching these pictures for a while one is almost ready to believe that he has been transported to Dreamland along with Nemo and is sharing his remarkable adventures. . . ."[11] The same reviewer was quick to point out the opportunity to exploit the film as a tie-in with the strip: "It should be popular everywhere. It is one of those films which have a natural advertising heritage in the great and wide popularity of its subject. Little Nemo is known everywhere."

McCay was so pleased that he began a second cartoon, to be called *The Story of a Mosquito*. Again the animated footage was introduced by a live prolog (which has been lost). In it,

> Windsor McKay [*sic*] is in his summer home in Jersey with his daughter and they are pestered to death by mosquitoes. It is by accident that the artist happens to meet a professor, who says that he is studying the language of the mosquito and knows all about them. He suggests that the artist make a series of drawings to illustrate just how the insect does its deadly work. So McKay sets to work and several months later the two of them go to a moving picture studio to see the finished work on the screen.[12]

In the surviving footage the mosquito startles us with his vampirish appearance (figure 42). His spiny wings, sharp

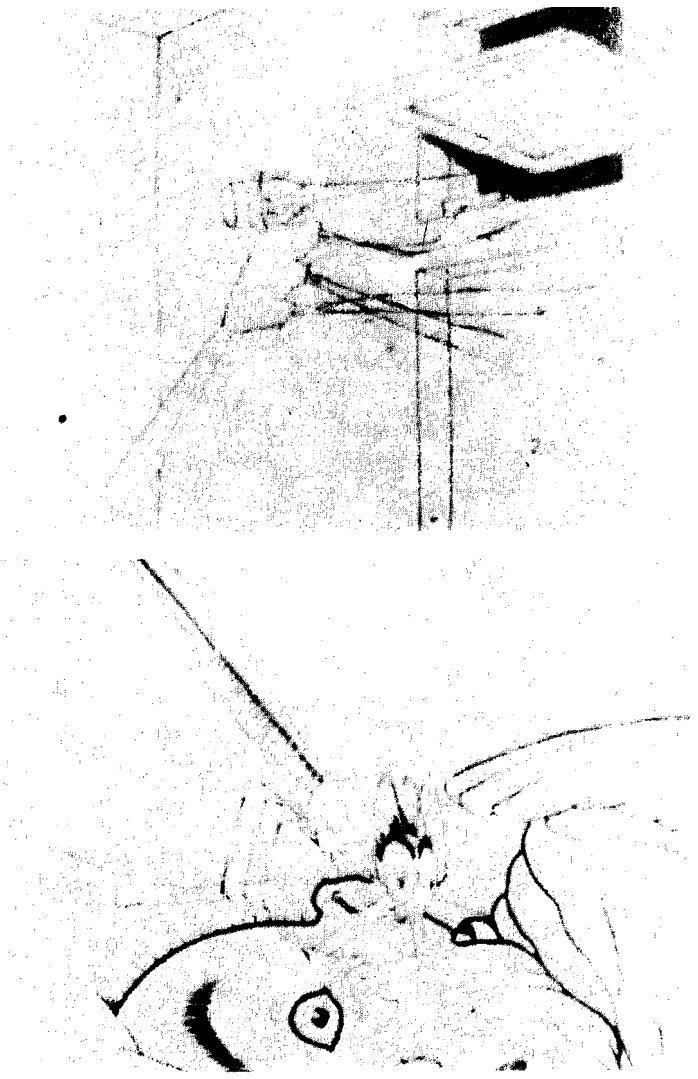


Figure 42.
McCay, *The Story of a Mosquito* (Vitagraph, 1912).

proboscis, and stiff legs are quintessentially "insectlike," suggesting a combination of a mosquito, a cockroach, and a spider. However, he is more comical than menacing because he is also wearing a top hat and carrying a carpet bag. *The Story of a Mosquito* simulated the montage of a live-action film, with changes in scenes and points of view. After the introduction of the mosquito, whom McCay called Steve, there is a shot of a fat man in a nightgown approaching a bedroom door. The animator has him pause and pivot several times, an economy planned to obtain the maximum footage from the drawings. The naturalism of the scene is remarkable not only for the anatomical accuracy of the drawing, but also for the realism of the man's movements, down to his moving shadow as he enters the room and closes the door. The stalking mosquito is too large to pass through the keyhole, so the "camera angle" is shifted to show him entering through the transom.

Steve makes repeated forays into the skin of the sleeping man, shown in an unnerving extreme closeup. The viewer's response is one of approach and avoidance: We are attracted to the cleverness of the drawing and the suppleness of the animation, but repulsed by the visceral nature of the humor. The microscopic views of the man's stubbly fat neck and his grotesque eyeball create a sense of excessive closeness. When the mosquito draws blood, we see it flow into his transparent abdomen. Our reaction to the penetration of the man's porcine flesh by the sharp beak is not unlike our discomfort during the famous eyeball-slicing scene of *Un Chien andalou*. McCay also successfully gives us a subjective representation of how the sleeper might picture his buzzing tormentor by greatly distorting the scale; Steve seems to be about three inches long. There is certainly a disconcerting Freudian aspect to this image of compulsive vampirism. The mosquito is only satisfied when his beak is inserted all the way to the hilt, enabling him to

engage in such an orgasmic frenzy of blood lust that he becomes dangerously engorged and explodes. Parts of his body and his feast of blood bathe the screen.

This grimly humorous film was again drawn by the retracing method. Backgrounds were not used, but the illusion of stability was created by including static props (the bedroom door and the pillow).

The Story of a Mosquito was produced and photographed by Vitagraph, but McCay did not allow the studio to distribute the film in the United States, where it would compete with his vaudeville act. He toured with it in the spring and summer of 1912, and when he played New York's Hammerstein Theater "the moving pictures of his drawings . . . caused even film magnates to marvel at their cleverness and humor."[13]

McCay's anecdote that audiences thought the drawings were moved by wires hardly seems credible, but it provided him with a good introduction for *Gertie,* his next project. Bringing an extinct dinosaur to life should allay all suspicions about wires. This third and most memorable film became the enduring masterpiece of pre-Disney animation.

This time a static background was added to the composition. McCay's young neighbor John A. Fitzsimmons was assigned the nerve-wracking chore of tracing the unchanging landscape background onto each and every six-by-eight-inch sheet of paper.[14] Initial plans were announced in 1912, and the drawings were in progress during the run of Cohl's "Newlyweds"—a competitive incentive. The drawings were photographed in the Vitagraph studio in early 1914. McCay presented the film on the stage of the Palace Theater in Chicago on February 8, 1914. Reviewer Ashton Stevens was moved to write: "Thus the camera, that George Washington of mechanism, at last is proved a liar."[15] The film was copyrighted on September 15, 1914. *Gertie* was intended to become part of the vaudeville act, like the

previous two films. McCay performed with it in New York, where Emile Cohl watched it avidly just before departing for Europe. As Cohl later recalled,

> Winsor McCay's films were admirably drawn, but one of the principal causes of their success was the manner in which they were presented to the public. I remember one of the first public presentations at the Hammerstein Theater in New York. The principal, in fact, the only performer in the film was an antediluvian beast, a kind of monstrously large diplodocus. In the beginning the picture showed a tree and some rocks. On the stage, before the screen, stood the elegant Winsor McCay, armed with a whip and pronouncing a speech as though he were the ringmaster of the circus. He called the animal who loomed up from behind the rocks. Then it was like exercises in horsemanship, with the artist always in control. The animal danced, turned, and finished by swallowing the trees and rocks then curtsying to the audience which applauded the work of art and the artist at the same time. It was lucrative for McCay who never left the theater without stopping by the cashier to be laden with a few banknotes on the way out.[16]

Richard Huemer and Robert Winsor McCay recreated the act for an episode of the "Disneyland" television program. It correctly showed McCay's impersonator standing at the lower right of the screen to coordinate his gestures and monolog with Gertie's motions. When McCay rewarded Gertie by tossing her an apple, for instance, she appeared to catch it in her enormous mouth just as the real prop went behind the screen.[17] In the triumphant finale, McCay would disappear behind the screen just as Gertie seemed to scoop him up on her head. Then the beast would exit screen right with a little animated Winsor McCay cracking his whip upon her back.

For some reason McCay's success on stage raised the ire of his employer, William Randolph Hearst, who invoked

the exclusivity clause of his contract. McCay agreed to restrict his performances to New York City. Effectively, though, the artist's vaudeville career was finished. This must have hurt him deeply; since he had been enjoined from continuing "Little Nemo" in 1911, work on his animated films provided a release for this compulsive draftsman's enormous energies, as well as consolation (and considerable compensation) for the loss of his favorite strip. He probably viewed his stage career as a means of keeping his reputation alive. Fortunately, William Fox (of the future Twentieth Century–Fox) was just emerging as a major producer-distributor and had formed Box Office Attractions in January. In November, McCay accepted Fox's offer of "spot cash and highest prices," and this announcement was made:

> Box Office Attractions has arranged to market "Gertie the Dinosaurus." The subject has been in constant demand by vaudeville managers. The film got $350 for one week at the Palace Theater New York, the best house on the United Circuit. It is the biggest figure ever paid for a single reel attraction. . . . McCay has set a new pace with his hand-drawn film of a trained "Dinosaurus" which he prosaically calls "Gertie." This film achievement is a new departure in the industry as well as in art.[18]

For this moving-picture theater version, McCay filmed another prolog and replaced the stage patter with intertitles. Present in the film are several of McCay's cartoonist friends, including Tad (Thomas A. Dorgan), Tom Powers, Roy McCardell, and George McManus. This array of Hearst artists is itself intriguing. If the prolog was filmed before McCay's feud with Hearst, then their appearance was probably just for extra publicity. But if the prolog was shot later, then their presence might indicate a show of solidarity among the Hearst cartoonists. The shooting date is not known.

The animation is once again introduced by the fictive device of a bet. While viewing the brontosaurus skeleton at the Museum of Natural History, McCay wagers that he can bring the beast to life in moving drawings. As in his first film, there are shots of him hard at work. McManus drops in and provides the opportunity to explain the system. We see some of the sheets being photographed, still positioned vertically as in *Little Nemo*. When the "10,000 drawings, each a little different from the one preceding it" (as a title identifies them) are done, the friends reconvene in a restaurant to watch the results (figure 43). McCay lightning-sketches the prehistoric landscape on a large pad and calls the dinosaur out of her cave by name; then the animation begins.

The brontosaurus emerges, shy at first and aware of the audience, but she quickly warms up to the performance. Her personality is a cross between a trained circus elephant and a frisky puppy. Gertie is tame, but not domesticated. She even snaps at McCay when he tries to get her to salute the audience. Perhaps in his conception of this lovable but cantankerous creature McCay was influenced by Maud, Opper's comic-strip mule with an equally prosaic name and stubborn disposition.

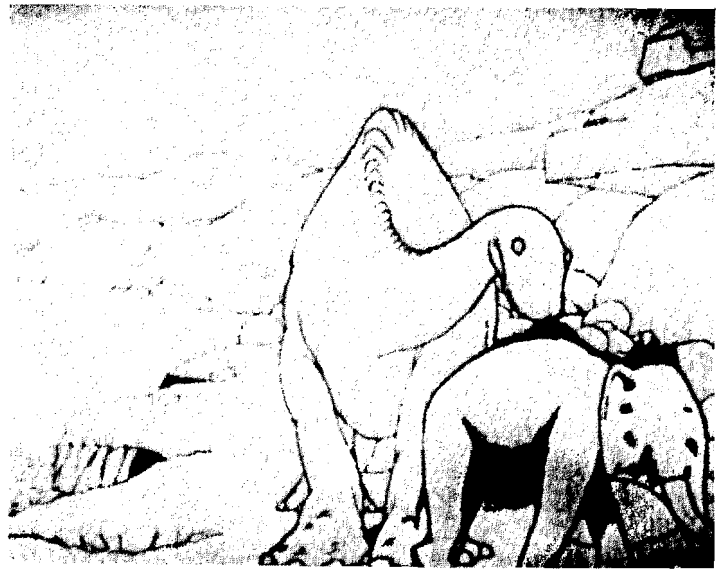
McCay's ability to simulate natural movement was uncanny. Gertie's ponderous weight is suggested as she shifts rhythmically back and forth on her feet. When she kneels to drink, the ground sags beneath her enormous mass. We see her abdominal muscles work to suck in the water, as her stomach slowly expands. The up-and-down rhythm of her breathing can be seen when she lies on her side. Anthropomorphic qualities contribute to her personality, as when she daintily scratches an itch with the tip of her agile tail. In minutes McCay convinces the audience that he has resurrected a tangible and lovable animal—a triumphant moment for the animator as life giver.

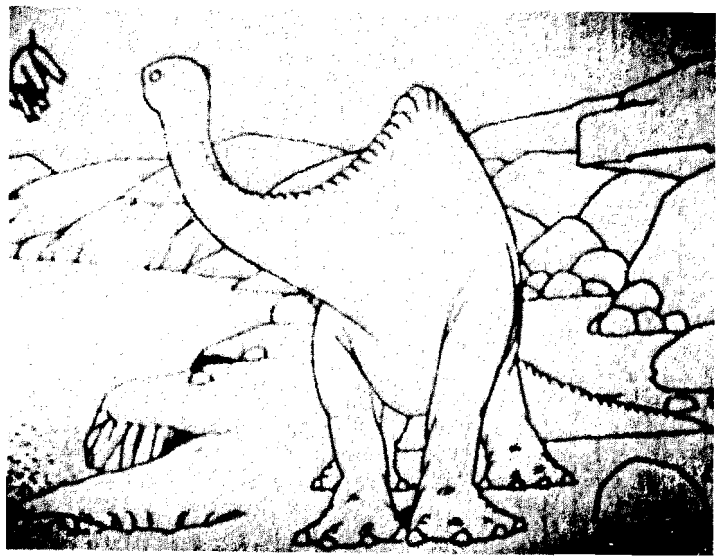
a

b

Figure 43.
McCay, *Gertie* (Box Office Attractions), © 1914. **a:** McCay and George McManus. **b:** McCay at sketchboard. **c:** Gertie meets Jumbo.

c





Hearst problems were probably the cause of the hiatus between the completion of *Gertie* in 1914 and the announcement of the next film in mid-1916. Like many people, McCay was shocked by the sinking of the passenger ship *Lusitania* in 1915, and he decided to depict the event in animation since there was no photographic record. The impulse was remarkably similar to Griffith's historicism in *Intolerance*. Working with patriotic fervor, McCay and Fitzsimmons flew into the thousands of drawings required for the task. *The Sinking of the Lusitania; An Amazing Moving Pen Picture by Winsor McCay* was released in July 1918, and differed from the films of the earlier period in several respects. Its documentary character called for a more realistic graphic style, so the detailed crosshatching, the washes, and the spatter techniques of the Hearst editorial illustrations were used. Technically, it was McCay's first attempt to use cels. The animated sequences were conceived as alternating shots to simulate the editing style of the newsreel subjects typical of the Universal Weekly, in which the film was included.

After identifying McCay as the "originator and inventor of Animated Cartoons," a Mr. Beach brings him a large painting of the ship. McCay says it will take 25,000 drawings. In the next shot we see him in his famous working hat supervising a crew of six assistants, one of whom is flipping through a bound volume of sheets to check the motion. "From here on you are looking at the first record of the sinking of the *Lusitania*," a title announces as the vessel steams past the Statue of Liberty, rendered in hazy atmospheric perspective. A stage curtain closes on the scene, indicating the passage of time. The next shot shows a German U-boat surging through the waves directly toward the audience. In the upper half of the picture, a cel provided the background of painted clouds.

The alternating long shots of the smoke billowing from

the ship and water-level closeups of the victims leaping from the deck and forming human chains before falling to their death make this film truly horrific. The smoke (figure 44) forms art nouveau arabesques and a fleeting skull-like outline. The tiny bodies twist and turn frantically as they plummet into the water. A block and tackle from the sinking ship swings directly in front of the "camera" to establish the illusionistic distance and the huge scale of the drawing, as well as adding a touch of verism. At the end there are pathetic shots of children bobbing in the waves, the Union Jack going under, and—most awful—a mother and her baby sinking into the depths with the camera following their helpless descent. After these scenes comes the bitter final title: "The man who fired the shot was decorated by the Kaiser and yet they tell us not to hate the Hun."

There are few details about McCay's film career in the late teens. Undated fragments of three films (*The Centaurs, Flip's Circus,* and *Gertie on Tour*) remain, but they do not appear to have been released. In 1921, Robert McCay assisted on a "Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend" series. All three films suffer from clumsy use of cels, but the fantastic scenarios and the drawings themselves are still brilliant.

The best of these late works is *The Pet*. Colonel and Mrs. B. have retired for the night, and the gentleman expresses the hope that the rarebits he ate will not keep him awake. The dream begins with an adorable Pooh-like creature meowing outside a door. Mrs. B. takes it in, bathes it, ties a ribbon on it, and lets it play in the yard. In every shot the animal is a little larger, but its growth is barely perceptible. Soon the mother has adopted the pet as a surrogate baby, even tucking it into a crib for the night (figure 45). By morning it has grown as large as a calf, and it swallows the family cat. When the beast devours everything on the table, the colonel goes to the pharmacy to buy a barrel of "Rough

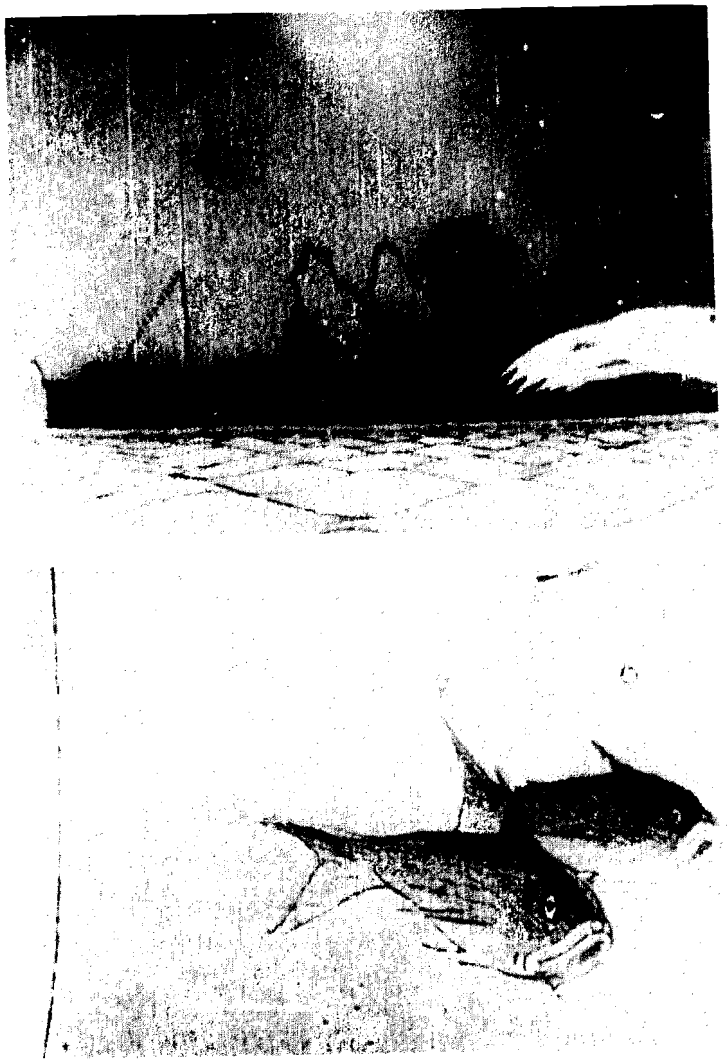


Figure 44.
McCay, *The Sinking of the Lusitania . . .* (Universal-Jewel), © 1918.

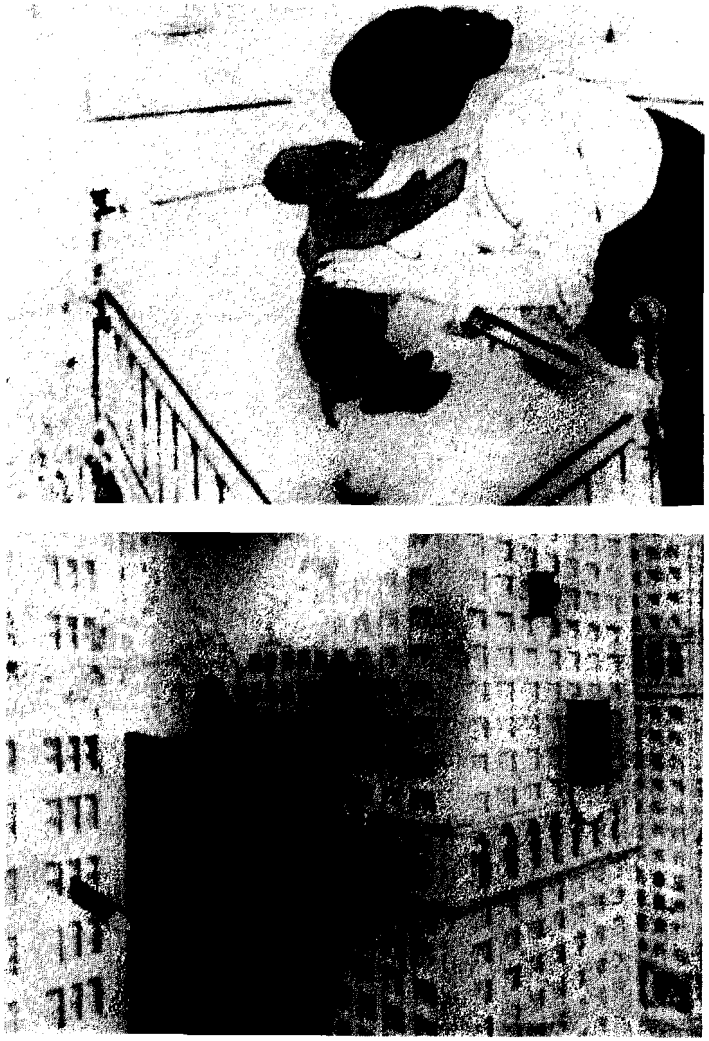


Figure 45.
McCay and Robert McCay, *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend: The Pet* (1921).

on Rats." Meanwhile the monster is gobbling up the furniture and a bin full of coal. The "Rough on Rats" only brings out a rash of disgusting boils on the hide of the rhinocerous-sized thing. As big as King Kong, the pet marches through the streets of the city, and McCay follows its progress with a remarkable "panning" shot. Finally planes fire upon it. Like the mosquito of a decade earlier, it explodes, and its parts rain upon the city.

Bug Vaudeville animates a menagerie of insects who invade the dream of a sleeping hobo. Perhaps McCay was influenced by some of the Russian animator Starevich's insect films. *The Flying House* (figure 46) has husband Bertie protesting the foreclosure on his home by building a giant gasoline engine in the attic. By adding a propeller and using the porches as wings, he and his wife fly up and away, over Grand Central Terminal, knocking a water tower down on a temperance rally. When the house departs the Earth for the remoter regions of the galaxy (presumably free from debt collectors), McCay inserts a surprising announcement: "To Teachers and Students—Special attention is called to the remarkable piece of animation which follows.—The Earth and Moon revolving on their orbits in the firmament drawn true to astronomical calculations with the beautiful constellation of "Orion" in the foreground. —The Management." As promised, the Earth recedes in scale as the moon grows larger. The Man in the Moon tries to slap the house with a giant swatter.

McCay's post-1915 work is full of flashes of richness, but one senses a schism in his career as a whole. The cel animation made after *Gertie* simply does not have the graphic fascination of the earlier retracing work, which, despite its reputation in the twenties and thirties as primitive and unstable, now seems energetic and vital and not at all immature or out of keeping with its subjects. McCay's restless moving lines are part of the excitement of the films.

Figure 46.
McCay and Robert McCay, *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend: The Flying House* (1921).

But perhaps the explanation for the schism goes beyond technical considerations. In his pre-1915 cartoons the spectator still experiences an awareness of the lightning sketcher. The films were conceived as, and worked best as, stage presentations. The filmed prologs were essential for reconstructing the presentational context of the films. This personal quality is lacking in the films made after the end of McCay's vaudeville career.

But even if Hearst had not been successful in limiting McCay's live appearances, history would have had the same effect. "By the mid-teens," according to historian Robert C. Allen, "big-time vaudeville had lost its position as premiere American popular entertainment form—that place taken by the motion picture."[19] The very popularity of McCay's film *cum* live performance might actually be read as a symptom of the decline of pure stage vaudeville. It was apparently the spark of excitement caused by physical contact with an audience and the opportunity to inject his own charismatic personality into his films that originally attracted McCay to animation. This physical involvement is precisely what is missing from the later works.

This is not to undermine the greatness of McCay's achievements, not the least of which was to strengthen the bond between popular graphic art and animation. His films were initially promoted on the strength of his widely recognized name, and by including shots of his cartoonist friends he affirmed the appropriateness of animation as an activity for comic-strip artists.

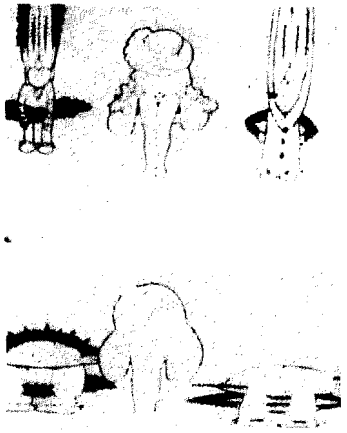
McCay never strayed far from his own graphic work when he made films. In making *Little Nemo* he relied so much on his earlier strips for inspiration that it is possible to trace the images in the film back to specific sources. The costume in which Nemo was dressed was the one he wore "resplendent in gold lace, plumes, velvet and spangles" in an adventure that began in the *Herald* on April 1,

1906.[20] The film's Impy character was introduced to the strip in May 1907, but evolved from the earlier Cincinnati work. Dr. Pill's exploding car was taken from a May 3, 1908 episode. When Nemo causes the bodies of Impy and Flip to stretch as though reflected in distorting mirrors (figure 47) McCay is borrowing an idea from a February 2, 1908 installment, which itself came from a "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend." (However, elastic bodies were part of a much older tradition, extending back to Tenniel and Grandville; see figure 48.) The spectacular dragon-chariot is the same one that crawled through three consecutive installments of "Little Nemo" during the summer of 1906 (figure 49).

"Jersey skeeters" were frequent visitors to the monologs of vaudeville comedians and to the comic strips. A 1907 *Judge* cartoon (figure 50) showed their basic characteristics: huge, lean and hungry, toughened by life outside the tourist hotels of Atlantic City and in the Catskills. Just such a mosquito made two appearances in McCay's comics (figure 51) before *The Story of a Mosquito* was shot. One of these strips anticipates the plot of the film when the mosquito creeps through a keyhole to indulge in a drunk's blood. The composition of each frame, with the man's face filling the foreground and the background suppressed, looks forward to the movie. In another, a mosquito who resembles Steve bores into a sleeping man's neck to an impossible depth and sucks his insides out. Although compositionally unrelated to *The Story of a Mosquito,* it shares the film's vision.

Even Gertie had ancestors in the comic strips (figure 52). McCay announced in 1912 that the American Historical Society had asked him to draw pictures of prehistoric animals, but the idea had actually occurred to him years before. In a 1905 "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend," a galloping brontosaurus skeleton entered a horse race. By the time work on the film began, the dinosaur's next of kin was

a



b

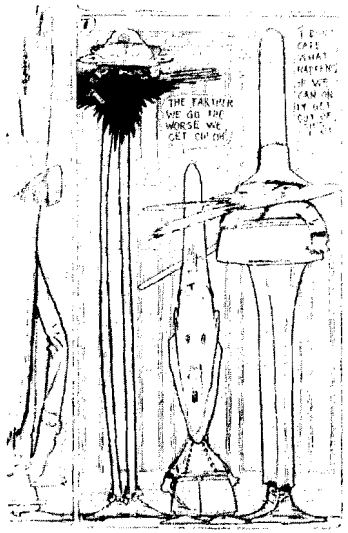
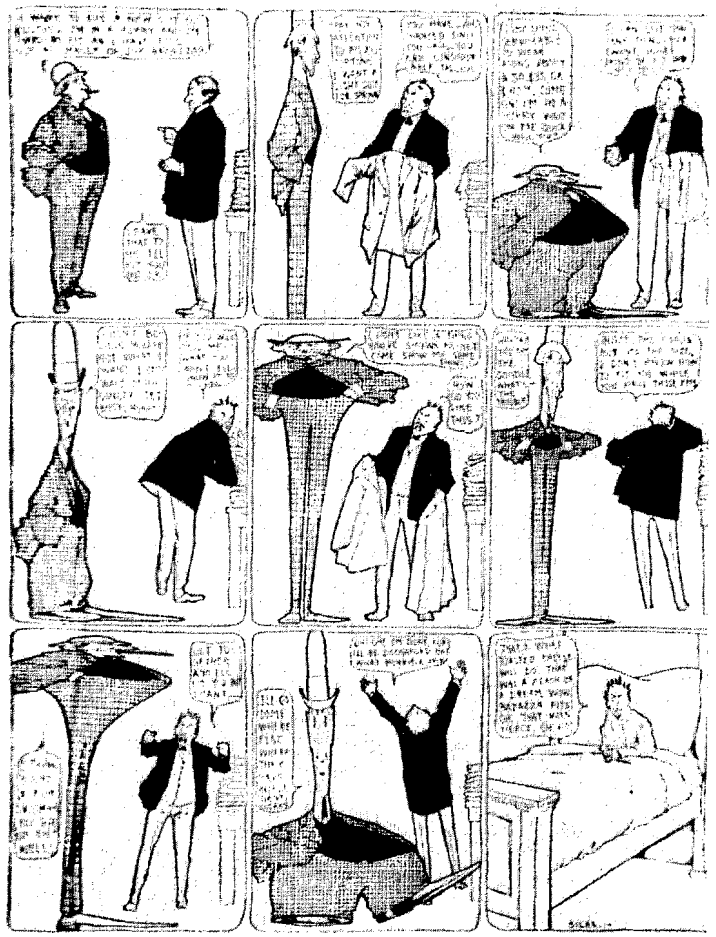


Figure 47.
a: McCay, *Little Nemo* (Vitagraph, 1911), **b:** Detail from "Little Nemo in Slumberland," New York *Herald*, February 2, 1908; © 1908. **c:** detail from "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend," New York *Evening Telegram*, © 1905.

c



a

Figure 48.
a: Sir John Tenniel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865. **b:** J.-J. Grandville, *Un Autre Monde*, 1844.

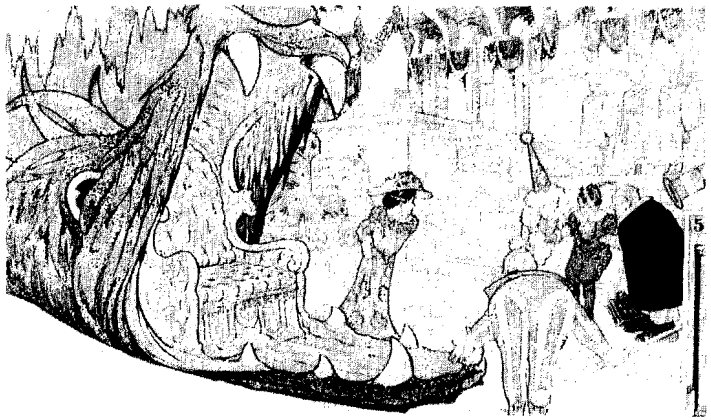


Figure 49.
Detail from McCay, "Little Nemo in Slumberland," New York *Herald*, July 22, 1906; © 1906.

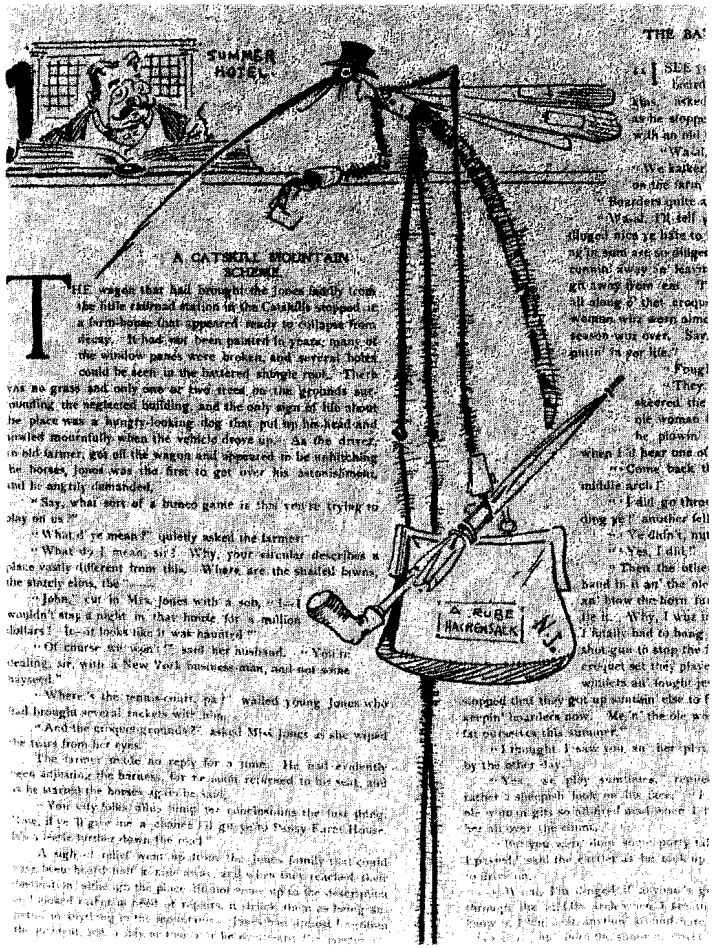


Figure 50.
Detail from Zim, "Jersey Skeeter," *Judge*, August 24, 1907; © 1907.

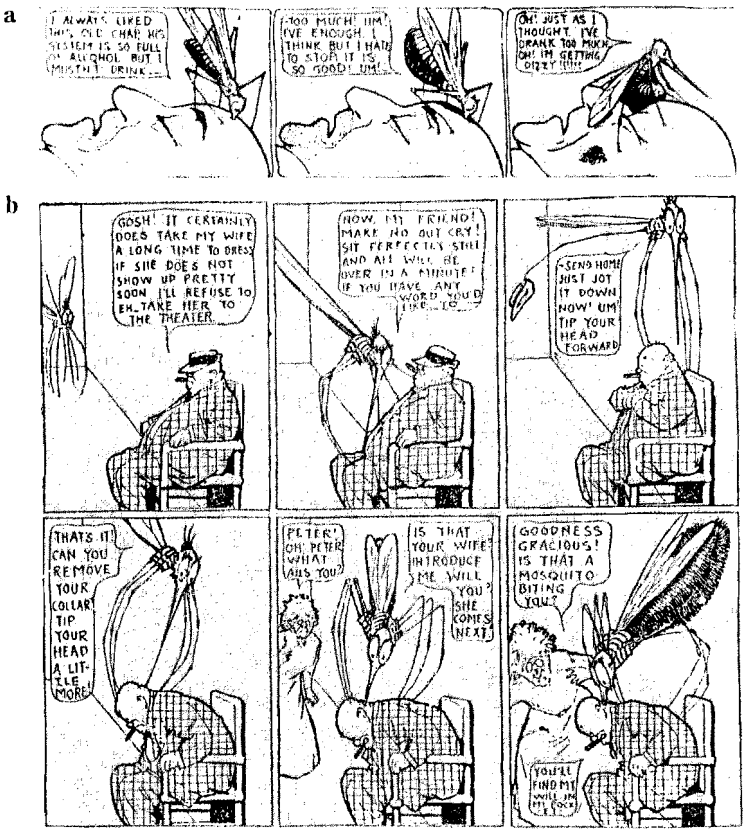


Figure 51.
a: McCay, "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend," circa 1910, from *Dream Days*. **b:** "Midsummer Day Dreams," circa 1910, from *Dream Days*. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard.

already fleshed out in a May 25, 1913 *Herald* page. The late works too depended on comic-strip prototypes for inspiration. The scenario for *The Pet*, for instance, was adapted from a 15-year-old "Dream" in which a puppy grew into a fearsome indestructible monster.

In addition to specific iconography, McCay's films were invested with their comic-strip precursors' remarkable reflexiveness. The almost obsessive desire to reveal the mechanics of animated photography to the audience recalled McCay's frequent playful undermining of the conventions of comic-strip art. The border outlining the panels had been exploded by sneezes, ignited by "hot" clothing, and used for a tightwire (figure 53) by McCay's characters. When Nemo, Flip, and Impy were locked out of Slumberland in December 1907, and were very hungry, they ripped up the border lines and used them to knock down the letters of the masthead (figure 54). Flip says "that will teach the fellow who draws us a lesson," and Nemo responds that he is "hungry enough to eat the whole [comic] supplement." McCay conceived these jokes in the spirit of fun, but in addition to inadvertently showing his egotism by reminding the readers of his presence, the reflexive qualities also strike us as very modern distancing effects analogous to contemporaneous cubist strategies.

When this sensibility was applied to filmmaking, the result was an extraordinary materialist conception of animation. Repeatedly we are told, in the advertising and in the films themselves, about the thousand of drawings and the hours of labor required for each cartoon. It is this affinity for revealing the means of production that distinguishes McCay from the first generation of trickfilm artists. Méliès, Merry, Booth, and Blackton were adamant in refusing to divulge the secrets of animation—an attitude completely alien to McCay. Rather than figuring himself as a nineteenth-century stage magician, McCay represents

a

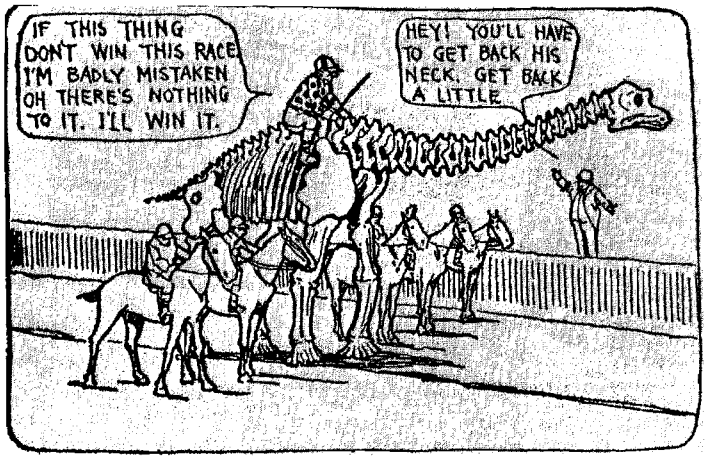


Figure 52.
a: Detail from McCay, "Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend," New York *Evening Telegram*, 1905; © 1905. **b:** "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend," New York *Herald*, May 25, 1913; © 1913.

b

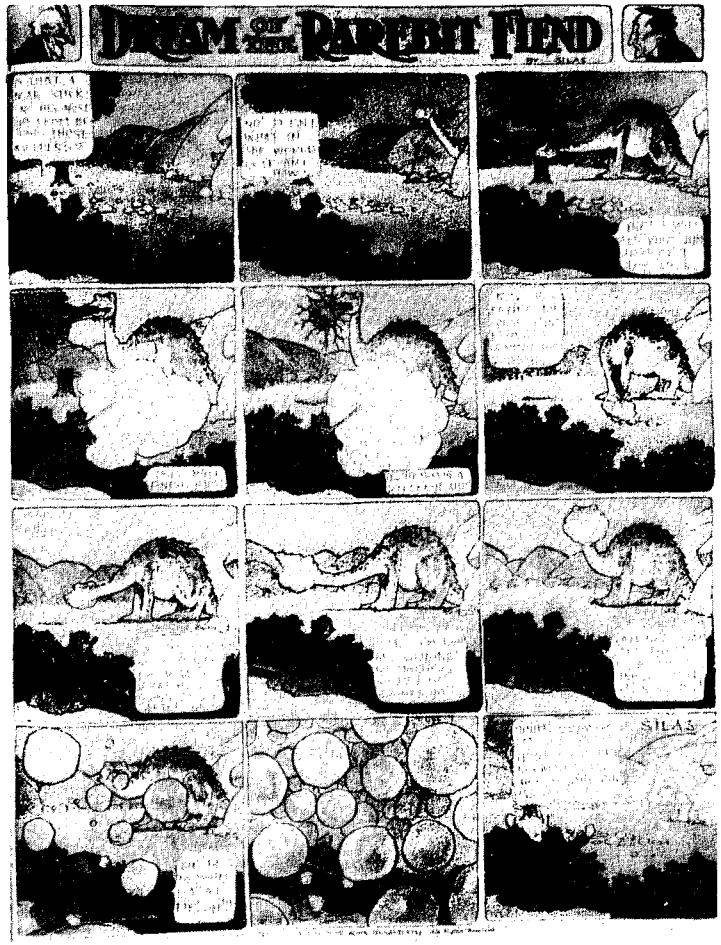


Figure 53.
McCay, "Midsummer Day Dreams," circa 1910, from *Dream Days*. Courtesy of Bill Blackbeard.

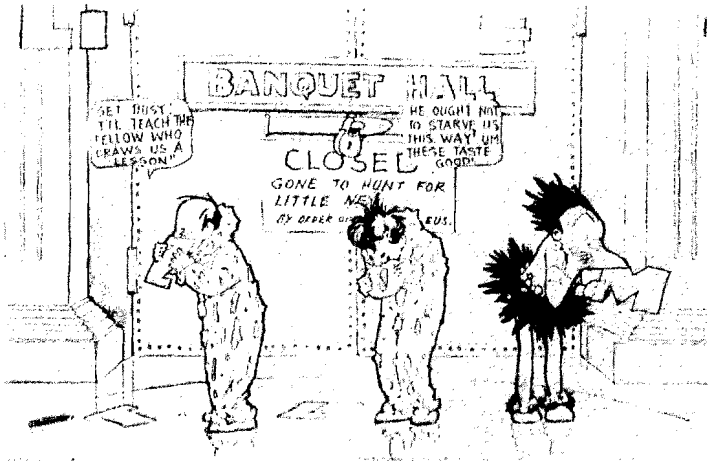


Figure 54.
Detail from McCay, "Little Nemo in Slumberland," New York *Herald*, December 1, 1907; © 1907.

himself as a modern technician. He is the twentieth-century man ingenious enough to put the complex apparatus of animation cinematography at his service. His self-aggrandizing plots attempt to ally him with scientists: paleontologists, entomologists, and astronomers. The convention of the wager, which he used several times, was the perfect device for McCay's self-figuration, showing him first accepting the challenge and then performing the superhuman task of picturing something impossible.

After McCay's death in 1934, his reputation skidded into obscurity until the revival of his work and the rediscovery of his films in the late 1960s. However, other early filmmakers remembered his pioneering role in animation. For many animators in the silent period, *Gertie* had revealed the possibilities of the medium. It must have seemed like an almost unattainable paradise. Even Buster Keaton paid homage to McCay, in his 1923 film *The Three Ages*. He asked his writer, Clyde Bruckman, "Remember *Gertie the Dinosaur*? . . . The first cartoon comedy ever made. I saw it in a nickelodeon when I was fourteen [*sic*; he was at least nineteen]. I'll ride in on an animated cartoon."[21] So in a sequence of *The Three Ages* made using clay models, an animated Buster makes his entrance on the back of an animated Gertie-like brontosaurus.

McCay's graphic art set a standard for later animators. Even after the cel system had abolished the retracing method, with its kinetic subtleties and suppleness, McCay's influence was still visible throughout the first years of studio animation in the predilection of artists for clear black lines on white backgrounds. The "New York style" superficially reflects the direct transposition of domestic comic-strip graphics onto film, but it is at the same time a vestige of *Gertie*'s clean, crisp, high-contrast outlines.

McCay's propensity for closed forms and trompe l'oeil illusionism—a final contrast to Cohl's tendency toward

openness and linear abstraction—virtually defined the aesthetic ground rules for all later American animation, setting it apart from work done in Europe. This is profoundly consistent with the traditional concerns of American artists in general for solidity, pragmatism, and pictorial realism.

9. "We will present the comedy HIT of the year—a series of animated cartoons based on the famous Newlywed pictures of George McManus." (*Moving Picture World,* February 15, 1913.)

10. *Moving Picture News; Moving Picture World,* quoted in *Eclair Bulletin* 39, April 1913.

11. L.-R. Dauven, "En Visite chez M. Emile Cohl qui inventa les dessins animés," *Pour Vous,* August 1933.

12. *Moving Picture World,* December 19, 1908.

13. *MPW,* March 27, 1909.

14. L. Gardette, "Teaching history by motography," *The Nickelodeon* [*Motography*], October 4, 1909, pp. 119–20. A similar article appeared in *La Nature,* June 19, 1909.

Chapter 4

1. Montgomery Phister, "People of the stage: Winsor McCay," Cincinnati *Commercial Tribune,* November 18, 1909; "Began as a scene painter," Pittsburgh *Post,* April 4, 1907; Winsor McCay, "Movie cartoons," *Cartoons and Movie Magazine,* April 1927, pp. 11–14; "Winsor McCay: Artist, inventor and prophet," undated manuscript, Gelman collection; Obituaries in New York *Herald-Tribune, Evening Journal,* and *American,* July 27, 1934.

2. Barnett Phillips, "The record of a sneeze," *Harper's Weekly,* March 24, 1894; Gordon Hendricks, "A new look at an 'old sneeze,' " *Film Culture* 22–23 (summer 1961), pp. 90-95.

3. Canemaker, *Remembering Winsor McCay.* The drawing "animated" by Canemaker was reproduced in Michael Patrick Hearn, "The animated art of Winsor McCay," *American Artist* 39, 394, May 1975, p. 27.

4. Marc Klaw, quoted in Waters, *Victor Herbert,* p. 322.

5. McCay, "Movie cartoons," 11, quoted in Judith O'Sullivan, "In search of Winsor McCay," *American Film Institute Report* 5, no. 2 (summer 1974), p. 7.

6. "Moving pictures that move," New York *Telegraph,* April 12, 1911.

7. *Moving Picture World,* February 4, 1911.

8. *MPW,* April 15, 1911.

9. *Ciné-Journal,* June 3, 1911.

10. Cohl, "Sur les dessins animés," *Ciné-Tribune,* July 15, 1920.

11. *MPW,* April 15, 1911.

12. Synopsis of the 1916 rerelease under the title *Winsor McCay and His Jersey Skeeters, MPW,* October 28, 1916. The original length in Europe was 163 meters (a full reel), much longer than the remaining fragment. (*Ciné-Journal,* May 24, 1913).

13. New York *Telegraph,* August 12, 1912.

14. John Canemaker, "Reminiscing with John A. Fitzsimmons, assistant to Winsor McCay," *Millimeter,* April 1975, pp. 14–16.

15. Ashton Stevens, "McCay on Stage," Chicago *Examiner,* February 9, 1914; reprinted in Blackbeard, *Dream Days,* p. xi.

16. Cohl, quoted in Arnaud and Boisyvon, *Le Cinéma pour tous,* pp. 82–83. For another eyewitness account see Claude Bragdon, "Mickey Mouse and what he means," *Scribner's,* July 1934, pp. 40–43.

17. Animator Shamus Culhane told me that the cartoon apple was tinted bright red.

18. *MPW,* November 14, 1914.

19. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film 1895–1915,* p. 298.

20. McCay's comic strips are known almost exclusively from reproductions in anthologies: *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* (F. A. Stokes, 1905; reprinted Dover, 1973), *Little Sammy Sneeze,* (Stokes, 1905), *Little Nemo in Slumberland,* (McCay Features Syndicate, 1945), *Winsor McCay's Dream Days: An Original Compilation, 1904–1914* (Hyperion Press, 1977); *Little Nemo in Slumberland,* second edition (Nostalgia Press, 1974), *Little Nemo, 1905, 1906* (Nostalgia Press, 1976). Original drawings are in the Moniz Collection and in many institutions, especially the Museum of Cartoon Art at Port Chester, N. Y.

21. Buster Keaton, quoted in Blesh, *Buster Keaton,* p. 220.

Chapter 5

1. I am indebted to John Canemaker's unpublished manuscript of his interview with Bray conducted on March 25, 1974. For the published version, see "Profile of a living animation legend: John