

## Panel C4

Sala Emiciclo  
**Early Animation**



**Donald Crafton**

### **“Watch Me Move”. Winsor McCay’s Animated Vaudeville**

Winsor McCay is known to cultural historians, and to those members of the general public who are aware of him, as an innovator in the graphic arts. He is famed for "Little Nemo in Slumberland" and "Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend." Animation specialists furthermore have long acknowledged his role as a pioneer of hand-drawn animated cartoons, especially his *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Evening Herald and His Moving Comics* (better known simply as *Little Nemo*, 1911) and *Gertie* (also known as *Gertie the Dinosaur*, 1914). What is usually not acknowledged, however, is that these film works were a continuation of the live stage aesthetics and traditions of the day, not a departure from them. This paper will redirect our attention to McCay as a performance artist. For years before his first animated experiments, he was a regular on the vaudeville theater circuits of the early twentieth century. The films were not merely influenced by vaudeville; they *were* vaudeville.

McCay introduced his first effort at bringing his cartoon drawings to the screen in *Little Nemo* with the prophetic caption, "Watch Me Move!" It was an uncanny echo of Galileo's "And yet it moves." Like the irresistible movement of the heavens that the Renaissance observer could not deny, once we see static sketches of comic characters, a dragon, or an extinct reptile moving on the stage-screen, there is no turning back. Movement and life no longer can be separated, in art as in science.

McCay's career as a stage and screen artist highlights the hybridity of early cinema's "transition period," when emerging film forms had not entirely separated themselves from their theatrical antecedents. When he first presented *Gertie*, for example, it was in the context of the live animal acts (elephants, lions, dogs, etc.) with which audiences were familiar. To some extent, the "trained" dinosaur that reluctantly dances to the showman's tune before a theater audience is a satire of this established popular theatrical genre.

I'll briefly present a chronology of McCay's stage presentations, which I have mined from a variety of archival documents. This provides the factual context for the natural connections between his presence as a stage entertainer and the mixed function (quasi-live, we might say) of his animated films on vaudeville programs.

In addition to exploring the connection between animated movement and the belief in created life that would have fascinated McCay's original audiences, this paper also will introduce The Gertie Project. This is an ongoing research and restoration endeavor being carried out by the Cinémathèque Québécoise and the National Film Board of Canada to reconstruct the original "live" performances of Winsor McCay and his adorable trained beast.

## **Biography**

Donald Crafton

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Donald Crafton held the University of Notre Dame's first endowed chair for film studies as the Joseph and Elizabeth Robbie Professor of Film, Television, and Theatre. He earned his B.A. degree at the University of Michigan, an M.A. from the University of Iowa, and the Ph.D. from Yale University.

A specialist in film history, visual culture, and performance, Crafton was the founding director of the Yale Film Study Center, and served as director of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. Crafton chaired the Department of Film, Television, and Theatre at Notre Dame from 1997 to 2002 and 2008-2010, and chaired the Department of Music from 2004-2007. He served as the interim director of the Nanovic Institute for European Studies in 2012-13.

His books include *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation* (California 2013), *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (California 1999), *Before Mickey: The Animated Film, 1908-1928* (Chicago 1993), and *Emile Cohl, Caricature, and Film* (Princeton 1990), which won the Jean Mitry prize. He was named an inaugural Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Scholar in 2000, and twice has received National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowships. In 2004 the World Festival of Animation presented him with an award for his contributions to animation theory. He received the University of Notre Dame's Presidential Award in 2007. He was the Utrecht University Center for Humanities Fellow at the Holland Animation Film Festival in 2013. He was a Guggenheim Foundation fellow in 2014-15.

Crafton became Professor Emeritus in December 2016.