

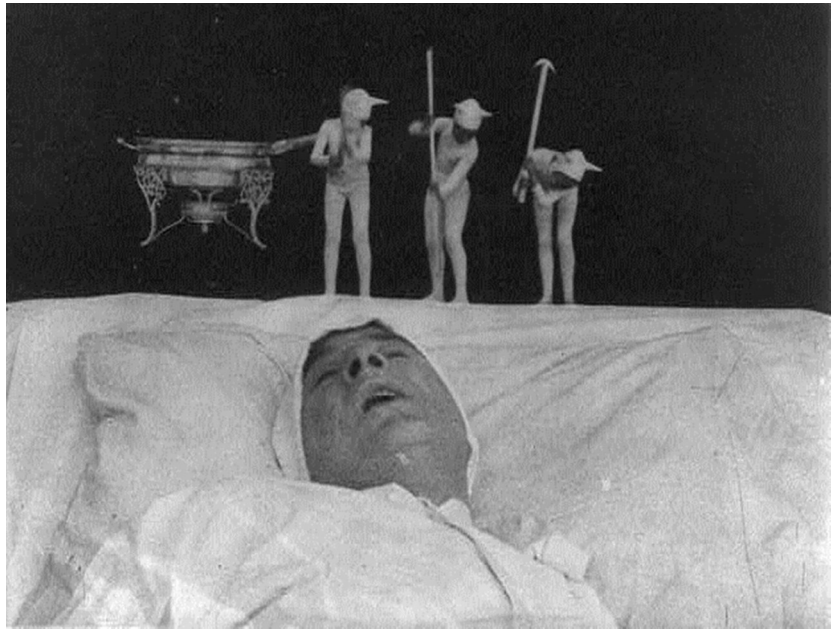
Dream of a Rarebit Fiend

By Lauren Rabinovitz

Edwin S. Porter's "The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend" is one of the most inventive films ever to have been drawn from a comic strip. "Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend" was a popular comic strip series from the New York *Telegram* by illustrator Winsor McCay. Launched in 1904, McCay's most successful cartoon strip always began with the same premise—a portly gentleman overindulges in a dinner of Welsh rarebit, a cheese fondue over toast. The combination of grated cheese, beer, butter, and seasonings leads to grand, rarebit-induced nightmares. In McCay's strip, the first frame depicts the diner getting into bed or falling asleep. Succeeding frames are beautifully drawn renderings of his remarkable dreams, ones often attendant on modern urban life featuring cityscapes, skylines, and skyscrapers. The strip always ends with the dreamer awakening.

The film "The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend" that cameraman Porter made for the Edison Manufacturing Company was only loosely based on McCay's comic strip. Made without McCay's collaboration, it infuses the dream with all the special effects contemporary cinema had to offer. It integrates stop-motion photography, split screen, and double exposure photography in order to "animate" inanimate objects and to create a series of fantastic scenes. Adhering more to the magic tricks of a Georges Méliès film, Porter's work is less a recreation of Winsor's grandly illustrated dreamscape than an appropriation of the conceit of the dreamer and his dreams.

"The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend" took longer to produce and was a more extravagant production than most films of 1906. Increased sales at Edison allowed Porter, the director of "The Great Train Robbery" (1903), and his collaborator Wallace McCutcheon to work more slowly than was usual, using miniatures and scripts in order to focus on painstaking details. The film took an unusually long period of time for the era—two months—to complete all the effects in this movie.¹



The rarebit fiend (Jack Brawn) is tormented by pesky little devils as he sleeps. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

The movie begins with a medium shot of a gentleman drinking alcohol and eating rarebit—thus setting up the story with a conventional emblematic shot. The second shot, however, is a double exposure of the gentleman and a swinging lamppost set on a city street set over a background of panning, blurring New York City streets. As film historian Charles Musser has noted, "It suggested the subjective sensation of the fiend's predicament without being a point-of-view shot."² Once the gentleman's intoxication has been established, the film shifts again, this time to a studio interior that depicts the man's drunken adventures in his bedroom. First, his shoes appear to scuttle across the floor, and then the furniture completely disappears—both actions the result of stop-motion photography.

The film technically shifts again to employ a new method for depicting a subjective state. It introduces a split screen effect that portrays the sleeping man in one half of the screen and his dreams in the other half. In the lower half of the screen, a medium close up depicts the man soundly asleep. In the upper half of the screen, his "thoughts" are illustrated as prancing devils and an oversize tureen of rarebit. The devils, really actors in costume, prod and poke the bottom of the frame with their pitchforks and axes.

Returning to the previous view of the bedroom interior, the bed now jumps up and down and spins in

circles. Resuming the use of split-screen action, the bed and the sleeper then fly across the New York City skyline. The upper half of the screen is the sleeper in his bed against a black background; the lower half of the image is an aerial panorama of New York City. The sleeper hangs on to the bed frame to avoid being jettisoned into the city below him. In the last part of the fiend's imaginative journey, he finally gets tossed from his bed, and his nightshirt gets spiked on the top of a church steeple. The interior of the bedroom reappears, and the fiend crashes through the roof and wakes up. The overall effect of the trick cinematography and the breaks in point of view is dreamlike in substance and a broad adaptation of the dreams of McCay's comic strips. Often labeled the first American animated cartoon, "The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend" still stands out for its imaginative effects.

¹ Charles Musser, The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 458.

² Charles Musser, Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 342.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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