

Victor DeBann, "The art of the motion picture," *Life*, December 22, 1927; © 1927.

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# Before Mickey

The Animated Film  
1898-1928

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Donald Crafton

With a new Afterword

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**For Elise  
and  
In Memory of Marilyn Crafton**

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## From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen

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The early cinema in all its forms had a craving for narrative, dramatic situations, visual motifs, and iconography (the use of recurrent imagery to establish consistent meaning) that could only be satisfied by foraging in other media. The early development of the western (to use a well-known example) was an amalgam of structures and aesthetic codes borrowed from dime novels, gaslight melodramas, wild west shows, Currier and Ives Americana prints, popular journalism, and illustration. Eventually these sources all melted into recognizable western movies. The situation was similar with early animation. Having no models upon which to base their films (except the *féerie*, which was rapidly approaching obsolescence), filmmakers looked to related media for inspiration. We can sense this "trying on" in the curious title of Blackton's *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*. Perhaps 1906 audiences were supposed to associate it with the popular lantern-slide projections known as "humorous transformations," such as the movable ones sold by the T. H. McAllister Co. of New York. These were operated by a lever and illustrated visual one-liners. Many of their titles seemed to anticipate the images in Blackton's film: "Magic Portrait," "Clown's Transformation," "Clown with Moving Eyes," "Woman Smoking," "Circus Dog Jumping through Hoop."<sup>1</sup> Even the simple two-dimensional movements of the figures in Blackton's

film were similar to the effects produced by these crude movable slides. The creative possibilities that lantern projections offered to the first animators were limited indeed. It was necessary to look elsewhere for fresh material.

There is a widespread misconception that comic strips were somehow intimately related to the inception of animation. I will begin by examining that possibility in detail, then will suggest that another popular amusement—the vaudeville stage—was an important early influence.

### ..... Comics and the Animated Cartoon

By 1895, when the cinema was launched, the comic strip was already an old, established art form.<sup>2</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century the Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer, the German Wilhelm Busch, and the Frenchman Nadar gave pictorial narrative its fundamental form. In the 1880s, recognizably modern strips were appearing in weekly humor magazines around the world, including *Puck*, *Punch*, *Life*, *Judge*, *Fliegende Blätter*, *Le Rire*, *La Caricature*, and *Le Chat Noir*. Most of these were simple gags, but some already had casts of regularly recurring characters. During the Hearst-Pulitzer circulation wars in New York in the 1890s, comic strips were annexed by first the weekly and then the daily newspaper and began attracting mass readership.

The popularity of the comics certainly could not be ignored by early filmmakers. Although comic strips had developed their own formal conventions for telling stories in pictures, their impact on the earliest films was minimal, except perhaps for some crude attempts to simulate speech balloons in a couple of 1906 experiments.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the first decade of cinema, filmmakers preferred to tell stories

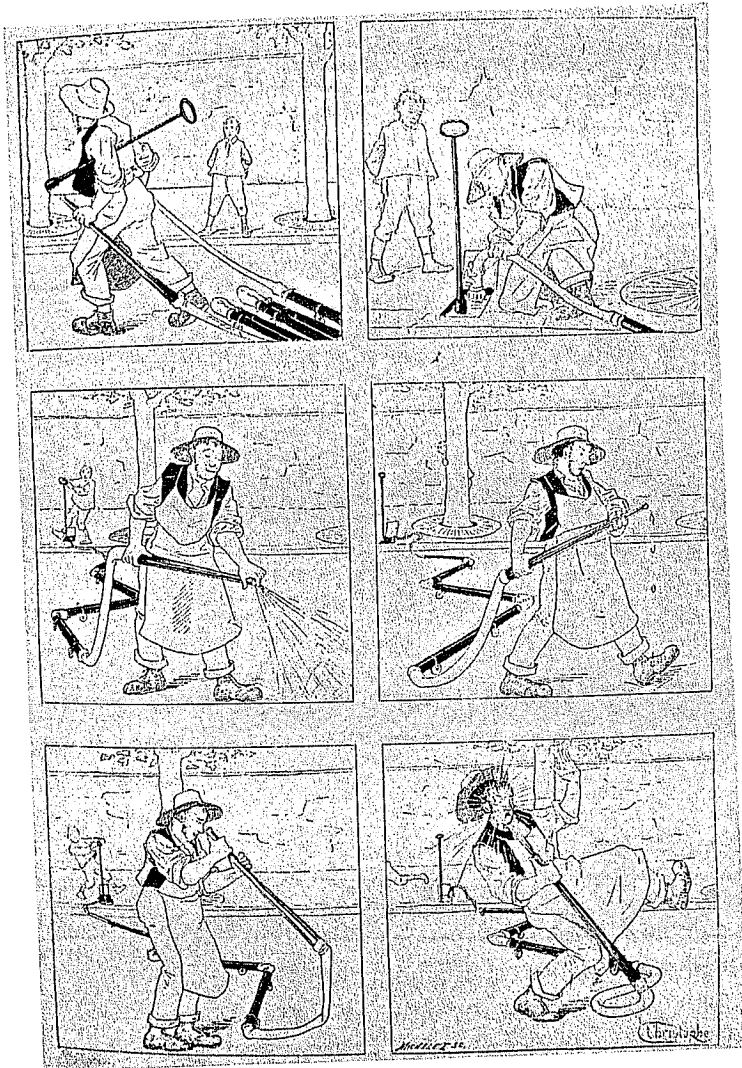
**Before Mickey**

by showing them in one long shot, rather than in a “découpage” of several shots.<sup>4</sup> Even for the period after cross-cutting was introduced, one strains to attribute any influence to comic-strip narrative codes.

The comic strip did, however, make a primary contribution to the cinema by providing a virtually unlimited supply of gags and story material perfectly suited to the two- to five-minute running times of the films. This relationship was already established in one of the first film narratives, Lumière’s famous *Arroseur et arrosé* (*Tables Turned on the Gardener*).<sup>5</sup> By 1895, when the film was shot, the “scenario” was already a comic-strip antiquity. Two versions had appeared in 1887, but the definitive source was drawn by France’s leading comic-strip pioneer Christophe (Georges Colomb) in 1889 (see reference 6 and figure 8). The filmmaker transposed the cartoonist’s urban setting to the more convenient location of the family garden in Lyon, but the high background wall that limits the space of the composition was retained (figure 9). In the strip the mischievous boy stops the flow of water by shutting off the hydrant, but in the film he stands on the hose with the same result: The dim-witted gardener gets squirted. It was indicative of Louis Lumière’s bourgeois standards that the boy, instead of escaping as he had in Christophe’s strip, gets a sound thrashing in the film version.

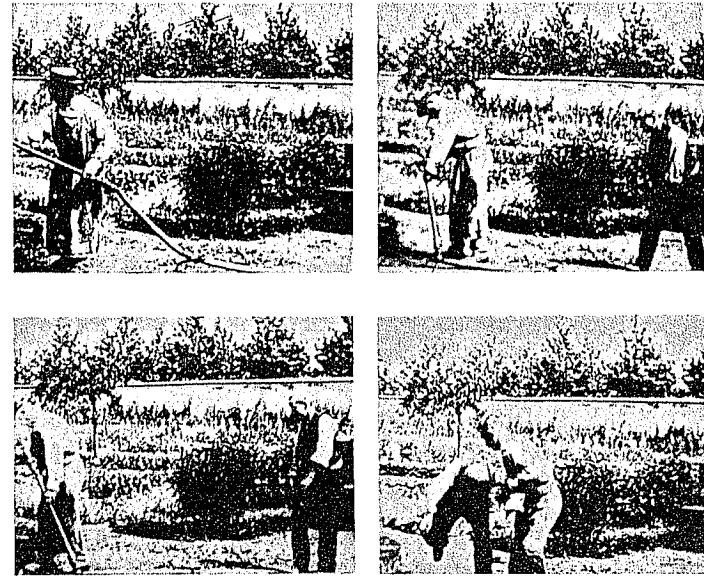
In the American cinema, too, comics were an early narrative mainstay. The transposition to screen was simple; an actor impersonated a popular comic-strip character in a quick roustabout performance. Blackton and Smith, for example, had produced for their Vitagraph company a series of “Happy Hooligan” films in 1899, with Blackton playing the title role.<sup>7</sup> Edison copyrighted a *Hooligan Assists the Magician* in 1900 and four other adaptations in 1903. The American Mutoscope and Biograph studio issued ten of

**From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen**



**Figure 8.**  
Christophe, "Histoire sans paroles—Un Arroseur public," *Le Petit Français Illustré*, August 3, 1889.

**Before Mickey**



**Figure 9.**  
Lumière and assistants, *Arroseur et arrosé* (1895).

**From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen**

their own "Happy Hooligans," also in 1903.<sup>8</sup> Happy Hooligan was a creation of Frederick Burr Opper, who never received any royalties from these adaptations or from films exploiting two of his other characters, the stereotyped Frenchmen Alphonse and Gaston.

In 1902, Biograph also launched their ambitious series of ten films based on Carl Schultze's "Foxy Grandpa." Actually, this time the comics arrived via William A. Brady's Broadway adaptation, which, like the films, starred Joseph Hart in the title role. More dependent on comic-strip material than the other early studios, Biograph also shot in 1903 two "Katzenjammer Kids" films and *Trouble in Hogan's Alley*, based on Outcault's strip.

No comic-strip artist was excited about the prospects of cinema as much as Richard Felton Outcault. Thomas Edison himself had sponsored Outcault's art study in Paris, and the artist partially returned the favor with sketches he drew for the *Electrical World*, including one of the "Black Maria," Edison's strange tarpaper shed which rotated to follow the sun in order to film the first Kinetoscope subjects.<sup>9</sup> In 1902, Outcault—now working for the *New York Herald*—launched "Buster Brown," the strip that would assure him fame and earn his fortune. A canny businessman, he was the originator of tie-in merchandising; he licensed Buster and his dog Tige to advertise everything from cigars to shoes. It was natural for Outcault to look toward the movies as another publicity outlet, and in 1903 he signed a contract with Edison for eight films based on his strip. In the one copyrighted in March 1904, the artist was pictured drawing Buster at his easel. In 1913, Outcault's friend Theodore W. Wharton of Essanay produced *Buster Brown and Tige with their Creator R. F. Outcault*, and still another series began in 1914, directed by Charles France for Edison (see reference 10 and figure 10).

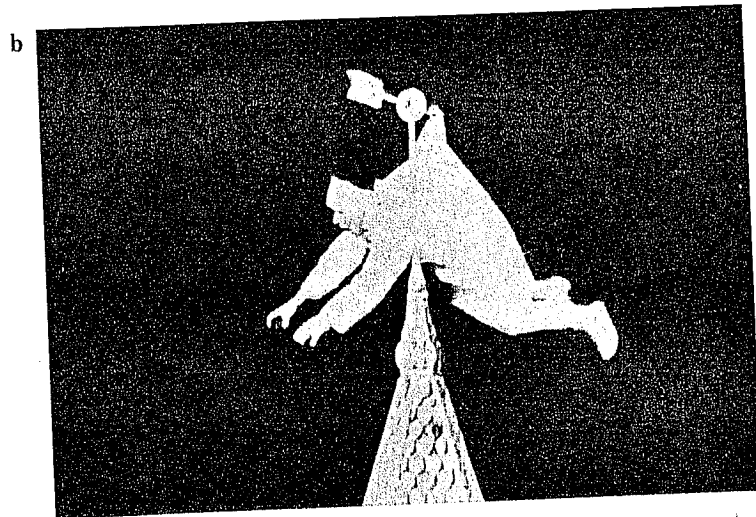
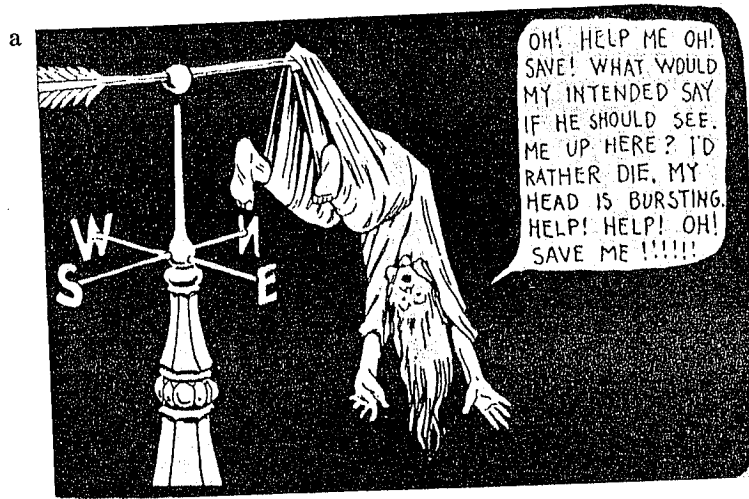
The most spectacular film based on a comic strip was

**Before Mickey**



**Figure 10.** Richard F. Outcault, Ruth Henderson, and Tommy Shirley in publicity shot for the 1913 "Buster Brown" series.

**From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen**



**Figure 11.**  
 a: Detail from Winsor McCay, "Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend," © 1905. b: Edwin S. Porter, *The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (Edison), © 1906.

unquestionably Edwin S. Porter's 1906 *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend*. It was adapted from Winsor McCay's strip, which had begun in the *New York Telegram* the previous year (figure 11). Porter's film, made without McCay's collaboration, was freely adapted from one of the episodes showing a dreamer floating over the skyline in a bed. Porter changed McCay's protagonist to a male and "rationalized" the nightmare by adding a prolog that showed the victim stuffing himself with rarebit and ale. Significantly, in place of McCay's remarkable "montage" of different viewpoints, Porter summoned up all the special effects the cinema had to offer—save animation—to recreate the dream as a series of fantastic tableaux.

The Nestor Company signed an agreement with cartoonist Bud Fisher in 1911 to use his Mutt and Jeff characters. Even the novelty of "Talking Pictures," which actually were just superimposed captions, was not enough to save the first release, a flop called *On the Job*. The producers hoped that ". . . with succeeding numbers of the series, the other characters in the pictures will be along the line of the grotesque, and thus conserve the general idea of cartoon comedy."<sup>11</sup>

In May 1912 the Katzenjammer Kids of Rudolf Dirks's strip made another devilish appearance on the screen, this time for the Selig company.<sup>12</sup> The essential fact to note is that all of these adaptations were live-action films. There was no attempt to adapt comic strips in animated drawing form until the surprisingly late date of 1911, when McCay finished some tentative experiments with his "Little Nemo in Slumberland" characters. By then the technical knowledge had existed for at least half a decade. Why were there no earlier efforts? Why had Blackton, for example, not included any comic-strip characters in his animated drawing films? The answer must go beyond the simple formidability of the task of rendering the hundreds of detailed



drawings that such a project would require; Blackton and others knew how to use cutouts to save time. The early producers were just not all that interested in comic-strip graphics. They viewed the strips only as a mine of story material and ready-made characters with appeal for the same huge middle-class audience for which film producers were competing. There was a strong demand for comic subjects in the period before the classic Sennett and Chaplin films, and these adaptations provided a quick and cheap source.<sup>13</sup>

The situation was the same in Europe. Alice Guy, for example, had freely borrowed from Guillaume's picture stories when she was a Gaumont director, and Jasset, writing in 1911, acknowledged the cinema's debt to Steinlen, Willet, Doës, Guillaume, and Caran d'Ache, whose picture stories appeared in *Le Chat Noir* and *Le Gil Blas illustré*.<sup>14</sup> Judging from the few identifiable samples of these adaptations that survive, all except Porter's were static and stagebound, profiting little from the lively visual arsenal available in their comic-strip prototypes.

In addition to providing stories, the comic strip made another real contribution to the cinema in the form of its personnel. All the pioneers of the animated film had previous experience in the popular graphic arts, beginning with James Stuart Blackton himself.

Born in Sheffield, England, in 1875, Blackton immigrated to America with his family when he was still a child (figure 12). In 1896 he was working as a cub reporter and cartoonist for the New York *Evening World* when his editor assigned him to do a feature story on Edison's new projecting machine, the Vitascope, which had just been demonstrated in public for the first time. During an interview with Edison, the inventor asked the artist if he would sketch him. As Blackton later reported,

**Before Mickey**



**Figure 12.**  
James Stuart Blackton, portrait by Mrs. Blackton, 1907.

**From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen**



I told him that I could and he said, "You come on out to the Black Maria," and we did and he had them get boards and wide white paper and some charcoal, and right then and there he had the camera recording your humble servant drawing a picture of Thomas A. Edison. He said, "Put your name on that board," and "This will be a good ad for you, it will go all over the country in the show houses." I did and that was my entrance into the motion picture industry. I finished that picture with two others with the name of Blackton, Cartoonist of the New York *Evening World* written over the top of that board.<sup>15</sup>

Realizing instantly the potential of Edison's projector for profit as well as entertainment, Blackton ordered one and formed a partnership (which eventually became Vitagraph, one of the most important pre-World War I producers), turning out a variety of films including Blackton's animation subjects. As the business grew, his administrative responsibilities usurped the time he had for indulging in experiments like *Humorous Phases*. He abandoned animation completely after 1909. His later directorial efforts were influenced by Griffith's successes. He resigned from Vitagraph in 1917 to go into independent production in England, then resumed an executive position with the company in 1923, remaining there two years until it was purchased by Warner Brothers. He died in Los Angeles in 1941.<sup>16</sup>

Blackton's role in the history of animation is curious. Although he had originated so many animated techniques, and although his work was so influential, he grew to disdain cartoons and all other trick effects. He neglected to write one word about his contribution to the field in his unpublished autobiography,<sup>17</sup> but in 1917 he wrote: "In that year of 1905, I had not yet outgrown my fondness for all kinds of 'trick' photography, generally of my own devising. What pride I took in carrying out all the weird happenings in *The*

**Before Mickey**

*Haunted Hotel!* . . . Nowadays, a vastly different order of problem engrosses my attention. The enthusiasm is the same, but I fear I have outgrown my joy in lens magic as a thing by itself. Camera tricks are still all right, but they have reached a point where they must interpret, not divert."<sup>18</sup>

Although Blackton regarded his work as juvenile "wild oats," his case illustrates the typical ease with which graphic artists made the transition into the film business. Harry Furniss, an uninspired but articulate English caricaturist who had started working for Edison in 1912, left a 1914 account that spoke for several of his colleagues:

Ever since I was a schoolboy I have been making a practice of drawing and caricaturing, of writing stories and novels, and of lecturing and giving popular entertainments. It has only just dawned upon me, however, that these exploits of mine were merely the preliminary steps towards the writing and producing of cinematograph pictures. By this I mean to imply that this class of work, which to me was a complete novelty, has come to me more naturally and more easily than any other work I have ever attempted in the course of a long and varied career, which, no doubt, is in a great measure due to my wide experience in other spheres of art.<sup>19</sup>

Once these artists learned the film trade, the lasting value of their early training varied greatly with each individual. With Blackton, perhaps because he was so young, the influence of his journalistic background dissipated immediately; with others it would prove vitally important. In any case it is clear that, though the comic strips were an important narrative source for the early live-action cinema, their influence on film form and on the animated cartoon was slow to develop, was often indirect, and, as far as these early years is concerned, has probably been overrated.

**From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen**

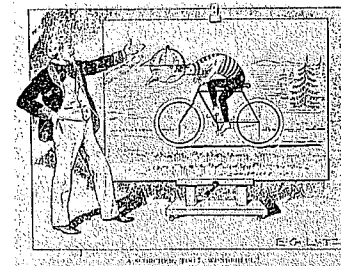
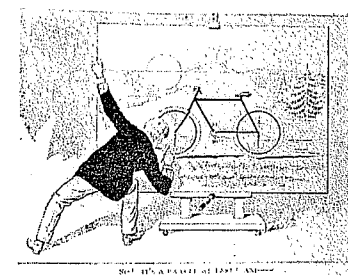
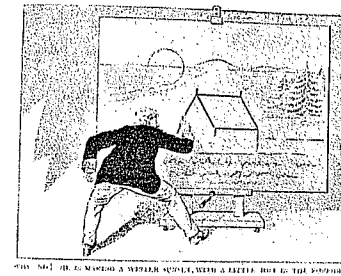
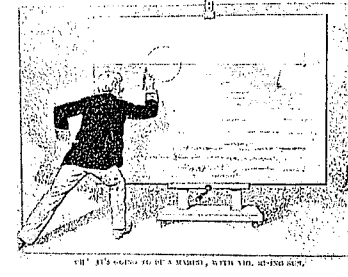
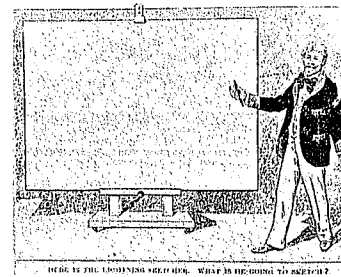
## Lightning Sketches

When the early cartoonists came to the cinema it was often by way of what Furniss had called “popular entertainments,” or performing lecture tours. Looking at the old animated films, one realizes again how closely they were related to the popular stage.<sup>20</sup> More important than the influence of comic strips is a link between the first animated cartoons and a hybrid of graphic and performing art known as “lightning sketches.” This was essentially a Victorian parlor entertainment that took to the vaudeville stage near the end of the nineteenth century. Here, in a sense, was the birthplace of the animated cartoon, because as lightning sketches made their entry into early films their iconography provided the mechanism by which self-figuration first occurred.

The artist Edwin G. Lutz has left us a record of how lightning sketches were typically presented in 1897 (figure 13). (Twenty years later, Lutz would write a manual on animation.) The artist would stand by his blank easel and deliver an illustrated monolog. Here, he first draws a marine landscape, then adds details to transform it successively into a winter sunset, a bicycle, and finally a “scorcher” (cyclist). The novelty arose both from the unexpected alterations produced by only a few lines and from the speed of the drawing, indicated by the sketcher’s dynamic poses. (If Lutz’s figure is a portrait of a specific artist, he has not been identified.)

Inherent in the lightning sketch act is an archetypal formula for a multitude of films, out of which the first animated cartoons evolved. There were three irreducible components: an artist, ostensibly the protagonist of the film and invariably played by the filmmaker himself; a drawing surface (sketch pad, blackboard, or canvas), always initially

Before Mickey



**Figure 13.**

Edwin G. Lutz, “The lightning sketcher,” *Life*, April 15, 1897; © 1897.

From *Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen*

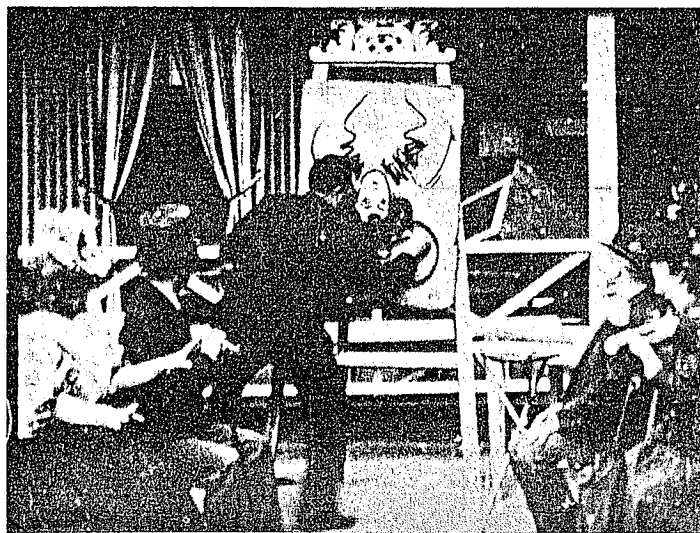
blank; and the drawings, shown being executed by the artist with the appropriate implements, such as pens, brushes, and chalks. There was also a basic narrative structure. The artist makes his drawings and they become endowed with the magic ability to move, spontaneously change their shape, or become "real" (three-dimensional). They may attempt to assert their independence from the artist by teasing him or by refusing to be eradicated.

The transposition of lightning sketches from stage to screen came first in England, where one of the earliest films made was an 1895 recording of a caricaturist named Tom Merry standing by his easel sketching a lightning portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm. This 40-foot film by Birt Acres was the first in a series by Merry, who, as proved by one of his extant performances, could draw not only at lightning speed but upside-down as well (figure 14). He was so popular that a juvenile rival, Little Stanley the Lightning Cartoonist, challenged him in 1898.<sup>21</sup>

During the first year of cinematography Georges Méliès became the lightning cartoonist of the French cinema. Billing himself as the "dessinateur express," Méliès sketched caricatures of Adolphe Thiers, Chamberlain, Queen Victoria, and von Bismark in front of his camera.<sup>22</sup> In these 1896 films the drawing speed was accelerated by intentionally slow cranking of the camera. Soon Méliès introduced the element of magic to the subject in *Le Livre magique*, a 1900 film that showed the artist transforming his full-size drawings into living people through stop-action substitution. This film was also released in England, where Walter Booth made an imitation called *Artistic Creation*.

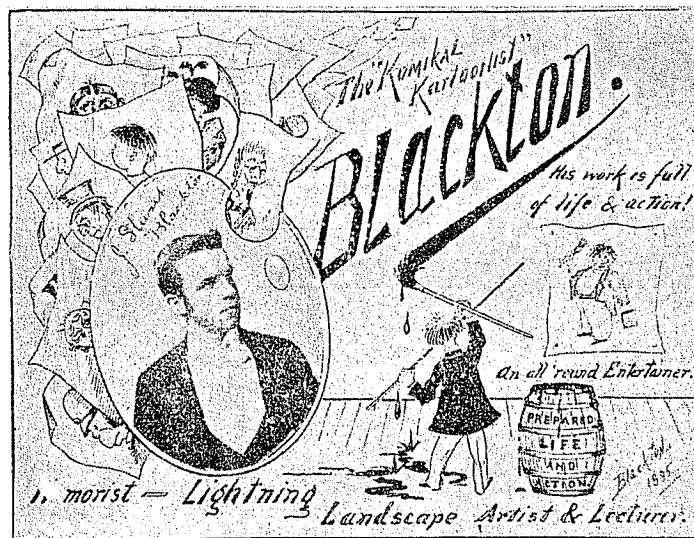
Either Méliès's or Booth's film might have been viewed by James Stuart Blackton, who brought lightning sketches to the American screen (figure 15). While still an adolescent, Blackton had toured the suburbs of New York as

**Before Mickey**



**Figure 14.**

(Attributed to a British Lumière cameraman), *Peinture à l'envers* (Lumière), with Tom Merry (circa 1898). Courtesy of National Film Archive.



**Figure 15.**

Advertisement for Blackton's lightning-sketch act, 1895. Courtesy of Anthony Slide.

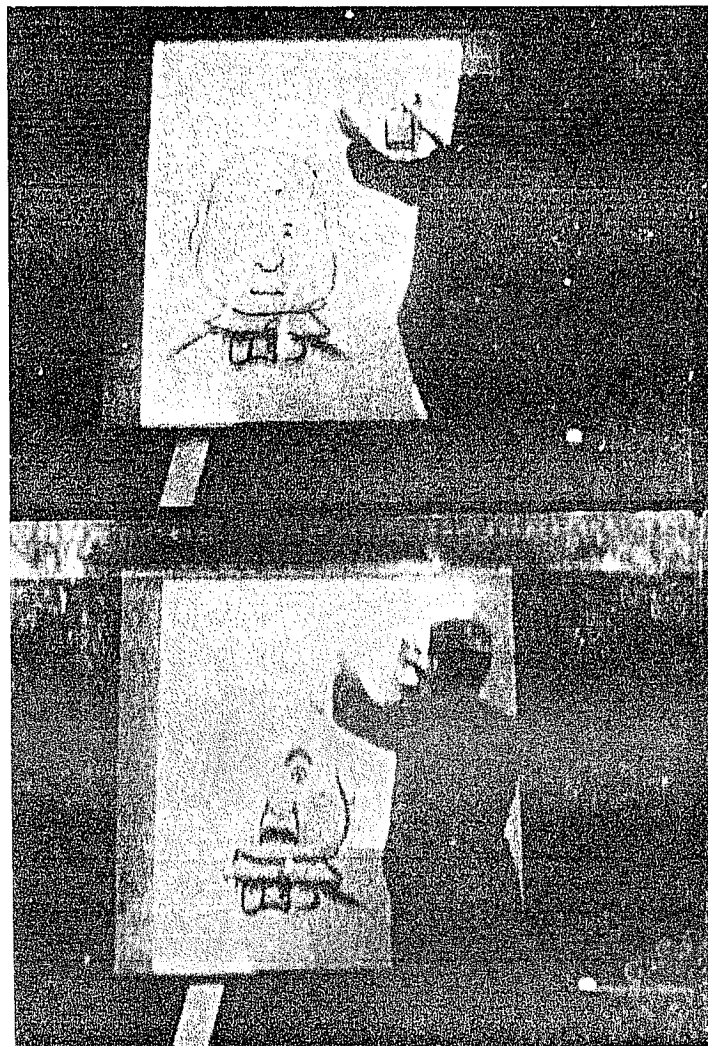
“Mademoiselle Stuart” and performed what were called chalk talks or lightning landscape paintings. His partner Albert Smith described the routine:

Blackton, a man of chesty physique, was neither decorative nor poised. He was encased in white tights and wore a morbid black wig fringed with a row of delicate rosebuds. More unfortunate still, little clusters of flesh-colored sequins formed at the points where Blackton’s knotty arm and leg muscles bulged most, giving the effect of something conceived by a diabolical impressionist with a weakness for misplaced bosoms. The dowagers of White Plains viewed Blackton with cold contemptuous silence, found him particularly lacking in virility and charm, despite his emotional gyrations at the easel.<sup>23</sup>

Blackton no longer appeared in drag—but his gyrations are still evident—in his frenetic performance in *The Enchanted Drawing* (figure 16), copyrighted by Edison in 1900 but probably filmed earlier in the Black Maria. We see the young artist sketching a caricatural face on his pad. As he adds cigars and a bottle of wine, the face smiles. As Blackton touches these objects, they become real in his hands, prompting the face to frown as they are taken away. Like the earlier European models, this film does not use frame-by-frame cinematography but instead borrows Méliès’s stop-action tricks.

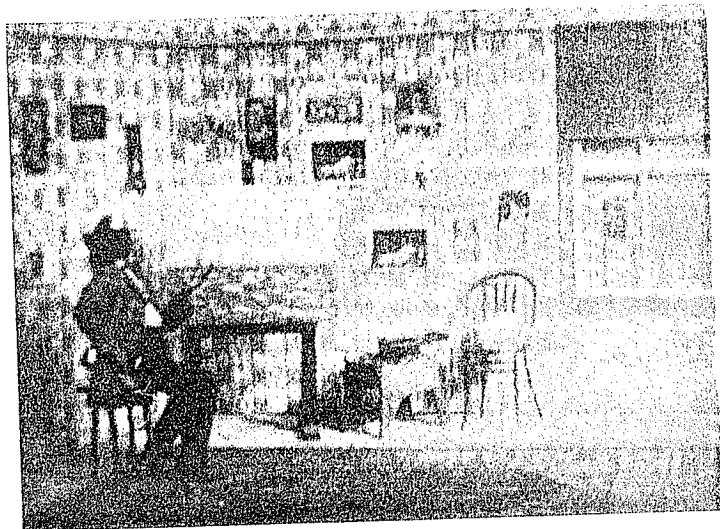
In *Animated Painting*, made by an anonymous Edison director in 1904, we once again find the artist at his easel, this time drawing the sun (figure 17). Suddenly it begins to spin and levitates completely off the canvas, making the room unbearably hot. The desperate painter throws open the windows, grabs the sun (now fuming like a pinwheel), and throws it into a bucket of water. Like *The Enchanted Drawing*, this film is not animated; the effects are done with wires. By the time Blackton made his truly animated *Humorous Phases* he was able to avail himself of this stage

**Before Mickey**

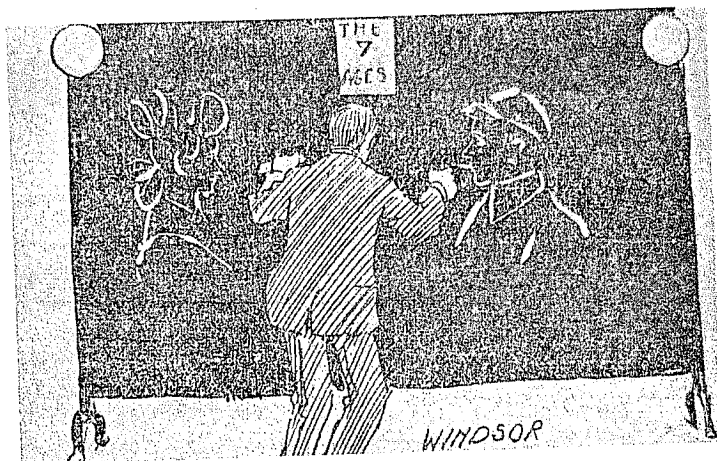


**Figure 16.**  
Blackton, *The Enchanted Drawing* (Edison), © 1900.

**From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen**



**Figure 17.**  
Anonymous, *Animated Painting* (Edison), © 1904.



**Figure 18.**  
Brink, "Windsor McCay," *Toledo Blade*, 1906.

Before Mickey

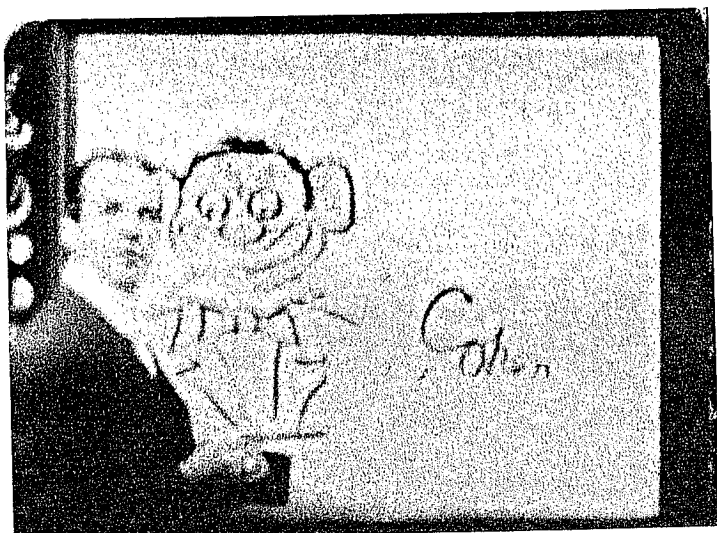
tradition, which had already been incorporated into the trickfilm. Iconography preceded the requisite technology.

These films did not displace the sketchers from the stage, but rather coexisted with them. Blackton's *Humorous Phases* and *Lightning Sketches*, issued in 1907, might be viewed as an attempt to capitalize on an evident renewal of interest in the stage act. In 1905 the comic-strip artist Outcault had taken to the traveling circuit with an act in which he sketched Buster and Tige on a large easel. It was this routine that Edison had recorded in 1904. His success inspired Winsor McCay, who put together an act called "The Seven Ages of Man," first presented in June 1906.<sup>24</sup> McCay, who collected a whopping \$1,000 a week for his two daily 20-minute performances, used innovations like colored chalks and a specially composed musical accompaniment in place of the usual "patter." A newspaper sketch of the artist at work (figure 18) shows that he may have borrowed the conversing male and female faces from *Humorous Phases* (or vice versa).

In *Lightning Sketches*, we first see an exuberant Blackton introduce his partner Smith to the audience and seat him in a chair. He sketches Smith's profile on the large gilt-framed sketch pad and asks the spectator to admire his work. The camera moves slightly closer and the artist makes caricatures of a Jew and a black from the words "Cohen" and "Coon" (figure 19)—an embarrassment to modern audiences, but a reminder of the many "Coon, Cohen, and Kelly" jokes familiar to turn-of-the-century vaudeville audiences. Then a sequence of animated drawings follows, including such scenes as a bottle of Médoc pouring its contents into a glass in an echo of the table-top animation in *The Haunted Hotel*. The performance over, Blackton bows to the audience and takes his leave.

The important thing to note about these lightning-sketch films is that the spectator was never allowed to forget that

From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen



**Figure 19.**  
Blackton, *Lightning Sketches* (Vitagraph), © 1907.

**Before Mickey**

he was observing a theatrical performance. The filmmaker (often represented by his hand) was the center of attention. Yet there were no straight recordings of a performance; each was altered by camera tricks to create a magical illusion. Significantly, the costume chosen by Merry, Méliès, and Blackton was formal evening wear—also the costume of the stage conjurer. The theatrical setting and the costumes are codes with one purpose: to promote the illusion that the animator is a magician. His initial appearance beside his blank blackboard or sketch pad is the equivalent of the magician's opening his act by proving that his hat and sleeves are empty. We understand that a mundane situation is about to be transformed. When the artist's drawings spring to life, the magical nature of the event is all the more delectable because the original materials seemed so ordinary. Audiences knew that camera trickery was involved, but easily accepted the invitation to suspend disbelief and imagine a world in which an artist's drawings could become real.

For an artist to be able to bring something to life bestows upon him the status of a privileged being. Whether they realized it or not, the sketcher-animators were involved in a retelling of the story of Pygmalion, the artist whose creation was so realistic and whose desire was so strong that his statue came to life as the beautiful Galatea. In the cinema, as Bergson said, movement is life, and the ability to synthesize screen movement was quickly grasped as a magic wand by Blackton and the others. These mythic *a priori* assumptions about animation are acknowledged in the root of the word itself: By depicting themselves at work on the screen, engaged in their business of making magic moving drawings, the artists showed themselves imparting the *anima*—the breath of life.

**From Comic Strip and Blackboard to Screen**