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Lines That Move: Winsor McCay's Work in Performance and Comics, 1900-1920

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Lines That Move: Winsor McCay’s Work in Performance and Comics, 1900-1920

A thesis proposal submitted to
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Abstract

This study argues for a multidisciplinary understanding of the work of Winsor McCay. It investigates the development and construction of the comic strip, identifying alternatives to the dominant formalist discourse and providing context for Winsor McCay’s key position in the history of the medium. It then discusses the development of vaudeville entertainment culture, addressing its rise to prominence as an outgrowth of increased industrial development affecting the formation of middle-class identity through popular culture. Chalk talks, a type of performance enacted by McCay, are examined with regard to the larger context of vaudeville performance. These lines of discourse are brought together in the work of Winsor McCay. The connections between his comic strips and vaudeville performances chart the emergence of a form of entertainment spectacle specifically contingent upon the historical development of modes of popular expression.
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Introduction

American comic strip artist Zenas Winsor McCay (ca. 1869-1934) produced a body of work that is recognized for its significance in the development of the comics medium. As one of the artists who participated in the birth of comics, the so-called ninth art, McCay is of particular importance in presenting strategies for the appreciation and criticism of the medium. He is best known for the creation of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, a serial comic strip that ran in multiple prominent newspapers from 1905 to 1914. McCay’s brilliant draftsmanship and thick art nouveau linework, as well as his formal and conceptual innovation over the course of the series’ nine-year run, distinguish his work from that of his peers in comics. In addition, McCay is regarded as one of the inventors of animation. His early experiments with that medium led to the development of its standards of practice. The legacy of both achievements has overshadowed McCay’s vaudeville chalk talk stage performances and dime museum background.

McCay rose in prominence from Kohl and Middleton’s Vine Street Dime Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio, to become a top-earning performer playing the East Coast Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit with a quick sketch act. This act varied throughout McCay’s years of performance, from quick sketches of his *Little Nemo* characters to spectacular performances involving interaction with the onscreen characters of his animated films, but generally consisted of the artist depicting visual gags and popular characters of his own design in chalk, pastel, or ink on a drawing pad placed on a easel. While artists such as Richard Outcault and George McManus attempted to move between vaudeville and comics, none employed the inventiveness shown by McCay or enjoyed as much success.
This study examines the dialogue that McCay’s performances engaged with his comics, with particular emphasis on how an understanding of McCay’s work in this manner emerges as a strategy for a better understanding of comics’ ongoing relationship with stage performance.

The foremost scholar on the work of McCay is filmmaker John Canemaker. His book *Winsor McCay: His Life and Times* (2005) examines every iteration of McCay’s career in a chronological fashion, resolving many earlier inconsistencies in the knowledge of McCay’s life. Canemaker has been instrumental in overturning the popular opinion of McCay’s work, established by prominent comics historians Coulton Waugh and Bill Blackbeard, who had derided McCay as someone whose art was merely an outgrowth of children’s literature and therefore insignificant if not inconsequential. Canemaker places McCay squarely in the historical context of animation with only brief references to McCay’s contemporaries working in the field of comics, devoting less than a quarter of his book to looking exclusively at McCay’s prodigious output in comics. Utilizing census material, newspaper articles and interviews, Canemaker’s argument places importance on McCay’s pioneering work in film, but minimizes his contribution to comics. There is room to expand upon Canemaker’s study of McCay’s life and artistic output in relation to the comics medium. Fortunately, Canemaker bequeathed his research material to The Ohio State University’s Cartoon Research Library, allowing the opportunity for his research into McCay to be furthered.

Much of Canemaker’s work builds on that of Judith O’Sullivan, whose dissertation (1971) provides a catalogue raisonné of McCay’s work based on extensive study of newspaper articles and primary documents. O’Sullivan gives a much more

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2 For more information on chalk talks, please see Chapter 2.
thorough account of both McCay’s comics and stage career; however, some of her facts appear to be inaccurate given the information Canemaker provides, such as her misattribution of McCay’s age, given the lack of a birth certificate and contradictory census data. Furthermore, her account of McCay’s formative work in comics analyzes the strip *Tales of the Jungle Imps* (1903), while giving little information on McCay’s previous work as a sketch artist, his carnival poster painting, and his dime museum act as legible influences upon this work. The latter experiences are topics worth exploring further in order to uncover their impact upon McCay’s work in comics.

The reprints of McCay’s comics vary greatly in accordance with their editors’ decisions. Compilations such as the eight volume Checker series highlight some of difficulties that arise with reproducing McCay’s work: many of the images lack basic identifying information, such as the newspaper in which they appeared and the date of publication. This lack of information leads to juxtaposing images from various newspapers throughout McCay’s career without contextual information explaining when and how they appeared. Many of these compilations, such as Fantagraphics’ *Daydreams and Nightmares* (2005), survey the entire gamut of McCay’s output, including political cartoons and advertisements, in addition to comics. This leaves many compilations with incomplete or otherwise recontextualized runs of McCay’s series. In addition, almost all are problematic because of the altered size of their reproductions; only Ulrich Merkl’s *The Complete Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* (2007) and Peter Maresca’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland: So Many Splendid Sundays!* (2005) maintain the strips’ original broadsheet format. The Cartoon Research Library at The Ohio State University also contains many of the original strips from the Woody Gelman collection.
Many other sources on McCay are merely brief entries in broad surveys concerning his role in the establishment of comics with particular emphasis on the formal wonders of *Little Nemo*; see, for example, Stephen Becker’s *Comic Art in America* (1959) and Harry Katz’s *Cartoon America* (2006). Another rampant problem with the study of comics in general, and McCay in particular, involves scholarship that romanticizes comics or invoke a sense of nostalgia instead of conducting serious scholarly inquiry. Subjective criticism emerges when looking at contemporary reviews of McCay’s performances in newspaper articles, which are often given to personal opinion, brief description, and informal style. The current study seeks to redress these tendencies.

In Chapter 1, “The Comics Medium: Definition and History,” I theorize the history of the comics medium. Building upon definitions offered by the most important figures in the construction of the medium, I investigate the borderline cases that have exposed the limitless potential for comics criticism. The advancement of comics in dialogue with other forms of expression provides an opportunity for a critical historical discussion of the medium, while reflecting on the practice of defining the medium through the analysis of its prominent characteristics exposes the ways in which the fluidity of the medium problematizes formal theorization. In this historical discussion, I identify and discuss the canonical images and figures of early in terms of the manner in which they construct the comics medium. Early exploration of the medium, in the hands of cartoonists such as Richard Outcault (1863-1928), Rudolph Dirks (1877-1968), and Frederick Burr Opper (1857-1937), articulated the vocabulary that distinguished newspaper comics from illustration and editorial cartoons, while later figures, such as
Lyonel Feininger (1871-1956) and George Herriman (1880-1944), built upon the established language of the medium with their own distinct voices. McCay belongs in the latter group, with his interest in taking formal elements to their most extreme limits and in engaging in chalk talk storytelling.

I then explore the vaudeville circuits and dime museum that employed McCay in chapter 2, “Vaudeville Entertainment and Chalk Talks,” focusing in particular on the Kohl & Middleton Vine Street Dime Museum in Cincinnati, where McCay’s employers sent him from Chicago in order to develop their business, and the Keith Albee vaudeville circuit, where McCay rose to top billing at the prestigious Palace Theater in New York. The rise and subsequent fall of these venues for performance is discussed, as is their standing in social and economic history.

Chapter 3, “Winsor McCay and Theatrical Comics,” examines the elements within McCay’s oeuvre that exemplify the manner in which he was able to integrate comic strip and chalk talk practices in concerted dialogue. Formal innovations play a key role in this discussion, as parallels are found in the manner McCay chooses to manipulate the frames of his creations, although other aspects, such as how McCay addresses his audience in both mediums, are equally important.

A multifaceted approach is necessary to explore the interplay between comics and performance in McCay’s life and artistic practice. In order to historicize McCay’s work it is desirable to work with a model of social history, wherein the social and economic environments in which McCay worked, particularly the major newspaper corporations, where McCay operated with his contemporaries working in comics, and vaudeville, are examined. A cultural studies approach theorizes the production of popular culture
artifacts within cultural ideology, providing a context within which *Little Nemo* and *Gertie the Dinosaur* can be discussed for their formal characteristics and conceptual ideas. A semiotic approach in tandem with the aforementioned methodology enables a parsing of the language of comics, such as McCay’s comics and performances so that informative connections can be made between the formal and conceptual elements of both mediums.

Primary sources play a critical role in these discussions, including both the collection of original Winsor McCay art and the Canemaker files at the Ohio State University’s Cartoon Research Library. Secondary accounts in the form of newspaper articles and tertiary readings add historical depth and critical analysis as well as aid in reconstructing performances which were recorded primarily in brief newspaper descriptions. McCay’s performances will be examined for the formal properties that they share with comics and the manner in which they operate to entertain, through innovation, breaks with expectation, humor and spectacle. These properties are discussed in relation to McCay’s comics.

McCay’s chalk talk and vaudeville performances as a comics artist have been largely eclipsed by his stunning achievements in animation and comics. Consequently, his experiences on the stage impacted his work in comics in ways that comics history has not yet explored. In exploring the relation between performance and comics in the work of McCay, this study will provide an understanding of the storytelling methods and decisions within McCay’s comics, revealing a theoretically loaded text in addition to superb draftsmanship and formal control. His lines move us through narrative across radically different media.
Chapter One
The Comics Medium: Definition and History

Comics scholarship has maintained a sense of history specific to the medium, in opposition to becoming subsumed within literature and art. The definition of a comic is a point of contention. Common comic formats, including comic strips, comic books and graphic novels, or “long-form comics,” have raised important questions about how comics should be categorized and what such classifications mean for the medium. Much of the confusion regarding comics stems from scholarly debate concerning the origin, or origins, of the medium. The ideological implications of certain origin stories have framed the discussion of the modern comic, and led to the production of threads of historical lineage that shape current perception.

The current state of discourse concerning the definition of comics has of yet yielded few, if any, unassailable conclusions. Early forays into definition tended to be essentialist, exclusive and entirely predicated by the subjective view of the author’s goals. To this end comics have been defined by such elements as speech balloons and blends of visual and verbal icons.3 Such elements quickly and clearly exclude the vast body of comics that do not rely upon written text, including everything from McCay’s early Little Nemo strips (1905-1914) to stories from Chris Ware’s Acme Novelty Library (2005). In addition, such definitions carry far-reaching implications concerning how the medium should be viewed. For instance, Thierry Smolderen argues extensively that early elements that superficially appear to be speech balloons are in fact nothing of the sort.

Rather, he makes the distinction that “the medieval phylacters… were simply labels” meant to identify the speaker or character illustrated.  

Smolderen dates this confusion to “the 13th century, [when] the label adopted a floating position” and was linked to the descriptor by a line that acted “more like a pointing device than as a metaphor for vocal examination” and was “written by an authorial hand so as to elucidate the nature of a pictorial object”.  

Not until 1896, with R. F. Outcault’s The Yellow Kid, specifically the strip “Yellow Kid and his New Phonograph,” did the modern speech balloon become an element of comics.  

Smolderen’s argument reinforces the belief that comics are a specifically American invention by crediting their creation to Outcault, and, more subtly, by affirming the definition propagated by prominent comics scholar Scott McCloud, that comics are at their very essence a sequential narrative.  

Smolderen’s contention is that labels, even when operating to give a voice to characters, are not the same as speech balloons due to the way in which they operate through time. Rather than the divided temporal space created by speech balloons, labels are “embedded in static coded pictures cut from the physical world—pictures without past nor future”.  

The author repeatedly refers to his subjects as sequential strips or picture stories, leaving little room for broader readings of the history of comics, as discussed below.

The backbone upon which a modern understanding of comics is founded is the definition of the medium provided by Scott McCloud in his seminal text, Understanding Comics (1993): comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,

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5 Ibid., 90-91.
6 Ibid., 100.
7 See Fig. 1.
8 Ibid., 91.
9 Ibid., 111-112.
intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”

In his formalist approach, the essential element McCloud stresses is sequentiality. Nearly all subsequent theories address this idea either directly or indirectly in support or objection. Several of McCloud’s ideas are questioned by Dylan Horrock in his essay “Inventing Comics” (2001). Horrock notes that McCloud’s insistence upon sequentiality usurps all other elements, discontinuing exploration into alternate identities for the comics medium, such as “comics [as] a cultural idiom, comics [as] a publishing genre, comics [as] a set of narrative conventions,” each of which supplies alternate paths for the exploration of comics without necessarily essentializing a specific visual element.

With its overemphasis on sequentiality, McCloud’s definition notably excludes single panel comics, such as Dennis the Menace and Toothpaste for Dinner, while including children’s picture books, the latter of which McCloud has attempted to argue against.

Addressing the state of modern discourse concerning the definition of comics in Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean, Douglas Wolk states, “if you try to draw a boundary that includes everything that counts as comics and excludes everything that doesn’t, two things happen: first, the medium always wriggles across that boundary, and second, whatever politics are implicit in the definition always boomerang on the definer.” In consequence, Wolk refuses to attempt a definition, although he suggests that the interested reader “already pretty much know[s] what they are, and ‘pretty much’ is good enough.” Thierry Groensteen takes up the challenge in

13 Ibid., 17.
14 Ibid., 17.
his discussion of the semiotics of comics, *The System of Comics* (2007), while simultaneously acknowledging the history of problematic discourse. Groensteen notes that any comic “is necessarily a sophisticated structure” that “only actualizes certain potentialities of the medium, to the detriment of others that are reduced or excluded.”\textsuperscript{15} He nevertheless provides his own definition, stating that “the central element of comics… is \textit{iconic solidarity},” an understanding of comics as interdependent, overlapping iconic systems.\textsuperscript{16} Ultimately, this too is unsatisfactory, as too many disparate objects can then be admitted, while at the same time even so broad a definition also runs the risk of developing normative values.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, perhaps it can only be said that comics, like any other concept, are complex, fluid and resistant to definition. Still, an approximated understanding of the medium allows for a semblance of a framework in the discussion of the medium, without continuous, unnecessary redaction.

Much has been made of the terminology associated with the comics medium. The name “comics,” encompassing comic strips, comic books, web comics, mini-comics and various other forms, has itself been closely scrutinized as it misleadingly associates the entire medium with humor.\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, the term has come to be the accepted standard in English-language scholarship, while French designations, “\textit{bande dessinée}” or “drawn strip” and the “ninth art,” continue to make slow progress in infiltrating literature on the subject. “Ninth art” comes from film critic Claude Beylie’s extension of Italian film theorist Ricciotto Canudo’s 1923 manifesto \textit{Reflections on the Seventh Art}, leaving the title of the “eighth art” open to debate. Much more problematic is the term “graphic

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 18-20.
novel.” The term, popularized by Will Eisner’s 1978 comic *A Contract with God*, whose cover reads “A Graphic Novel by Will Eisner,” attempts to provide more “respectable” nomenclature for the medium despite being equally inappropriate as “comic book.” The word “novel” in particular creates associations with fiction and length that do not necessarily describe many “graphic novels,” as they may be non-fiction, vary significantly in length and take forms that have no relation to the distinctions between “novel” and “short story.” Furthermore, the class implications associated with the term, related to the “high” and ‘low” art debate, have triggered a critical backlash even as popular usage continues to increase.

Descriptions of the visual and verbal style of comics have borrowed heavily from other disciplines, particularly literature and cinema, creating a problematic history of discourse, situating comics between these two media. Recurrent calls for the development of a distinct terminology have been largely unsuccessful, although the attempts made by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* and Thierry Groensteen in *The System of Comics* have yielded impressive results. Problems with terminology continue and may perhaps be inextricable from the medium.

Comics were formed from the confluence of a variety of visual and verbal systems. Even within the subset of pictorial storytelling, certain characteristics take precedence in comics studies, such as an interest in interdependent iconic sequences over spatial organization alone, with concurrent problems within the linguistic structure as well. In addition, images hold a more prominent position in the medium than words. Rudolphe Töpffer, established as an important precursor to American newspaper comic

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19 Particularly McCloud’s discussion of closure and paneling transitions in Understanding Comics, 60-81.
strips, articulates the heuristics of the medium thusly: “The drawings, without their text, would have only a vague meaning; the text, without the drawings, would have no meaning at all.”

Given the vague standards of definition and the multitude of form and content comics draw upon, the problem of locating prototypical comics is especially challenging, as latent comics elements are manifest in sources that are otherwise wholly unlike the modern medium.

Early comics have taken on a variety of forms, depending upon the stress of the argument one desires to make. Scholars generally locate the development of the comics form with prehistoric mark-making in an attempt to legitimize the medium with accumulated history, and this is where McCloud begins in articulating his argument for sequential images as comics. The cave paintings at Lascaux, tabula rasa for the social construction of nearly every human art, have their place in comics history as well.

McCloud posits that the cave paintings were a system of interdependent pictorial forms acting as both images and language, in his discussion of the historical separation of the two. McCloud isolates images that aspired to realistic representation and those that were more iconic, or had more symbolic potential, in a bid to describe the schism between words and pictures that has had lasting repercussions on the discussion of comics. The argument that cave paintings have a link with comics is likewise supported by Brian Walker, who states that “the first cartoonists were probably cave dwellers.” Continuing the discussion of comics history, McCloud, more concretely, discusses the Bayeux Tapestry, an 11th-century embroidery detailing the Norman conquest of England across

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23 See Fig. 2.
230 feet of images, a pre-Columbian picture manuscript and an Egyptian painting. Using brief legends and colorful imagery, what McCloud calls the “clear divisions of scene by subject matter” within the Bayeux tapestry suggest the sequential nature of comics. The Mayan manuscript, dating to 1049 C.E., presents the story of 8-Deer “Tiger’s Claw” conquest of an as-yet unknown country in both representational imagery and hieroglyphics. Further study of this material appears to support McCloud’s conclusions, strengthening the argument for further analysis of pre-industrial culture in relation to comics. McCloud argues that some Egyptian paintings, such as that on the tomb of “Menna,” provide a visual narrative, in this case describing the harvest of wheat and a system of taxation, unlike Egyptian hieroglyphics, which are solely phonetic guides. In addition, intensive critical study of medieval broadsheets has led to discussion of their inclusion to the medium as proto-comics. Taken in conjunction, these artifacts provide a compelling view of a comics history tied to premodern forms of communication, transcending cultures and media.

A modern history of comics begins in the 19th century. A vast amount of research has uncovered a large number of figures working in a comics-like medium, although a few individuals are considered particularly important. William Hogarth is often cited as

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25 See Fig. 3.
26 See Fig. 4.
29 Ibid., 10-11.
an influential figure for his satirical etchings, such as *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732). The genre of satire became one of the most prominent in the development of the American newspaper strip. Rudolph Töpffer has been championed by both scholars and masters of the discipline as the most important immediate precursor of the modern American comic strip. The first of his multi-panel narratives, with corresponding text beneath each picture, appeared in 1827, while one of his later publications, *Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* (1842) is thought to be among the earliest comics published in America, albeit in bound book form. Recurring characters, sequential paneling, interdependent text and images and mass production of the book all provide evidence for viewing it as a comic. In America a slew of new magazines arose beginning in the late 1870s that championed comic images. The political magazines, especially Joseph Keppler’s *Puck* (1876) and its Republican counterpart *The Judge* (1884), utilized satiric imagery to express their views with surprising effectiveness. Many of the artists that lent their talents to these magazines went on to establish themselves in the newspaper industry, giving rise to the comic strip, a change in format that allowed the medium to develop further, although by this time all of the formal elements that appear in comics had been explored. Therefore, although Richard Outcault (1863-1928) is widely considered the progenitor of the modern American comic strip, none of his contributions to the medium

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33 See Figs. 5 and 6.
35 Chris Ware has produced numerous comics concerning Topffer’s importance to a history of comics, including several in *The Acme Novelty Library*.
36 Walker, 10.
37 Ibid.
38 See the discussion of Thomas Nast’s satirization of “Boss Tweed” and Grover Cleveland’s acknowledgment of *Puck*’s political efficacy in Walker, 43, 49-50.
appear without precedent. The importance of Outcault and the comics artists of the 1890s lies in the institutionalization of specific qualities of comic strips as well as the construction of a specifically American medium in the form of the newspaper strip. Newspapers and magazines filled a necessary space in the social climate of the late 19th century. The infrastructure of American was built on railroads and waterways, while horses were the main form of transportation, significantly limiting business and travel. Automobiles were a new untrustworthy invention, exclusively in the possession of the privileged elite.\(^{39}\) Communication was limited as well; by 1900 “telephones were still scarce, and radios non-existent.”\(^{40}\) Newspapers were a way in which information could be communicated to a broad audience at an affordable rate. They were particularly popular on the eastern coast were “close to 90 percent of the urban working class was literate.”\(^{41}\)

Images provided an additional selling point and, along with the invention of color supplements, became a focus for competitive newspapers hoping to increase circulation. Newspaper comics, such as Outcault’s *Hogan’s Alley*, combined both images and colors and proved that they could sell papers.\(^{42}\) *Hogan’s Alley*, which ran in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, produced the most widely marketed iconic comic strip character up to that time,\(^{43}\) “the Yellow Kid,” paving the road for Rudolph Dirks’ success with *The Katzenjammer Kids*, the longest running comic strip, and Frederick Opper’s *Happy Hooligan*, despite only infrequent use of the sequential imagery and word balloons that


\(^{40}\) Allen, 8.


\(^{42}\) In 1896, the circulation of the Sunday *World*, where *Hogan’s Alley* debuted, saw “almost a 100 percent increase over 1891.” Gordon, 14.
became standard practice within the medium under these latter two cartoonists. This financial success led to recurring use of the character, demonstrating thematic development and the importance of repetition as a marketing tool, creating a history of commodification. From these structures of comics language, Winsor McCay produced formal variations clearly operating within the framework of the modern comic, yet challenging the possibilities presented by the medium.

The development of the comic strip has created a set of problems specific to the medium, clearly manifested in the debates about definition. Furthermore, the construction of comics history, an ideologically charged task, situates the medium within social structures that reflect back upon comics, viewing the creation of comics not as an autonomous set of formal changes, but rather as a series of processes that generate and propagate specific ideas. These considerations are inherent to any discussion of the medium, and provide the basis upon which new findings fit within existing discourse. McCay’s artwork has also been colored by these debates, positioning the artist as an innovator responding to the conditions of standardization within the practice of the medium. The following examination of McCay’s artwork addresses these claims.

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43 Ian Gordon, 14.
44 This history is more fully explored by Ian Gordon in his book, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945.*
From the late-19th century a business and entertainment culture known as vaudeville emerged as a powerful voice for performance entertainment in America. Vaudeville was characterized by the rapid succession of unrelated performance acts on stage. As an American entertainment institution, vaudeville was likewise multifaceted, known for appealing to the rich and poor, cultured and crude, natives and foreigners, men and women of differing races, religions and backgrounds. Despite being dominated by a relatively small number of individuals at the height of its popularity, vaudeville was not a single monolithic business structure, but may more appropriately be considered a cultural movement manifested in the development of a viewing format promoted by prominent theatrical venues. This multiplicity is not to say, however, that vaudeville did not repeat the same endemic structures of racism, sexism and intolerance in American society.

Every individual facet of vaudeville practice was contingent upon local, regional, and national cultural and economic structures. Taken together, these structures intersect with the production of popular culture during McCay’s career, creating a dialogue between differing media.

The word “vaudeville” has a history interwoven with performance and comedy. The etymology of the word is uncertain; however, a pair of popular theories have emerged. In the 15th century, troubador Olivier Baselin popularized a repertoire of drinking songs while based in the Val-de-Vire region of Normandy; “vaudeville” may be
a corruption of this region’s name.\textsuperscript{45} Another French term, \textit{Voix de ville}, referred to urban folksongs. Translated as “voice of the city,” this term’s associations with the social classes and ethnic diversity of city populations has led to its predominance in discussion of the history of vaudeville.\textsuperscript{46} In its early usage, the word “vaudeville” regularly described a particular type of comic theater. Productions written by Amadeus Mozart and Anton Chekhov were described as “vaudevilles” to indicate their inclusion of comic elements. Indicative of the institutionalization and popularity of this particular theatrical form, the Parisian Theatre du Vaudeville, which specialized in this form of theater, dates back to 1792.\textsuperscript{47} The word appears to have immigrated to the United States some time in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, when a vaudeville theater was active in Boston and New York’s Vauxhall Garden reportedly showed vaudeville plays.\textsuperscript{48} It is possible that the Vauxhall Garden productions included a show organized by P. T. Barnum in May 1840. If indeed the case, Barnum’s show, filled with “a variety of performances, including singing, dancing, Yankee stories, etc.,”\textsuperscript{49} indicates that vaudeville and variety are more closely associated in America by this time than vaudeville and comic theater. At the time that Winsor McCay performed, the use of vaudeville theater to refer to the cultural entertainment industry in operation also included another subtext that opposed what was known as variety entertainment, associated with the brusque behavior of the saloon, with wholesome family entertainment suitable for women and children.

\textsuperscript{47} Trav S. D., 73.
\textsuperscript{48} Trav S. D., 73-74. “Theater historian John DiMeglio says there was a ‘vaudeville theatre’ in Boston in the 1840s… Benjamin Baker’s 1848 play \textit{A Glance at New York} mentions ‘vaudeville plays’ at the Vauxhall Garden.”
Vaudeville audiences formed in response to the growth of leisure time arising from the deskilling of labor following increasing industrialization. The split between leisure and regimented work led to the view of work as “a chore from which [laborers] sought relief” in the form of shared culture based around the workday. In an effort to create a respectable social identity, “the middle class erected a cultural hierarchy around practices such as the theatrical performance of Shakespeare.” The beginnings of vaudeville trace the emergence of this social body, appealing to the middle class goals of respectful and decent presentation. Vaudeville, as well as comics and newspapers, provided relief from the drudgery of the average six day-a-week ten hour-a-day job with family-friendly entertainment.

The modern vaudeville theaterhouse was developed by Tony Pastor (1837-1908), who actively established guidelines for conduct in the venues he owned in order to court female and family audiences. Pastor had developed an impressive background in the business of entertainment, “having sung at Barnum’s museum as a ‘Child Prodigy,’ danced in a blackface act in the Raymond and Waring Menagerie, and performed juvenile roles and acrobatic turns with Welch’s National Amphitheater” before purchasing the Volks Garden at 201 Bowery Street, New York in 1865 and renaming it Tony Pastor’s Opera House. In an effort to remain within the geographic boundaries of legitimate theater, Pastor’s establishment moved two more times: to Broadway in 1875, and to Fourteenth Street in 1881, where Pastor would achieve his greatest financial success.

Among the methods that Pastor used in his efforts to increase revenue and attract a wider

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50 Gordon, 16.
51 Gordon, 16.
52 Allen, 55.
53 Trav S. D., 65 and Lewis, 315.
audience were door prizes on “ladies night” and several acts aimed at the female population. This was in part a matter of financial necessity, as discussions of temperance and the Concert Bills of 1862 and 1872 made it harder for saloons to attract customers with entertainment. According to the latter bills, “no establishment could offer any two of the following at the same time: liquor, stage performances, or waiter girls.” Pastor’s efforts to organize polite working class theater were largely successful, and by his death in 1908 he was “acclaimed as the grand old founding father of vaudeville.”

B. F. Keith (1846-1914) and Edward Albee (1857-1930) capitalized on Pastor’s ideas. Both had performed for the circus early in their lives, and learned the rudiments of the entertainment industry in this environment. Keith earned enough money from circus management to afford a dime museum, a venue that preceded the vaudeville theaterhouse. It was the business acumen of Keith’s partner Albee that propelled the pair to their prominent position as two of the most powerful men in vaudeville. “Continuous vaudeville” was introduced to Keith’s Gaiety Dime Museum in 1885. Under this system, the museum offered “variety from ten-thirty in the morning till ten-thirty at night” for a small admission fee, affording acts previously unknown job stability. However, even this failed to turn a profit initially. As with Pastor, Keith and Albee began to reform their image, staging a “pirated version of Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Mikado five times a day, with vaudeville acts between performances” at a reduced rate,
an attempt at “high-class” entertainment bringing the pair enough money to lease a theaterhouse. 61 Dropping the second-rate opera from the program, but keeping the pretensions of classier entertainment, increased their income still further, allowing the pair to amass a number of theaters throughout New York. The loss of opera did not indicate a return to the bawdiness of the dime museum, or worse still the “variety” of the saloon. Instead, Keith and Albee instituted strict policies regarding the behavior of their performers, and reserved the right to cancel any act deemed obscene. “Liar, slob, son-of-a-gun, devil, sucker, damn and all other words unfit for the ears of ladies and children” 62 were among the words that would merit instant discharge from a Keith theater.

In May of 1900 Keith and Albee attempted to consolidate the business of vaudeville into a group that they could more easily manage and control. The result was The Association of the Vaudeville Managers of the United States, or VMA, led by President B. F. Keith. This organization regulated performer salaries, arranged the routes of touring acts, allied theaters previously in competition and collected five percent of each performers’ salary in order to finance these endeavors, leading to protest by the performers. 63 Despite organization by the performers to assert their rights, which was met with blacklisting by the VMA, performers were unable to significantly improve their position in these financial arrangements, allowing managers such as Keith and Albee to increase their wealth still further.

Although the Keith-Albee circuit established its importance in the business of vaudeville, there were other circuits that posed a significant threat to Keith and Albee’s

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60 Snyder, 27.
61 Snyder, 27.
62 Snyder, 29.
63 Snyder, 37-38.
operation. F. F. Proctor established himself in vaudeville by amassing enough theaters to create the first vaudeville circuit by 1887. Like Keith and Albee, Proctor had a background in entertainment as a former acrobat and juggler, and was able to save money in this occupation until he was able to purchase a theater in Albany he renamed Levantine’s Novelty Theatre in 1880. And like Pastor, Keith and Albee, Proctor was rigid concerning the upholding of morality, although, unlike the aforementioned theater magnates, he insisted upon these standards both on and offstage. This affirmation of morality played out well for Proctor, who was able to secure top acts consistently, earning enough to amass a series of theaters across three states. Proctor was also known for pioneering a scale for ticket prices based on seating ranging from a dime to thirty cents. His enterprise did not go unnoticed by Keith and Albee, who went into partnership with Proctor in 1906 after taking over the lease on Proctor’s flagship theater on Fifth Avenue. As a result of the merger another business organization was established. The United Booking Office controlled the bookings for all Proctor and Keith theaters, further promoting the Keith and Albee vaudeville monopoly at the expense of performers’ salaries.

McCay worked on several different circuits, in his capacity as a chalk talk showman, to present his endeavors in animation and for the Broadway stage production of *Little Nemo*. The Proctor circuit was the first to offer McCay work, according to John Canemaker, in an effort to counter the Keith circuit’s acquisition of comics artist

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64 Trav.S. D., 77.
65 Trav S. D., 92.
66 Trav S. D., 146.
67 Trav S. D., 147
68 Canemaker 132.
Richard Outcault although Judith O’Sullivan asserts that McCay’s offer came first. McCay started out at a rate of $500 a week, indicating his status as a top drawing performer; typically performers started out at $150 to $200 a week on Proctor’s circuit. Within a month, Proctor and Keith had merged, allowing McCay and Outcault to tour on the same circuit. During this time, Little Nemo was licensed to high-scale theater syndicate Klaw and Erlanger, who produced a proper Broadway show. In correspondence with its opening, McCay played at Hammerstein’s theater, The Victoria. Following a disagreement with a booking agent for Keith, McCay decided to offer his services to the Morris circuit, a lone holdout unaffiliated with the United Booking Office or the Vaudeville Managers of the United States, which rewarded his decision with an additional $100 per week.

Traveling shows, circuses and dime museums provided business models which vaudeville promoters developed into their entertainment industry. Dime museums in particular are closely related to vaudeville entertainment. These museums showcased curiosities, both objects and in the flesh, as well as lectures and shows for a nominal viewing fee. These curiosities included educational exhibits of exotic animals, such as lions, whales and elephants, in addition to attractions such as bearded women, midgets, mermaids and giants. P. T. Barnum is credited with the popular institution of the dime museum. From 1842 to 1868, his American Museum was the “best-known ‘Congress of

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70 Canemaker, 132.
71 Canemaker, 135.
72 Broadway shows were notably higher-class entertainment. They did not provide continuous variety entertainment, typically focusing on a single elaborate show.
73 Canemaker, 149 and O’Sullivan, 31. Both authors relate the professional competition between McCay and Outcault, but do not indicate the brevity of the time frame from the artists’ first performances to Proctor and Keith’s merger.
Among the attractions that graced the displays of the museum were Jolie Heth, who claimed to be the nursemaid of George Washington, the FeeJee mermaid, a stuffed amalgamation of monkey and fish, and “General” Tom Thumb, whose short stature and good nature won over audiences. Barnum’s establishment received criticism for its appeals to popular imagination that often failed in execution; however, his museum became a model for business development emulated across the country.

The Vine Street Dime Museum in Cincinnati was established at 218 Vine Street by the firm of C. E. Kohl and George Middleton. Kohl and Middleton entered into vaudeville in the 1880s, purchasing numerous theaters and dime museums in and around the Chicago area before expanding outward. McCay was likely brought to Cincinnati in 1891 in an effort to promote the newly established venue, possibly by the request of manager John Avery, who became McCay’s friend. McCay stayed with the theater through three changes in ownership and one relocation to 526 Vine Street, as did Avery. His eye-catching signage adorned the building, drawing on his experience illustrating circus posters in Chicago to render several of the museum’s curiosities. McCay also worked on posters and other visual designs for the museum. McCay often drew a crowd while working on the façade of the building, as is attested by the writings of newspaper columnist Damon Runyon and New York American art department head William Apthorp, who complimented McCay’s artistic prowess.

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74 Lewis, 22.
75 Lewis, 23.
76 O’Sullivan, 10.
77 Trav S. D., 117.
78 O’Sullivan, 11.
79 O’Sullivan, 10.
80 Canemaker, 44.
McCay’s vaudeville act was a chalk talk, or quick sketch performance, that he took across the eastern United States. A chalk talk describes an event wherein a performer produces drawings intended to impress an audience. These events may or may not be accompanied by a spoken narrative or joke requiring visual and verbal interplay. Chalk talks are only infrequently discussed in relation to vaudeville. Instead, writings on chalk talk stress its many applications, suggesting that proficiency in visual and verbal presentation assists in all fields, including business and religious sermons, in addition to secular entertainment.\(^81\) Chalk talk was not reserved for skilled artists, although the fundamentals of drawing were certainly helpful. Many of the standard chalk talk “stunts” were simple enough that training was unnecessary as the nature of the medium led its performers to prefer simple descriptive lines in order to quickly move from one illustration to the next while speaking.

Chalk talk proved to be adaptable to vaudeville in part due to its history of use in conjunction with religious sermons. Revered George E. Osgood of Grace Church in Attleboro, Massachusetts was “one of the earliest users of the crayon,”\(^82\) and the early 20\(^{th}\) century saw “an ever-increasing use of crayon presentation by ministers.”\(^83\) The respectability of chalk talk, related to its connections with religion, made it an ideal candidate for an entertainment industry that was attempting to throw off the stigma of saloon variety in favor of family entertainment.

In his general reference quicksketch guide, chalk talk performer Charles L. Bartholomew created a system of classification for chalk talk drawings: trick drawings,

\(^{81}\) See Barnett, Bartholomew, Bixler, and Tarbell.
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 23.
dexterous drawings, sentiment stunts, illustrations and portrayals, and crayon cartoons. McCay indulged in each of these categories; his typical chalk talk performance consisted of trick drawings, drawings made at a high rate of speed, drawings of famous figures, drawings made in the dark, drawings of audience members asked to participate or any combination of the above. A trick drawing in McCay’s repertoire known as the Seven Stages of Man garnered the artist critical appreciation. For this performance McCay would build upon an initial sketch to rapidly take a man and woman from infancy to old age. McCay did not speak during his chalk talk acts, and spun this idiosyncrasy as a signature of his performances. Later, he added music composed by Fred Day and Rudolph Aronson to the background of the act. McCay’s extension of his chalk drawings led to the development of his early animation and a spectacular stage show involving interaction with his animated characters.

McCay was one of many cartoonists working in chalk talk. This field appears to have been a lucrative side career for well-known comic strip artists and came with the added bonus of serving as advertising for their principal occupations, pleasing both the artists and the newspapers for which they worked. Comics innovator Richard Outcault discovered that the vaudeville stage had embraced his character “The Yellow Kid,” who became the subject of numerous songs and theatrical productions, some of which could boast artwork by Outcault, who was also known to take the chalk talk stage himself. Bud Fisher, creator of Mutt and Jeff, was also a lightning sketch artist, and would follow
McCay with forays into animation in 1915.87 Sidney Smith, who created “The Gumps” for the Chicago Tribune in 1917, and Clare Briggs, whose strip Danny Dreamer imitated Little Nemo, often appeared together on the New York circuits.88 George McManus’ chalk talk consisted of depicting the characters from his popular comic Bringing Up Father.89 Lesser known comic artists, such as Charles Plumb and John T. McCutcheon, were active in chalk talk not only on vaudeville, but also on college campuses and in an informational capacity presenting for the National Farm Bureau.90

McCay modified his vaudeville act to include his animated films, which were among the first made. Vaudeville audiences appear to have been skeptical of McCay’s accomplishments. In a brief article on cartooning McCay relates that Little Nemo “was pronounced very lifelike, but my audience declared that it was not a drawing, but that the pictures were photographs of real children.”91 A similar problem occurred with McCay’s next animated production, How a Mosquito Operates (1912) proved similarly problematic. Despite McCay’s “great ridiculous mosquito” his audiences “declared the mosquito was operated by wires to get the effect before the camera.”92 Finally, McCay hit upon the idea of Gertie the Dinosaur, a prehistoric animal that could not be filmed, as a means of provoking recognition of animation not as a camera trick, but rather the application of intellect and hard work.
During a performance of *Gertie*, McCay would interact with his animated film, an effect only made possible by the encroachment of film into vaudeville theaterhouses. At the turn of the century film was considered a lower form of entertainment than upright vaudeville, so it was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that the new medium made an impact following the invention of the feature length film. However, “by 1897, there were already several hundred projectors across the country, many of them in dime museums and vaudeville houses,” which were commonly used to finish a cycle of performances. McCay was able to capitalize on the situation by combining his fine draughtsmanship honed from years of working on comic strips and illustrations, the popularity of his vaudeville performances with its specific mode of aesthetic appreciation and humor, and the developing technologies that spurred the growth of animation into a single spectacle. The decline of vaudeville, giving way to the dominance of film, took place rapidly across the first quarter of the century. Vaudeville historian Trav S. D. presents a bleak picture of the descent of the industry: “By 1919 there were close to a thousand vaudeville houses in the country… by 1921 it is estimated that a quarter of theaters that played both films and vaudeville dropped the vaudeville shows… by 1925, there were only a hundred straight (no flickers) vaudeville theaters.” With film usurping the cultural role that vaudeville had occupied, the temporal frame in which a spectacle such as *Gertie* was culturally viable was relatively brief.

A performance of *Gertie* involved McCay appearing onstage with a bullwhip explaining the process of animation to his audience before starting the film with the crack of a whip. Throughout the film, McCay interacts with the animated giant: he offers

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93 Trav S. D., 151.
94 Trav S. D., 151 and 247.
Gertie a large “red cardboard ‘apple’” as a reward for her good behavior, and finishes the show by walking behind the screen and into his cartoon to be carried off in Gertie’s mouth. McCay was clearly infatuated with his creation, which he saw as the future of art, with his comics training in pen and ink as a basis. He predicted that “people are soon going to be educated to such a degree that they will not be interested in pictures that stand still.” McCay’s comments paint a contradictory picture of the presence of technology in the culture industry, both mistrusted due to lack of an educated audience and yet a seemingly inevitable process capable of being harnessed by a well positioned individual. It likewise stood to reason that “there must be skilled draftsmen to actually draw the pictures and make them either funny or attractive… using their expert draftsmanship and knowledge of art as a basis for a claim for higher remuneration.” McCay, at the intersection of various culture industries, was strategically positioned to take advantage the opportunity for a cultural collision in the form of a new kind of comic inspired, performance-based, interactive spectacle.

The dominance of vaudeville in the entertainment industry, approximately from 1890 to 1920, facilitated by the formation of the VMA and UBO, which controlled the majority of all bookings made for performers, made a significant impression upon McCay. As a vaudeville performer, he dealt with the organization of the circuits, the codes of conduct that governed the stage, the form of the chalk talk, and the popularity of predominant forms of expression, specifically the spectacle promoted by Barnum that found its way to the variety of the vaudeville stage. McCay’s background in the creation

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95 Trav S. D., 249-250.
96 Canemaker, 175-177.
97 McCay, “From Sketchbook to Animation,” 15.
98 McCay, “From Sketchbook to Animation,” 15.
of dime museum artwork ingratiated him to the performance community that grew out of such establishments, and impacted his ideas concerning the relation of artwork and images to an audience. The basis of McCay’s understanding of this relationship in the production of his comics can be found in the content of his work in vaudeville.
Winsor McCay performance on the vaudeville circuits between 1906-1927, during which time he also produced many of his acclaimed comic strip series. McCay’s heavy workload, including the extraordinary endeavor of producing animated movies by hand with little assistance, led him to use his time while on the circuit to draw his comics. The dialogue that his comics engage in with vaudeville productions, while not always readily apparent, provides an alternative reading of the comic strip that more closely unifies the two fields of entertainment.

McCay’s first animated cartoon, *Little Nemo*, opens with a live-action scene in which the artist is dining surrounded by a group of his artist friends. McCay makes a wager that he will “attempt drawing pictures that will move,” which is greeted with laughter and heckling. The artist stands and moves over to an easel set up with his art supplies and immediately gets to work. McCay’s brush is shown gliding over a sheet of paper, swiftly rendering Nemo’s companion Impy in perfect proportion, in outline and detail. Aside from several dips into his ink, McCay is able to describe Impy in a single motion; no mistakes are made, no lines redrawn. These movements create an impression of effortless, almost machine-like movement. This superhuman motion, the surety of McCay’s line and the speed of execution, is an uncommon sight, and his dinner company sits rapt in watching McCay at work, as the artist goes on to illustrate Nemo, Flip, and Doctor Pill. The lines McCay creates and the manner in which he works captures attention.
Following the dinner room wager, McCay is seen in his office having completed the 4,000 drawings necessary to make his pictures move. In a comedic sequence showcasing McCay’s understanding of physical comedy, a bumbling young assistant manages to knock over a stack of the carefully ordered cartoons. This example of action as humor is followed into the presentation of the cartoon, which opens with Flip chasing after Impy, the former spinning wildly following a missed punch. When Nemo appears, Flip and Impy are stretched high and low before disappearing altogether, at which point Nemo begins to draw one of his companions, the Princess of Slumberland. This self-reflexive action is exemplific of McCay’s delight in addressing the audience’s experience in viewing his work, present in every medium McCay used. Nemo presents the Princess with a flower and the two ride off in the mouth of a dragon. Such flights of fancy provide an escape from the reality made possible by McCay’s talent in executing believable dimensional perspective. As Nemo and the Princess make their exit, Flip and Impy follow behind in an automobile that abruptly explodes, ending the picture as the characters fall from the sky unharmed. The title screen of the picture reads “Winsor McCay: The Famous Cartoonist of the N. Y. Herald and His Moving Comics.”

McCay’s vaudeville chalk talks are only recorded by newspaper reviews and advertisements, as there are no videos or photographs of McCay on the stage. The video introduction of Little Nemo, and the later, similar introduction to Gertie the Dinosaur in 1914, provide rare glimpses of McCay drawing in front of an audience. In these performances, McCay displays his understanding of entertainment culture, and the manner in which he was able to articulate work that responded to these demands across many media.

99 Canemaker, 137.
McCay was immersed in the culture of vaudeville, and some of the more prominent personages in the business, actors, singers and comedians, are discussed in McCay’s strips. *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* gave McCay more room to include references to popular culture, as it was not a strip intended solely for children (as was *Little Nemo*) and did not have a continuous narrative arc or recurring characters. Instead, *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* is dependent upon a few narrative and thematic conventions that unified the content of the strip. The halfspread size of the comic was uniform throughout its run. The title identifying the strip proves to be an important thread of continuity between the individual strips, as is the bold ink outlining preferred by McCay, whose art nouveau style is evident in both black and white and color printings. The final panel of the strip provides one of the strongest unifying links of the series. In this panel a character states that he or she has had a nightmare induced by ingestion of Welsh rarebit, a meal composed of fried cheese served over bread. Taken together, these characteristics, the dialogue, the artwork, and the title, provided the physical structure for the *Rarebit Fiend*, and encouraged, through repetition, audience identification of the strip. The open structure of the comic strip allowed for the inclusion of allusions and representations of vaudeville stars as well as advertisements for McCay’s own vaudeville appearances. Singer Vesta Victoria, actor and comedian Dan Rice, and comedian W. C. Fields were among the vaudevillians to receive pen and ink translation.

McCay alludes to his own vaudeville appearances in at least five *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* strips. Most prominently, one strip depicts the artist at work receiving compliments on his show, causing his head to swell until bursting. Others reproduce the vaudeville stage in imaginative ways. In the February 24, 1906 *Rarebit* strip, McCay
draws a man whose act involves sculpting the faces of famous personages out of Welsh rarebit who is summarily booted offstage.\textsuperscript{101} This strip appears to respond to the common practice at vaudeville houses of employing a chaser, an act “so appalling it would have the audience heading for the door,”\textsuperscript{102} in order to empty the theater for more paying customers. The character in the strip also appears to be uncommonly similar to Marcus Loew, a sculptor of the famous whose performance was so poor it earned him the title “King of Small Time.”\textsuperscript{103} The appearances of these figures indicate the close ties between Winsor McCay’s comic strips and vaudeville, and further evidence of the advantageous relationship between the two mediums.

Several vaudevillians suggested material to McCay for use in \textit{Dream of the Rarebit Fiend}, and received credit if such a strip was produced. Jules Ruby, a vaudeville agent on the F. F. Proctor circuit, is credited with inspiring at least three strips. In one McCay draws himself working at his artboard until his hands swell up and he is unable to draw, forcing him to use his feet in order to complete a cartoon assignment.\textsuperscript{104} In another, a woman is instructed by her dentist to open her mouth wider, until he is able to step right in.\textsuperscript{105} Further episodes were suggested by vaudeville actor Bert Leslie, comedian Edmond Hayes, clown and showman Dan Rice, Jr., and comedy actor Johnnie Coyle, all of whom were Winsor’s colleagues on the stage.\textsuperscript{106} The use of material suggested by vaudevillians, and in some cases in reference to the workings of vaudeville, provides a direct link between the two fields of entertainment.

\textsuperscript{100} See Fig. 7.
\textsuperscript{101} See Fig. 8.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Trav S. D.}, 88.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Trav S. D.}, 88.
\textsuperscript{104} See Fig. 9.
\textsuperscript{105} See Fig. 10.
McCay’s comics maintained a humorous sensibility often related to the physical humor of vaudeville skits. In particular, *Little Sammy Sneeze* capitalizes upon the use of slapstick humor. This halfspread comic detailed the consequences of a child’s sneeze, building tension over a number of panels. Often, Sammy accidentally upsets a project other peripheral characters are working on, leading them to take violent revenge in the form of a swift kick to the rear.\(^{107}\) Slapstick was prevalent on the vaudeville stage, despite the efforts of the industry to provide clean, innocent humor. The Three Keatons were one of the attractions that operated in this idiom. Composed of father Joe, Mother Myra, and little Buster, the “gist of the routine was that little Buster would torment Joe while he was busy doing something, until Joe proceeded to ‘discipline’ him” by “swing[ing] Buster around, bounce[ing] him off the scenery, throw[ing] him offstage.”\(^{108}\) While author Trav S. D. attributes the success of the act to Buster’s acting ability and the shock value of violence, the violence of the actions is undermined by the lack of repercussions, making acceptable what would otherwise be outrageous behavior. This disconnection between the physical action and its expected consequences is at the heart of slapstick humor in both vaudeville and McCay’s comics. Comics scholar D. B. Dowd remarks on the physical humor apparent in *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, specifically the comic strip used as the basis for the animated film *How a Mosquito Operates* (1912).\(^{109}\) He describes the physical act of the character of the mosquito, which stumbles and tumbles after gorging upon the blood of an alcoholic, as the source of the humor of the

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\(^{107}\) See Fig. 11.

\(^{108}\) Trav S. D., 136.

\(^{109}\) See Fig. 12.
sequence, as the idea of the strip itself is repellent.\textsuperscript{110} McCay’s attention to precise lines and perspective is worth noting, as action to action closure in a comic panel relies on the compression of time through repetition demanding careful artistic direction.\textsuperscript{111} As the basis of comparison, Dowd envisions the physical specificity of Charlie Chaplin’s actions in the film \textit{The Gold Rush} (1925), an earnest effort at accomplishing an impossible feat, in this case cutting the sole of a shoe with a knife and fork.\textsuperscript{112} These feats of physical disconnect were honed by Chaplin on the vaudeville stage prior to his movie career, although he did not find success there.\textsuperscript{113} The slapstick actions of McCay’s characters, appearing most often in \textit{Sammy Sneeze}, \textit{Little Nemo} and \textit{Dream of the Rarebit Fiend}, reveal that humor was structured in ways that relate to the interaction of audience and author in both stage performance and comics.

In McCay’s comics there are a number of metafictional elements, references to the art form that indicate a close interaction with the audience, that operate in a manner similar to vaudeville comedy routines. One of the earliest examples occurs in \textit{Little Sammy Sneeze}. The strip in question is six panels long and depicts only Sammy, whose sneezing fit proceeds as usual. The end result of this catastrophic sneeze is the complete destruction of the panel in which Sammy appears, reduced to torn fragments burying the unfortunate titular character.\textsuperscript{114} In \textit{Dream of the Rarebit Fiend} these elements are prominent as well. \textit{Rarebit Fiend} panels have been rolled out,\textsuperscript{115} fastened up,\textsuperscript{116} ripped

\begin{itemize}
  \item[$\textsuperscript{110}$] Dowd, 14.
  \item[$\textsuperscript{111}$] Action to action closure describes the way a set of sequential panels in which one distinct action is followed by another closely related action is mentally processed and understood. See McCloud, 70 for a more complete discussion of action to action closure.
  \item[$\textsuperscript{112}$] Dowd, 14.
  \item[$\textsuperscript{113}$] Trav S. D., 150.
  \item[$\textsuperscript{114}$] See Fig. 13.
  \item[$\textsuperscript{115}$] See Fig. 14.
  \item[$\textsuperscript{116}$] See Fig. 15.
\end{itemize}
apart, burned away, shrunken down, and otherwise distorted in order to highlight the construction of the comic panel. In addition to the formal manipulation of the panels, McCay cannily references the reading the New York Evening Telegram, the newspaper in which the strip was printed, and his own authorial hand. As previously mentioned, McCay also includes himself in his strips. Each of these interventions intrude upon the reader’s reality, their experience and real time. The environment of the dime museum provided a similar breakdown between the exhibit and the audience. At the American Museum, Barnum’s “giants and midgets… interacted with visitors in genteel surroundings, answered questions, sold pamphlets detailing their life histories, and, by the 1860s, signed photographic souvenirs of themselves.” On the vaudeville stage interaction with the audience was an expected part of performing, for better or for worse. This interaction in vaudeville is discussed in terms of the “gallery gods,” the audience that would vocally and vociferously decry acts that fell flat, and cheer and applaud those that entertained. One such act was Proctor’s Maggie Cline, an Irish singer “who inspired audiences to sing along in what a journalist called an ‘earthquake obligato.’” In addition to leading a sing along, ‘Irish Mag,’ was also known to engage the audience in direct conversation. Eva Tanguay, one of vaudeville’s most prominent stars of dance, was so loved the audience “screamed and shouted throughout her twenty-minute act.” “Fanny Brice… just before exiting the stage, would literally salute the crowd” in

117 See Fig. 16.
118 See Fig. 17.
119 See Fig. 18.
120 See Fig. 19, Fig. 20, Fig. 21, and Fig. 8.
121 See Fig. 22, Fig. 23, and Fig. 24.
122 Lewis, 53.
123 Snyder, 23.
124 See Snyder, 117 for a dialogue recalled between an offending audience member and a sharp-tongued Maggie Cline.
deference to their relation with the entertainer. The vaudeville audience was not only aware that they were viewing a stage production, but actively took part in creating it. McCay adapted this relationship to comics in the form of self-reflexive stunts highlighting the construction of the medium by its audience.

The published comic strip, despite its appellation, is a multiple. In the production process the strip undergoes several iterations, from conceptual activity, scripting or storyboarding, to preliminary sketching, the inking process, transfer to a print-ready format, coloring and duplication on the newspaper presses. The read strip is one of many copies emerging from the combination of factors that led to its creation. This process is then repeated on a daily basis, producing a corpus referred to as the strip. The strip need not be a self-contained, reflexive or autonomous entity; however, recurring characters or plot devices typically define the limits of the strip’s content.

McCay’s strips are marked by such structural multiplicity, not only in production, but in content as well. The vast majority of McCay’s strips operate on the basis of thematic content, utilizing a set form with minor variations from week to week. In this manner the audience of the strip knew exactly what the content of the strip would be, and yet could enjoy the mutivaried ways in which these conventions played out. For instance, *Sammy Sneeze* explored what situations could be affected by the explosive power of Sammy’s sneezing. While Sammy acts in exactly the same way week after week, the consequences of his actions vary. *Hungry Henrietta* operates in the reverse, as every situation presented leads to the same consequence: Henrietta eating and crying. The conventions of *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* and *Little Nemo* clearly determine their

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125 Lewis, 319.
126 Trav S. D., 90.
content as well, although these strips provided McCay with more leeway, as their content is not as closely tied to the actions of characters and their consequences. Both strips display the products of dreams or nightmares, and are understood as such. Each weekly strip displays a different dream or nightmare, and the content of the strip is the variation on this form. The audience read and understood these conventions, and therefore could anticipate the framework for the strip. Interestingly, McCay displays this idea in a self-referential strip from *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, where a character awakes from his cheese-inspired dream with the suggestion that he might send it in to Silas, McCay’s nom de plume.127

Vaudeville acts were similarly multiples in nature. The institution of a set program to maximize the tension and release of the performances likely contributed to the repetition of content, however, the most pertinent repetitions were the acts of the performers. The vaudevillians of the stage enacted “the same routine for weeks and even years on end… [and] had to sound fresh and original.”128 As they traveled across the country they were expected to reproduce the same material on demand for each performance. Unfortunately, as the environment changed, the same act did not always operate in the same manner, as comedian Eddie Cantor learned when “he presented an English language act in a theatre where most of the patrons spoke Yiddish.”129 The multiple of vaudeville also became a maleable thematic organization. Like readers of McCay’s comics, the vaudeville audience knew what to expect of performers, who adapted content in order to successfully relay a message.

127 See Fig. 25.
128 Snyder, 108.
129 Snyder, 109.
Comics and vaudeville both provided an arena “where people could fashion new ways of life and live out their fantasies.” The concept of leisure time as an opportunity for exploring alternative worlds is elaborated on in the fantasy work of McCay. The articulation of the dream landscapes that appear in Little Nemo and Dream of the Rarebit Fiend allow for immersion into a separate reality by means of accurate and consistent rendering. The fact that McCay chose to construct a fantastical environment in his strips is a departure from the normative history of the medium. The work of Richard Outcault, while fictional, was renowned for its depiction of the realities of working-class life and the slum-kids of the streets of New York. In contrast, McCay’s depictions of dreams allowed him to express the subjectivities of the urban environment without directly referencing it. The desire for alternative worlds is evident in the choice of presentations and their success in early dime museums as well as vaudeville proper. The spectacles hyped by P. T. Barnum while operating his American Museum relied upon his ability to construct such an alternate reality, often by exaggerating the truth. In this way a monkey and fish sewn together become the FeeJee mermaid, and old women become George Washington’s nurse. While these claims were both “well-known ‘humbugs,’” Barnum’s financial success provides a counterpoint to such accusations, that he had a large audience that wanted to be deceived. Vaudeville provided a similar chance for everyone to see astonishing spectacles performed at an affordable price. Vaudeville also achieved a popular appeal, drawing audiences from all social classes, ethnicities and genders, such that “from the 1880s to the 1910s, vaudeville was the most popular form of

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130 Snyder, 133.
131 Blackbeard, 25-29. See Fig. 26.
132 Lewis, 43.
entertainment in the country.” Like Barnum’s museum, vaudeville established a price point that most could afford and a time schedule that promoted escape from the harsh reality of the workday. The wide distribution, ease of handling and low prices of newspapers allowed comics to provide a similar escapist function, capitalized upon by McCay in the creation of fictional environments that pushed this idea further than the more common urban landscape employed by other cartoonists. Additionally, McCay’s *Little Nemo* was aimed at children, and the comparative lack of shocking content, rampant throughout *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, combined with the capitulation to reality in the last panel, made McCay’s comic an appealing source of respectable escapist entertainment, unlike other crude comics.

The threads of continuity between McCay’s comics and vaudeville run from formal elements, such as drawing vaudeville comedians, to aping content, as in vaudevillian slapstick, to the articulation of escapism in a form suited to public consumption. Specific strips highlight the interrelation of content that runs between vaudeville and McCay’s comics, such relationships pervade the entirety of McCay’s work, as illustrated by indications such as the repetition of thematic sequences articulated in concert with audience interaction and the inclusion of narrative sequences suggested by vaudevillians. The connection between vaudeville and McCay’s comics is not limited to the artist’s vaudeville appearances. Instead, the links between McCay’s lines and the performer’s body is in the ability to tell a story and relate to an audience.

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133 Lewis, 315.
Conclusion

Winsor McCay is a key figure in shaping the history of comics. His work in newspaper strip storytelling emerged within a history of image and text combinations as old as human culture. These combinations describe comics, a fluid medium of expression and communication. Unlike his contemporaries in the medium, McCay’s work explored the limits of expression specific to comics, such as the comic panel stage, while capitalizing upon the iconic characters he created and the repetitive nature of the medium. McCay’s formal developments in the medium questioned the way in which comics interacted with their audience, expanding the potential dialogues they offered.

McCay participated in a culture that constructed his understanding of humor and storytelling. The pervasive nature of the vaudeville entertainment industry impacted McCay’s work directly and indirectly. Directly, McCay’s comics reference the vaudeville stage and its stars. Singers, actors and comedians were portrayed in Dream of the Rarebit Fiend and gave McCay suggestions for his strips, which were taken up by the artist and transmitted to his audience, furthering the reach of vaudeville culture. McCay was himself a highly paid vaudevillian. His quick sketch act, although a marginal form within the context of the stage performance, could be found on no less than three of the most prestigious vaudeville circuits. These performances were advertised in McCay’s comics, not only in direct or oblique narrative dialogue, but also in the production of iconic characters that were a part of his quick sketch act. McCay’s success on the vaudeville stage further reveals a interrelated web of cultural production, where McCay’s
comics, from which he derived his fame, were adapted for onstage entertainment, which provided a ground for future comics and interactive modes of narrative dialogue.

Indirectly, McCay uses the expressions of humor made popular by vaudeville and showcases an awareness of the content of his work that exposes a relationship to his audience that exceeds passive absorption of a fantastic image. The repetition of acts by vaudeville performers showed an understanding of the ways in which repetition shapes the audience’s relationship to the performer. The audience expected to see the same show, with variation depending on the locality, so that a context developed describing the operation of entertaining elements in the show. McCay replicates this aspect of the interrelationship between audience and performer in the creation of numerous strips that rely upon structured thematic devices to develop a framework for the transmission of content. As performers repeated the same act, so did McCay repeat the same plot. McCay’s use of physical comedy to create humorous actions in ways that worked to the advantage of the comic strip’s sequential identity took cues from vaudeville’s representations of violence as comedy.

McCay’s actions do not end at the borders of his comics. His self-reflexive explorations confront the reader with the presentation of the comic strip itself, in much the same manner that vaudeville bridged the gap between audience and actor. Whether McCay was literally dismantling the frames that guided the construction of the medium, or referencing the fact that a newspaper was both medium and context for his strips, these metanarratives relate an awareness of audience interaction with the medium.

McCay’s dialogue with vaudeville and comics has not been addressed in such a way as to describe the way in which both impact one another. This examination hopes to
show that vaudeville culture had a profound impact upon the development of McCay’s comic strips. The dialogue between these two media has a specific importance to the discussion of comics history, which has largely been identified with a minority culture. In expanding the history of interaction between media, the development of specific forms of cultural production becomes blurred. The actions that shaped the history of the stage are shown to be the same that shaped the history of the comics page, united by the drawn lines of Winsor McCay.
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Figure 2
Artist unknown, detail of *Bayeux Tapestry*, 1066 C.E., embroidery, 0.5m x 70.34m, Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux, Bayeux, France
Figure 3
Mayan Picture Manuscript, ca. 1049 C.E. From McCloud, 10.
Figure 4
Tomb of Menna, ca. 1300 B.C.E. From McCloud, 14.
Figure 5
William Hogarth, *A Harlot’s Progress, Plate 1*, 1732, engraving, 29.8 x 37.5 cm,
British Museum, London, England
Figure 6
William Hogarth, *A Harlot’s Progress, Plate 2*, 1732, engraving, 30.2 x 37.2 cm, British Museum, London
Figure 7.
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Figure 11.
Winsor McCay, Little Sammy Sneeze, date unknown.
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