Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric, Vol. 7, No.2/3, 2017, pp. 198-202.

Remixing Slumberland: An Afterward

David Beard*

The author examines the anthology Little Nemo: Dream another Dream *(Locust Moon Press) in light of the rhetorical remix theory of Scott Church. Winsor McCay's early twentieth century comic strip* Little Nemo in Slumberland *(in part) defined the visual language of comics as well as the visual language of dreams. In remixing* Little Nemo in Slumberland*, the creators in* Dream another Dream *produce a new language of dreams, one in which McCay's work is visible, but which imagines a dreamscape constrained by the panels of comics and less inflected with the racism and orientalism of McCay's 1905 vision.*

Keywords: *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, Remix, Rhetoric, Winsor McCay

The largest book I own, the most expensive book I have ever purchased, I carried around awkwardly for a week as I wrote this afterward to the special issue, on Remix Rhetoric, for *The Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*. When opened, the book is something like a yard wide and two feet tall, and inside its pages are a powerful example of remix rhetoric. In *Little Nemo: Dream Another Dream*, more than 100 artists revisit the early twentieth century comic strips of Winsor McCay (in *Little Nemo in Slumberland*), remixing his narrative structures and visual tropes. In the process, they both create a fresh and new image of what it means to dream for the 21st century, at the same time that they preserve a form of art that has been eroded by the death of print.

Little Nemo in Slumberland was published in the *New York Herald* from 1905, until 1911; the weekly comic strip took up the full first page of the comics section of the paper—a luxury that no current newspaper could afford, as comics are squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces.

McCay was not just making comics, though—in 1905, the visual language of comics had yet to be solidified. So his work was experimental—and in these experiments, he defined the visual language of comics for future generations.

Passages like figure one on the next page, taken from the Locust Moon Press images of McCay's work, show the ways that McCay used repetition to build effects on the reader. The reader feels crowded out by the elephant, as the elephant comes to fill more and more of the frame. Our only escape is Nemo's weekly escape, the final panel in which he awakens from the dream.

McCay was also developing the visual language of dreams, at the same time that he was developing the visual language of comics. For example, he played with iconography of flying and falling, as in figure two (also from the Locust Moon Press site).

And some of those images of the dreamscape have become central images in the popular imaginary. A scene in which Nemo's bed sprouts legs and wanders the city is among the most famous

* David Beard (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is Associate Professor of Rhetoric in the Department of English, Linguistics and Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. He is co-editor of this special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric.* Special thanks to Andrea Sande, Debbie Rose, Mitra Emad, Aaron Boyson, Ryan Goei, Trudy Vrieze and students in WRIT 2506 for thoughts on Little Nemo, and to Lisa Horton and Julia Rose Brown for editorial feedback. He can be reached for comment on this essay at dbeard@d.umn.edu.

ISSN 2161-539X (online)

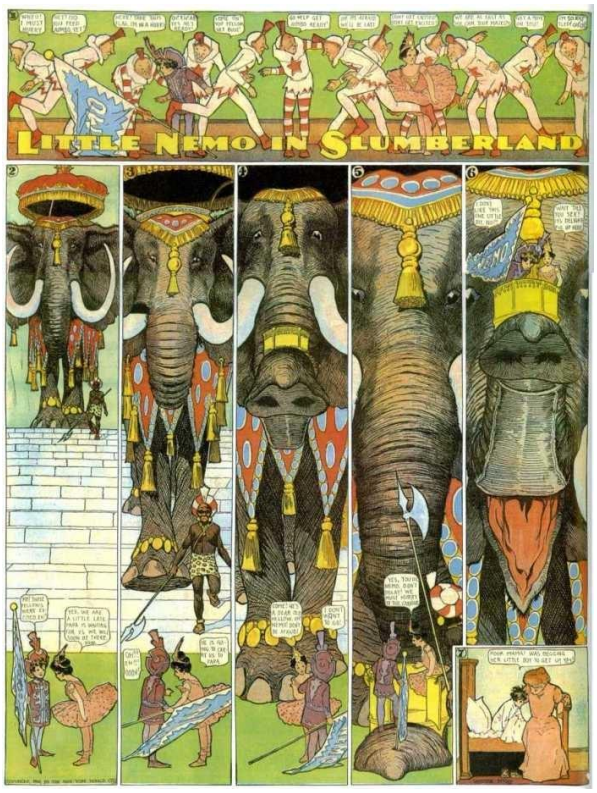


Figure One, by Winsor McCay, used by permission of Locust Moon Press, from their website: https://locustmoon.com/littlenemo/

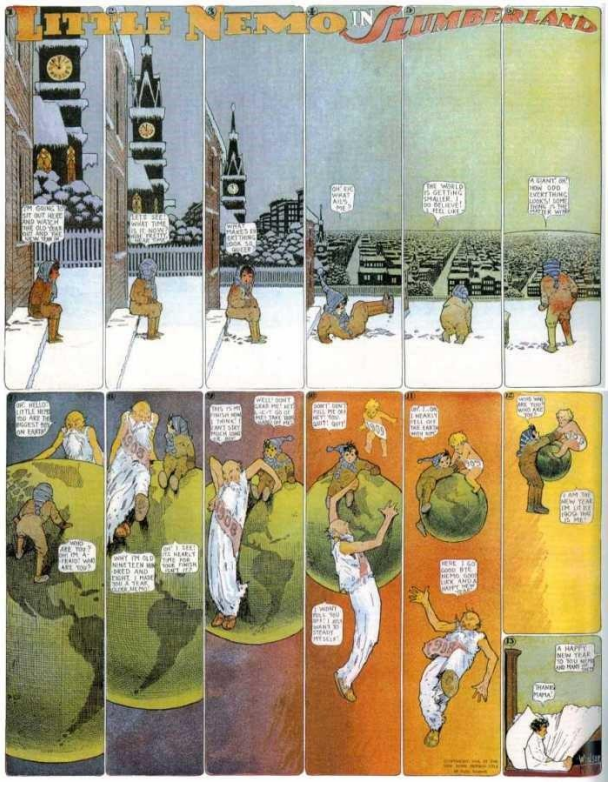
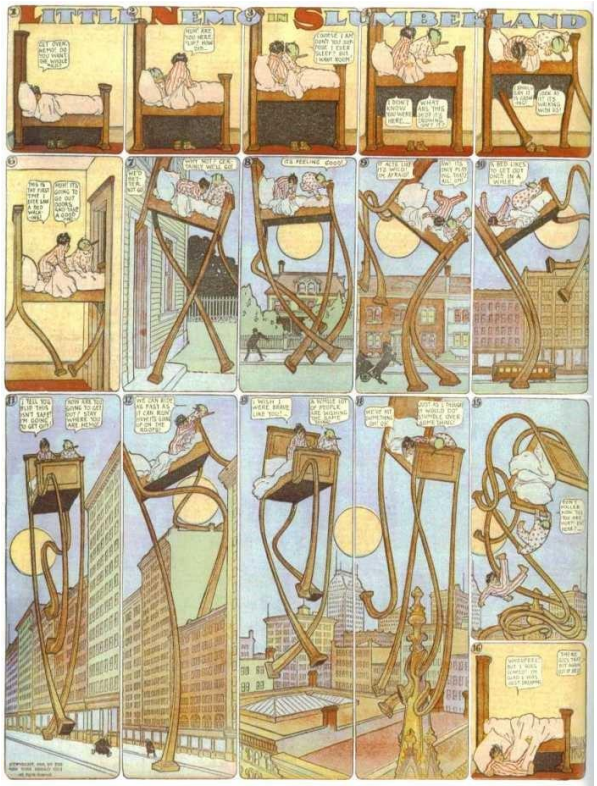


Figure Two, by Winsor McCay, used by permission of Locust Moon Press, from their website: https://locustmoon.com/littlenemo/



← Figure Three, by Winsor McCay, used by permission of Locust Moon Press, from their website: https://locustmoon.com/littlenemo/

in the history of the Little Nemo strip, in the history of comics generally, and perhaps in our history of the visualization of dreams (figure three, again, from the Locust Moon Press website).

It's my central claim that Little Nemo in Slumberland invented the visual language of comics and some of our common cultural visual language of dreams. And so Locust Moon Press's 2014 volume, *Little Nemo: Dream Another Dream*, remixes the language of dreams as it remixes the visual language of comics.

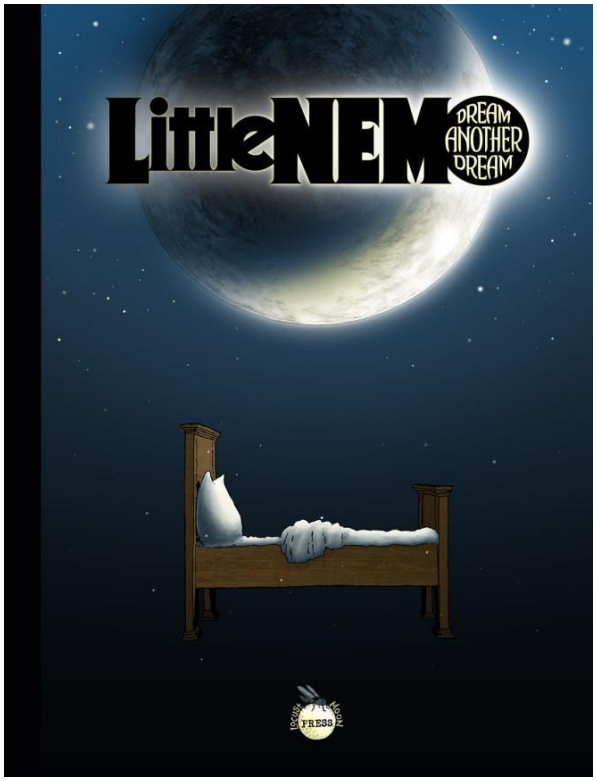


Figure Four, by Winsor McCay, used by permission of Locust Moon Press, from their website: https://locustmoon.com/littlenemo/

About *Little Nemo: Dream another Dream*

In *Little Nemo: Dream Another Dream (*figure four), a comic shop in Philadelphia took the leap (supported by Kickstarter) to produce a massive book of 114 comics in homage to McCay's classic strip.

The book received multiple awards (two 2015 Eisner Awards, for Best Anthology and Best Publication Design, and the 2015 Harvey Award for Excellence in Presentation)—it is a handsome volume, at 16" wide by 21" tall, on quality white paper. It's possible none of the cartoonists in this volume will ever see their work bound in a format like this again. Part of the energy for participation among the comics professionals was, I think, a chance to work in a format that died with full-page newspaper comics decades ago.

In *Little Nemo: Dream Another Dream*, remixing is both a fresh and innovative way to transform the language of dreams and a powerful way to preserve a comics art form in danger of being forgotten.

Remix in Dream another Dream

Scott Church teaches me a great deal about remix in his essay, which connects the classical rhetorical practice of "imitatio" to remix. Like a contemporary remix, he claims, imitatio "was a productive and inventive process that spurred rhetorical invention primarily through interpretation, variation, creativity, and novelty."[1] The act of remixing McCay is an homage to a giant, one of the most significant creators in the history of American comics. As Church tells us, "when remixers imitate artists by sampling their songs, they often do so to pay homage to that artist. They acknowledge that the artist being sampled has created a memorable original piece worthy of being used as a sample."[2] The pieces in *Dream another Dream* are in imitation of McCay, and produce vibrant remixes of McCay's vision of what it means to dream.

Each of these creators, though, brings novelty to the project, and as Church claims, "Novelty is also crucial to remix."[3] Indeed, "the remixer does imitate the source material insofar as it creates a contrast and thus evinces the novelty of the remix."[4] So when the creators of these new dreams, these new adventures in Slumberland, offer their new visions, they demonstrate novelty—something fresh and new. At the same time, their connection, their debt, their respect for McCay is palpable.

---

[1] Scott Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, xtine burrough (New York: Routledge, 2015), 44.
[2] Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," 45.
[3] Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," 45.
[4] Church, "A Rhetoric of Remix," 45.

Figure Five, by Winsor McCay, used by permission of Locust Moon Press, from their website: https://locustmoon.com/littlenemo/

In Farel Dalrymple's contribution (not pictured), Dalrymple plays with the racist and orientalist legacy of McCay's work, including the blackface that McCay used to indicate African characters. (McCay used deeply orientalist imagery to represent the exotic, and he used deeply racist imagery in giving Nemo a "savage" African companion named Imp). In Dalrymple's remix of McCay, he doesn't erase this racist representation: instead, the "savage" Imp tells Nemo "You just used to be more racist in your dreams." Dalrymple asks us to dream something better as we remix the past.

In these pieces, we see the power of *imitatio*, with the creative voice of the individual visible as well.

Toby Cypress, though, produces a more dramatic or radical remix. He eschews the use of panels, although he retains the final image of Nemo falling out of bed—a trope of every one Peter Bagge, for example, plays with the visual language of McCay's most famous piece, the walking bed with extended legs (in figure five).

James Harvey (figure six) plays with the architectural dimensions of McCay's page design -- the echoes of the language McCay developed for the full-page comic strip here are palpable. But notably, he numbers the panels to direct us to read them in a new order. In the lower right corner (numbered panel 15), Nemo appears unconscious and in the dark -- exactly in the spot in the page where Nemo usually wakes up. Our normal reading conventions are thwarted and we worry for Nemo's safety. But the final panel by numbering, in the lower left, gives us our usual resolution, Nemo waking with his uncle.

Bagge and Harvey play with McCay;'s forms, and they innovate within McCay's forms, while preserving the dream logic that McCay invented.

Figure Six, by Winsor McCay, used by permission of Locust Moon Press, from their website: https://locustmoon.com/littlenemo/

of McCay's strips. Cypress moves toward a more contemporary vision of the dreamscape, more kaleidoscopic and undisciplined than McCay's well-ordered dreamscapes (figure seven).

Figure Seven, by Winsor McCay, used by permission of Locust Moon Press, from their website: https://locustmoon.com/littlenemo/

In many ways, McCay was domesticating the dreamscape, placing it within frames and carefully controlled sequences. Cypress, though, offers us a vision of dreams that cannot be domesticated by frames or by the artist.

Jonathan Wayshak's contribution ends with Nemo's fall from the bed not waking him, but instead resulting in an explosion with nuclear force—the forced resolution of McCay's narrative structure remixed for a post-nuclear world.

This essay is just a brief glimpse at the diversity of visions Locust Moon has assembled, works that invite us to reconsider the dreamscape by inviting Freud into our dreams themselves or by returning us to the childlike wonder of *Slumberland* as McCay imagined it.

My goal, in the end, is to point you to this innovative collection of homage cartoons to an early twentieth century master. They are more than homage, though—they are better understood as remix, the rhetorical forms of remix that Church has pointed us toward.

My goal is also to invite you to use the essays assembled in this special issue to dream something better, the way these artists have dreamed *Slumberland* anew for the 21st century. They have dreamed anew the forms of dreams, and they have dreamed anew the inherited racism and orientalism, critiquing the past while remaking it into something better. As you complete this special issue, I invite you to use the rhetorical power of remix to both preserve the past and to dream something better.