The Adventures of a Cartoon Strip Character with a Quiff and a Dog: Tintin’s Journeys as an Original Form of Travel Writing

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Georges Rémi (better known as Hergé, a pseudonym made up of his two initials: R G) died in 1983, having made a name as the father of the modern cartoon strip in Western Europe, notably thanks to 23 books narrating the adventures of a betufted boy reporter called Tintin. Tintinology (literally and unambiguously: the study of Tintin) started to develop in the mid-1980s as a small-scale, possibly amusing, area of scholarship – yet one where an increasing number of academics have analysed Tintin and his stories in the light of the most serious intellectual theories, from psychoanalysis (David 1994; Peeters 1984; Tisseron 1985, 1990, 1993) to semiology (Floch 2002) via cultural studies (Masson 1989; Baetens 1990; Bonfand and Marion 1996; Tomasi and Deligne 1998). The critical literature on Tintin is expanding alongside the literature on Hergé himself (Tisseron 1987; Smolderen and Sterckx 1988; Ajame 1991; Assouline 1996; Serres 2000; Peeters 2002; Sadoul 2003). This article contributes to this body of Tintin meta-literature by focusing on the way Tintin travelled around the world, from China (The Blue Lotus) to Peru (Prisoners of the Sun) and from Egypt (Cigars of the Pharaoh) to the Arctic Ocean (The Shooting Star).

With more than 200 million copies of the books sold in 50 languages, millions of boys and girls (as well as adults) all around the world have read the adventures of the cartoon strip character with a quiff and a white fox terrier called Snowy (in French: Milou). As US film producer Steven Spielberg has just struck a deal with Moulinsart (the firm holding the
exclusive rights to Tintin) to produce a series of action features of Tintin’s adventures around the world, it is timely to propose an academic reading of Tintin books as a live geography presenting and representing ‘real’ destinations (such as Scotland in *The Black Island*), as well as imaginary yet realistic ones (such as Balkan Syldavia in *King Ottokar’s Sceptre*), not to forget the moon (*Explorers on the Moon*). Starting with a brief presentation of Tintin books, this article adopts a thematic approach, successively presenting Tintin’s journeys, destinations and sense of space (both in terms of cultural geography and physical geography). The aim is to explore and analyse how Tintin’s journeys can be read and interpreted within an academic context and Tintin books are thereby discussed as an original yet valid form of travel writing. Methodologically, this article builds on the critical literature on Tintin and Hergé as well as on the numerous websites dedicated to them; as primary sources, it directly uses Tintin books themselves, but excludes the last, *Tintin and the Alph-Art*, which Hergé did not manage to complete before his death. Exclusively set in an airport, *Tintin and the Alph-Art* would be particularly relevant for an analysis in terms of travel and tourism, but as only a very rough draft exists, with three pages drawn in pencil and sheets of notes and sketches, it was decided not to include this incomplete book in the present analysis.

**Tintin: a global traveller**

A reporter by trade, but also an adventurer and a detective, Tintin is very well travelled. From 1929 (the first book, *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets*) to 1976 (*Tintin and the Picaros*) he has journeyed to all continents; this is best summarised in Table 1, which identifies the books (by their English titles), their original years of publication as well as Tintin’s destinations. Himself a pacifist and politically neutral (although he never hesitates to protect the weak and the oppressed, as exemplified by Zorrino in *Prisoners of the Sun*), Tintin has been to countries led by all types of ideological and political systems, from communism (*Tintin in the Land of Soviets*) to military dictatorships (*Tintin and the Picaros*) via Western-style capitalism (*Tintin in America*) and monarchy (*King Ottokar’s Sceptre*). Only two books (*The Secret of the Unicorn* and *The Castafiore
Emerald) have a domestic setting: there must be a journey if Tintin is to have an adventure; for Tintin, home is dull, bland, uninteresting. Considering that The Secret of the Unicorn is actually the prelude to Red Rackham’s Treasure, one could argue that it is nonetheless fully rooted in travel, with numerous thoughts of abroad, including the flashback sequence of Haddock’s ancestor fighting pirates in the West Indies, so The Castafiore Emerald really is the only book not involving travel. There is an ironic reference to this in an early scene where Tintin, Haddock and Snowy walk in the countryside, commenting on the fact that they are not going abroad this time. With time, Tintin’s motivations to travel gradually evolve: professional in the first books (when he is sent abroad as a journalist by his employer: Tintin in the Land of Soviets, Tintin in America), they later become more personal (e.g. to retrieve his kidnapped friend Calculus in The Seven Crystal Balls or to rescue his friend Chang
who is the sole survivor of a plane crash in *Tintin in Tibet*). The early journeys may have elements of business tourism (with their professional dimension and Tintin duly reporting on his trip and adventures) but from *The Broken Ear* onwards they follow Tintin’s personal agenda, so one could almost use the concept of ‘special interest tourism’. Even if there is always a valid reason to set off – a mission, an objective – rapidly the journey itself becomes a key topic of the adventure. By nature, Tintin is a traveller and his stories can be defined by the journeys he accomplishes. This is perfectly summarised in titles such as *Tintin in Tibet* and *Tintin in the Congo* – or even *Flight 714*, even if that flight never reaches Sydney, its intended destination (interestingly the French title reads *Vol 714 pour Sydney*, mentioning the destination whose name was surprisingly dropped from the English version). This does not mean though, that travelling is easy or idealised: in Tintin’s world, travelling is dangerous. His journeys are fraught with problems and accidents often occur, be they natural or not (for instance, a volcanic eruption and a plane highjacking in the above-mentioned *Flight 714* or a car crash and a prairie fire in *Tintin in America*). In many respects, Tintin’s journeys almost illustrate the concepts of adventure tourism and outdoor recreation, decades before the invention of these concepts.

However, although he may be a global traveller, Tintin rarely visits the local tourist sights (with a few late exceptions such as New Delhi on the way to Tibet and the pre-Columbian pyramids of *Tintin and the Picaros*). Academic textbooks of tourism management (such as Cooper 1998) usually distinguish between four elements of the so-called tourist system: transportation, destination, entertainment and accommodation. Tintin’s tourist systems are unbalanced: the latter two elements are minimised to the benefit of the former, transportation and destination. Entertainment and accommodation only play a minimal and occasional role in Tintin books, such as the cabaret shows at the beginning of *The Seven Crystal Balls*, Tintin’s gate-crashing of the King’s party in *King Ottokar’s Sceptre* or the hotel room bugged with microphones in *Tintin and the Picaros* – but transportation and destinations are thoroughly thought-out and precisely depicted. Numerous articles (such as de Granrut 2001) have studied and complimented Hergé’s representations of vehicles – both for their diversity and for their accuracy. In terms of diversity, Tintin must indeed have had
recourse to all types of existing vehicles, according to the situation and circumstances: bicycle and rickshaw in the China of *The Blue Lotus*, motorbike and horse in America, train and canoe to reach ‘Black Island’. In this respect, Masson (1989) stressed an interesting point: Tintin himself does not seem to own any vehicle, and more often than not, he simply ‘borrows’ a bike, car or aircraft that just happens to be nearby. This is not strictly accurate as Tintin has a moped at Marlinspike at the beginning of *Tintin and the Picaros* and a bicycle in *The Castafiore Emerald*, not to mention the fact that it would be impractical for him to take his own bike around the world, but the point is that Tintin is always ready to try any means of transport available. In terms of accuracy, those vehicles’ drawings are most realistic: all scholars agree that Hergé did a lot of research and was very well informed (with famously large archives of press cuttings, catalogues, postcards and the like), which is why it is possible and relatively easy to identify his models and sources, for example in terms of aircraft and ships. Many books on Tintin, like Soumois (1987) and Peeters (1983), have closely examined all those sources of inspiration, so we know that the counterfeiters’ red car in *The Black Island* must be a Mark X Jaguar, the Thomsons’ jeep lost in the desert of *Land of Black Gold* a 1945 Willys model, Tintin’s helicopter in *The Calculus Affair* a Bell 47M, Tintin’s seaplane in *The Shooting Star* an Arado AR-196 … In that respect, it is interesting how Tintin books provide a sound, illustrated documentary showing the evolution of transportation means and vehicles throughout the twentieth century, with a certain pedagogical value, also updating them as books are reedited and reprinted. But if Hergé’s depictions of vehicles are very realistic and thereby very credible, his representations of destinations are somehow more problematic.

**Tintin’s destinations: real geography vs imaginary geography**

The most striking of all places Tintin journeys to is undoubtedly the moon – but even more striking is the fact that it was in 1954 (year of publication of *Explorers on the Moon*) that Tintin went to the moon, i.e. three years before the Russians launched their satellite Sputnik, seven years before Yuri Gagarin became the first man into space and fifteen years before the
moon landing of the American NASA mission Apollo 11. The latter point emblematises Hergé’s creativity as a visionary artist, explaining a famous cartoon by Bob de Moor (one of Hergé’s closest assistants) representing Tintin welcoming Neil Armstrong on the moon in 1969, saying ‘Bienvenue sur la lune, monsieur Armstrong’ whilst Captain Haddock holds a sign reading ‘Welcome’ and Calculus brandishes a bunch of red flowers. Now that space tourism is a topic of discussion and predictions, after American Dennis Tito and South African Mark Shuttleworth journeyed into space (in 2001 and 2002 respectively), Tintin rightfully deserves the label of pioneer of space tourism – and in retrospect one can only smile at Haddock’s comment when, after nearly being hit by a meteorite, he exclaims that ‘those madmen who want us to take holidays to the moon may have to think again’.

If Tintin went to other, less extraordinary, ‘real’ destinations (be they the main settings of his adventures, such as the Congo or China or transitory settings such as the surroundings of Lake Geneva in *The Calculus Affair*), he also travelled to fictional places that Hergé, brilliant demiurge, created just for him. Besides the Indian state of Rawajputalah (whose Maharajah befriends Tintin and accommodates him at the end of *Cigars of the Pharaoh* and at the very beginning of *The Blue Lotus*, yet without playing any important role), Hergé invented countries in three areas of the world most prone to political conflicts (in which Tintin unsurprisingly becomes involved): Latin America, the Balkans and the Middle East.

In Latin America, Hergé invented San Theodoros and its belligerent neighbour Nuevo Rico. San Theodoros is the first fictional country created by Hergé, appearing in *The Broken Ear* and much later in *Tintin and the Picaros*. San Theodoros is the victim of the rivalry between two military dictators, Alcazar and Tapioca – and the capital city is successively named Alcazaropolis and Tapiocapolis, according to the ruler of the day. San Theodoros is in conflict with its neighbour Nuevo Rico over ownership of the bordering region called Gran Chaco whose soil is very rich in ores and minerals – this is transparently inspired by the 1932 conflict between Bolivia and Paraguay over the Gran Chaco territory.

In the Balkans, Hergé invented Syldavia and its belligerent neighbour Borduria. These two countries first appear in *King Ottokar’s Sceptre* (the eponymous sceptre being Syldavia’s main emblem of royal power).
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Syldavian King Muskar XII is threatened by neighbouring Borduria (led by a dictator in many ways comparable to Stalin), but Tintin saves him by thwarting a plot resembling the 1938 German Anschluss over Austria (King Ottokar’s Sceptre was published in 1939). Syldavia and Borduria also appear in Destination Moon and The Calculus Affair with a steady Manichaeanism: the small Syldavia (‘The Kingdom of the Black Pelican’, a sort of Balkan Belgium) is the good, friendly, Westernised, dynamic country, whereas Borduria is the military, aggressive, totalitarian enemy threatening all humanity in its mad desire to conquer the world (with a transparent parallel to the Cold War seen from the West).

In the Middle East, Hergé invented the Khemed. An Arabic oil state, it appears twice, first in Land of Black Gold and secondly in The Red Sea Sharks. Its capital city is Wadesdah, located somewhere between Beirut and Mecca. The Khemed (whose archaeological sites in the mountainous Jebel Kadeh are most reminiscent of Petra) is the setting of yet another political conflict in which Tintin becomes involved: on one side, the current ruler (Tintin’s friend Emir Mohammed Ben Kalish Ezab) and on the other side, the enemy Sheik Bab El Ehr (temporarily in charge through a coup). This fictional Middle East country also has realistic echoes of the Palestinian conflict as in the original version the terrorists were not Arabs but members of the Jewish Irgun.

The names, descriptions and folklores of those countries are extremely convincing, which is laudable, but one could argue that it may be confusing for some young readers. How can they guess that Jakarta exists (Flight 714) but that Klow (King Ottokar’s Sceptre) does not? That Nyon is real (The Calculus Affair) but that Alcazaropolis is not (The Broken Ear), even if the latter name sounds more genuine than the former one? In the plane on the way to Syldavia, Tintin reads a detailed guidebook about the history of the country, its culture and tradition, further anchoring Syldavia in a deceiving realism. Tintin’s world partly overlaps with ‘the real world’ – but only partly. For generations of readers, Tintin books have been an introduction to world geography – but one could be critical of the fact that Hergé has somehow misled them; should Tintin books come with a brief note of warning when they depict fictional places? This tension between realism/reality and fiction/imagination is a cornerstone of any academic appreciation of Tintin. Farr entitled the introduction of his (2001)
Complete Companion book, ‘Tintin, an imaginary hero in a real world’ – one could further play with these words and suggest that Tintin is also a real hero in an imaginary world. That the French edition of Farr’s book was given the title ‘Tintin, le Rêve et la Réalité’ (literally: dream and reality) is also significant of this problem, which is further developed in this article.

Tintin’s cultural geography: the (impossible?) juxtaposition of cosmopolitanism and racism

When he travels (i.e. most of time) Tintin interacts with the locals. He befriends many (like the Chinese boy Chang Chong Chen) but he also makes enemies (like the Greek Rastapopoulos); he readily interacts with other foreigners like himself (for instance the Italian diva Bianca Castafiore and the Portuguese trader Oliveira da Figueira) so his universe can rightfully be described as cosmopolitan. He gets on well with people from all backgrounds (including the gypsies in The Castafiore Emerald – as gypsies are nomadic people, this adds an interesting ‘travelling’ dimension to the otherwise claustrophobic story that is set only at Marlinspike Hall). Tintin thereby appears as an ambassador of international peace, a proponent of tolerance and cross-cultural friendship (Serres 2001). From the same perspective, it is worth stressing that Tintin’s world is a small one, as his foreign friends (and foes) appear and reappear from one story to the next (as epitomised by Chang from The Blue Lotus and Tintin in Tibet). From the point of view of the return of the protagonists, The Red Sea Sharks is particularly remarkable, as Tintin successively encounters General Alcazar, Dawson, Bab El Her, Ben Kalish Ezab and his son Abdullah, Oliveira da Figueira, Bianca Castafiore, Dr Müller, Rastapopoulos (alias the Marquis di Gorgonzola), Allan and Wagg, all of whom were introduced in previous books.

Contrasting with that cosmopolitanism which possibly prefigures world citizenship and some socio-cultural aspects of globalisation, an important (yet regrettable) feature of Tintin’s cultural geography is Hergé’s use of some ethnic stereotypes. A good example is the representation of Chinese people in the first books, as plaited executioners in Tintin in the Land of the Soviets and as mad dog-eaters in Tintin in America – although
The Blue Lotus gives Hergé the opportunity to somehow redeem himself, to correct those clichés and to laugh at those people hawking them. The best illustration of Hergé’s stereotypical representations is probably his image of black people, especially in Tintin in the Congo which has often been criticised if not pilloried in that respect. It is true that Hergé’s depiction of Congo (then a major Belgian colony, more than 80 times bigger than its colonising power) and its inhabitants is most racist and ethnocentric. The first black and white version was published in 1931; when the book was redrawn in colour in 1946, Hergé modified some details that were seen as too colonialist, but the book nevertheless stayed in disgrace for decades in several countries including Britain. In the representations of the childish, naive, primitive and superstitious Africans who gave Tintin the title of sorcerer and worshipped his statue after his departure, it is easy to read Hergé’s own imperialist background. (Interestingly, though, nowadays Hergé is not at all vilified in Congo, quite the opposite, as analysed by Mandel (2001): a cartoon strip is there called ‘un tintin’ and those old caricatures have actually enabled a self-critical spirit of self-irony to develop amongst young artists). If its cosmopolitanism is its strength, it is true that its racist overtones remain an important weakness of Tintin’s cultural geography, but at least one can appreciate the fact that his cartoon strips tackled genuine contemporary issues, such as the impacts of colonialism in Tintin in the Congo, the evils of Bolshevism in Tintin the Land of the Soviets and the despoilment of native American land in Tintin in America. One could maybe suggest that Hergé indeed tried to make up for his previous racism when in The Red Sea Sharks Tintin rescued African slaves with the help of the US navy, thereby becoming an emancipator in 1958, five years before Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech.

Tintin’s physical geography: Hergé’s pedagogical skills

Tintin’s journeys take the form of a ceaseless field trip around the world, especially in natural contexts, as Tintin seems to prefer rural locations (even wild ones) to urban ones (though towns and cities are not fully absent, with for instance Chicago, Jakarta and Port Said, yet they are
usually transit places and stopovers). Just as he has travelled through most political systems, Tintin has journeyed through most climates and environments, from the South American rainforest (The Broken Ear, Tintin and the Picaros) to the dangerous sand deserts where one dies of thirst (Cigars of the Pharaoh, The Crab with Golden Claws, Land of Black Gold) and from the bottom of the ocean (Red Rackham’s Treasure) to the snowiest tops of the highest mountains (Tintin in Tibet). Hergé’s realism again has to be praised, but for a few minor technical mistakes such as the fact that under the rainforest’s canopy the real sun does not really shine as much as in Tintin books. Hergé was certainly keen to teach geography to his young readers, particularly in the first versions of the earliest books (which were published in weekly serialised forms in the Thursday supplement for children of the Belgian newspaper Le Vingtième Siècle; this supplement was anecdotally entitled ‘Le Petit Vingtième’, the very name of the newspaper Tintin himself was supposedly working for: Tintin and Hergé had the same boss!). Later versions were occasionally simplified though, and made less pedagogical; an excellent example is provided by Farr (2001: 45) about Tintin’s tracing of the route and ports-of-call on his sea voyage to the Congo. In the 1930 black and white version, Tintin instructively points out from the ship: ‘Look, Snowy, that’s Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands. As I expect you know, the Canaries lie north-west of the Sahara. Over there, the port, that’s Santa Cruz’. The 1946 coloured, revised version only has: ‘Snowy, here’s Africa’. Around Tintin, the natural environment is rarely calm, and he experiences a variety of climatic and geographical accidents, like the flooding of the Yangtze River in China, a snow storm in Tibet and a volcanic eruption in an Indonesian archipelago. Moreover, landscape changes and weather fluctuations often play an important role in the progression of the plot, i.e. in the storyline itself: in The Black Island a cave submerged at high tide enables Tintin to find the gang of counterfeiters he is after; likewise, in Land of Black Gold the coldness of the desert nights prevents him from sleeping, which is how he discovers Dr Müller and his accomplices sabotaging a pipeline. This led Ancellin (2001) to formulate a most original theory of the deus ex geographica through which Hergé has recourse to physical geography to add more suspense and impetus to Tintin’s stories.
These natural environments are inhabited by a variety of animal species (including hostile ones: again, Tintin’s world is a dangerous one), which also makes Tintin a precursor of nature-based tourism. The world’s fauna comes alive around him, fish and mammals alike (the piranhas of *The Broken Ear*, the gorilla of *The Black Island*), birds and insects (the magpie and the parrot of *The Castafiore Emerald*, the spider of *The Shooting Star*) not forgetting the Yeti, the mythical abominable snowman. The main criticism one can, with hindsight, formulate of Hergé is the lack of any concern for ecology and wildlife in Tintin books: in South America, Tintin gets rid of a jaguar by cruelly making it swallow a sponge; in Africa, he kills scores of antelopes and elephants and even dynamites a rhinoceros (that latter picture was censored in some countries, notably in Scandinavia) – but it true that those books were drawn decades before the emergence of ecological concern on the socio-political agenda. This said, Hergé was again very well informed and ended up teaching zoology to many readers: *Prisoners of the Sun* made many people learn that llamas spit when they are upset, *Tintin and the Picaros* made many people learn about gymnoti. As noted by Ancellin (2000: 78): ‘For entire generations, Tintin’s adventures have constituted an opportunity for a real initiation to geography. At a time when there was no television and no documentary magazines, the little reporter’s peregrinations have provided young people with a window onto the most spectacular landscapes and natural phenomena of a world still poorly known: the earth’. On that basis, the neologism ‘edutainment’ (borrowed from leisure theory and museology) can certainly be used with reference to Tintin books, as readers learn about animals whilst enjoying themselves, a sound mix of education (making Hergé a mass teacher) and entertainment (justifying Hergé’s fame as a proponent of popular literature).

**Reading Tintin’s journeys: applying the concept of magical realism to Tintin books**

Tintin’s journeys can be interpreted as a quest – such is the approach adopted by Masson in his 1989 monograph proposing a highly symbolist reading of Tintin’s adventures, with numerous dichotomies
(horizontality/verticality, sun/moon, east/west ...) which create a sophisticated, albeit abstract, presentation of Tintin’s journeys in terms of initiation, anamnesis and spiritual trajectory. Depending upon their tastes (and possibly their expectations and backgrounds), readers will notice, appreciate and remember different aspects of Tintin’s journeys. Some may particularly like the way Tintin books are so realistic, or at least much closer to life than other cartoon strips like Astérix and Disney’s. From that perspective, Peeters (2002) has explained how, for Hergé, quality in a cartoon strip comes from the direct echoing of reality, both in the graphic representation of the world and in the choice of topics. Here possibly lies the success of Tintin as well as its timelessness, as the readership of Tintin books transcends fashion, age and culture. Throughout the books, there are countless elements and instances of realism, for example in the previously outlined representations of vehicles and landscapes, or with the occasional use of foreign alphabets such as Cyrillic (Tintin in the Land of the Soviets) or Arabic (Land of Black Gold). In a way, the ‘real’ helps to make the ‘fictional’ acceptable, and one could even argue that there is constantly, in the strips, an attempt to make the fictional real by using the real in an over-realistic way; this dialectic of the real and the fictional (symbolised by Tintin himself, who is neither a child nor an adult) is one of most fascinating aspects of Tintinology. Most Tintinologists claim that Hergé’s acme of realism is probably reached in The Black Island, as analysed by Farr, the main British specialist of Tintin, in an article aptly entitled ‘Scotland: larger than life’ (2000) – it must be stressed though that it is only the 1966 revised version which is so highly praised by Farr: the first version, dated 1938, was less accurate and allegedly contained over 100 minute mistakes of detail. This is not that surprising, though as Hergé himself had never been to Scotland and only relied on secondary sources. Pressed by Methuen, his London publisher, who wanted a more realistic version, Hergé sent to Britain his assistant Bob De Moor who retraced Tintin’s steps, so to speak, from rural Sussex to the Scottish Highlands, making sketches and taking precise notes that informed the more accurate 1966 version. The result is most convincing, from the costumes (including Tintin’s tam-ó- shanters and his Argyll socks) to the scenery (especially the castle in ruins of the small village of Lochranza on the Isle of Arran, which transparently inspired the gloomy castle of Ben More in The Black
Island). In that respect, an interesting difference between Tintin and Hergé is the fact that the former travelled a great deal more and much earlier than his creator. Only in the 1960s did Hergé begin to travel to any extent: ‘up to then most travelling had been limited to the imaginary trips undertaken by Tintin, but now he visited in turn Italy, England, Sweden, Greece and Denmark. In 1971 he travelled to the United States for the first time’ (Peeters 1988: 22).

In contrast to that hyper-realism (which for a cartoon strip is quite an achievement), other readers may prefer the elements of magic and mystery permeating some Tintin books: hypnosis (Cigars of the Pharaoh), premonitory dreams (about Chang in Tintin in Tibet), visions and levitation (Tintin in Tibet again), alien substances with extraordinary properties (the rock from The Shooting Star), telepathy (Madame Yamilah’s cabaret number at the beginning of The Seven Crystal Balls), parapsychological communication with extraterrestrial beings (with the mysterious Mik Kanrokitoff at the end of Flight 714, where an unidentified flying object even appears in the night sky), divination (with Calculus’ omnipresent pendulum in Red Rackham’s Treasure, The Seven Crystal Balls as well as Flight 714), Inca witchcraft (The Seven Crystal Balls and Prisoners of the Sun where people are tortured magically at a distance) and so forth. As Tintin books thus combine a rational view of reality with acceptance of the supernatural, one could propose that they actually correspond to the cartoon strip’s expression of magical realism. A literary mode involving the occasional fusion of the real and the fantastic, magical realism, mostly associated with the names of Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter and Toni Morrison, has been analysed in a vast literature (Chanady 1985; Cooper 1998; Danow 1995; Zamora and Faris 1995). The concept was originally coined in 1925 by Franz Roh writing about postexpressionist painting and was later adopted by literary criticism, so applying it to cartoon strips (which in fact borrow both from the visual and the textual) seems quite natural and logical, and Tintin books do present the blending of reality/realism with fantasy/magic that defines magical realism, both literally and conceptually. Interestingly, the last Tintin book (Tintin and the Picaros) concludes with a major, defining scene of street carnival in South America – two very symbolic features, as the carnivalesque is one
of the key themes of magical realism (Danow 1995) and South America is usually regarded as the birthplace of magical realist literature (Flores 1995; Leal 1995), as emblematised by Márquez’s *Hundred Years of Solitude* (originally published in 1967, a year after Hergé’s *Flight 714* which possibly represents the acme of Hergé’s artistic genius in terms of magical realism in cartoon strips).

**Conclusion**

Tintin is associated with journeys, travel and tourism in countless ways. The cover of the Summer 2003 Virgin Express in-flight magazine *Red Hot*, the numerous Tintin exhibitions around the world (for instance at the Greenwich Maritime Museum in 2004), the proposed yet controversial creation of a definite Tintin museum in 2006 at Louvain (Belgium), the recent case (February 2001) of Belgian police seizing a cache of forgeries of a pastiche book showing Tintin on a sex holiday in Bangkok (*Tintin in Thailand*), all depict Tintin as an intrepid traveller, eternally youthful and adventurous, yet sometimes just a step away from controversy. Tintin books are undoubtedly worth analysing because Tintin is a popular cultural product on a global scale, and the books can be studied in numerous ways, focusing on the characters or on the storylines, on symbols, systems of meanings or sources of inspiration. So many texts are actually being written about Tintin that it is next-to-impossible to keep track; in 2002 Steeman published a 59-page bibliography just on Tintin and Hergé, a perfect illustration of the exponential development of the Tintin meta-literature. Tintin books undoubtedly represent a form of travel writing, albeit an original one, as the writer and the traveller are actually not the same person, and the writer is rather an armchair traveller. Even more interesting in terms of travel writing literature are the ways in which Tintin books combine and integrate the textual and the visual, thereby creating a subtle yet meaningful sense of place, space and adventure. Occasionally, delving into the fantastic and the unexplained, Hergé’s artistic genius in his cartoon strips justifies the proposed analysis of Tintin’s journeys as a form of magical realism. Tomasi and Deligne (1998) have analysed the similarities between nineteenth-century Jules
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Verne and twentieth-century Hergé (who was certainly inspired by adventures such as From the Earth to the Moon (Verne 1996) and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (Verne 1994)). To a lesser extent, Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver Travels (Swift 1998) is another influence, with an interesting parallelism between Hergé’s fiction/reality and Swift’s big/small (Lilliput/Brobdingnag).

Serres (2000) has further suggested that Hergé was actually better than Verne and Swift inasmuch as he actually created his own literary genre, here conceptualised as cartoon-strip magical realism. This analysis does not pretend to be definitive and authoritative, however there is not and there cannot be one single reading of Tintin’s journeys – yet academic attempts at interpreting Tintin books are extremely important as they can help us better understand the global success and the timeless popularity of Tintin.

References


