**The Clear Line**

**Luc Sante**

In a corner of my office, on top of a bookcase, lies a hunting horn–a sort of bugle, curved in the manner of a French horn. It has occupied a place in my inner sanctum wherever I’ve lived since childhood. Such horns are not hard to find secondhand in the Ardennes Mountains of southern Belgium, since these days there’s not much call for them by hunters of the stag and the boar. The reason I talked my parents into buying me this horn can be found in the fifth panel on page 4 of the sixth adventure of Tintin, The Broken Ear. The panel shows Tintin visiting an artist’s garret, a low skylit room with a bed on the floor amid a panoply of artistic bric-a-brac: a plaster bust, a horseshoe, a sixteenth-century helmet, a skull, a few paintings and sketches, and, directly above the pillow, a hunting horn. Since I wanted to be an artist at an age when most kids want to be firefighters, I knew that I would one day live in a room just like that, and wanted to get started accumulating the props. Possession of such a horn would ensure my future as an artist. The Tintin albums were never wrong about such things. Had I wanted to be a sea captain instead, I would have pestered my mother into knitting me a blue turtleneck sweater with an anchor motif on the chest, the kind worn by Tintin’s friend Captain Haddock. The sweater would automatically have conferred upon me the authority to command a vessel.

But if the adventures of Tintin were my guide to life (and worryingly, perhaps, they still are; just a few years ago I bought a floor lamp at a flea market because it looked like the sort of thing Tintin would have in his living room), they were also the reason I wanted to be an artist. I was not alone. Because of Tintin, kids in Belgium, where the series and I both originated, aspire to draw comic strips the way their American counterparts want to start rock bands. I was typical: As soon as I could draw recognizable figures, I started working on a comic strip featuring an adventurous lad and his faithful dog. But even Belgians with no discernible talent have incorporated Tintin and his world-view into the fiber of their beings. The boy reporter made his debut in 1929 in the children’s supplement of a Catholic newspaper, crudely drawn at first, but with his personality and that of his white terrier Milou (called “Snowy” in translation) fixed almost from the first panel of Tintin in the Land of the Soviets, the first adventure. That he was an ageless kid, of less than medium height and of an uninsistent modesty despite his many accomplishments, answered to the best aspects of the suffering Belgian self-image. Overnight, or almost, he became a national icon.

Tintin is of indeterminate age; he can drive a car and shoot a gun but is said at least once by another character to be “hardly more than a child.” He is invariably called “the boy reporter” in the fictional newspaper and radio accounts that are quoted within the panels, but is never seen doing any reporting or writing nor is any such work ever otherwise alluded to. He has a nice apartment and a substantial library although no apparent income; his constant travel might be paid for by law-enforcement agencies–Interpol, maybe–since the trips always lead to the solving of some crime or other, but he is never seen being assigned, debriefed, supervised, or compensated. He has no parents or any other relatives unless you count the all-male elective family he accumulates over the course of the series: Captain Haddock, the eccentric Professor Tournesol (“Calculus” in translation), and the twin detectives Dupont and Dupond (“Thompson” and “Thomson”).

Milou (I can’t bear to call him “Snowy”) goes with him everywhere, including to the moon, where he has his own four-legged spacesuit. Tintin has a little tuft of blond hair sticking up in front, and unless he is in costume or disguise he wears the clothes of a jaunty youth of the 1930s, including plus-fours with argyle socks. My father, who was short, blond, and usually wore plus-fours, was called “Tintin” by his friends back before the war, although by the time I knew him his hair had turned black.

I began absorbing Tintin before I learned to read. I know that my father’s mother gave me a subscription to the Tintin weekly magazine before she died, which was sometime around my fourth birthday. I’m pretty sure the magazine was then serializing Tintin in Tibet, the twentieth of the twenty-three volumes–twenty-four if you count the one left in rough sketch form by the death in 1983 of Georges Rémi, known as Hergé, who wrote and drew the series and refused to consider a successor. Hergé attained his peak of productivity in the ’40s, right in the middle of the war, when he published his strips in the Brussels daily Le Soir. The paper from those years is referred to as Le Soir volé–the stolen Soir–because it was overseen and censored by the German occupiers. Unlike most collaborators, Hergé got little more than an administrative slap after the war, and hardly any public opprobrium, because it was so clear he was an innocent by nature. His ideology was conservative, but it was molded for all time by the Catholic Boy Scouts. His world-view was that of a serious-minded twelve-year-old.

A serious-minded Belgian twelve-year-old in, say, 1939 would think of the colonial subjects in the Congo as simple, happy people who derived enormous benefits from being colonized. You couldn’t expect them to understand complex matters, but at least you could send in the White Fathers to convert them to the Roman religion and stop them from eating each other, or whatever it was they did. Tintin in the Congo, book number two, makes for painful reading today, and not only because Tintin is so determined to bag every sort of big game that, unable to shoot a rhinoceros, he blows it up–although he uses too much powder and is left with just the horn.

The caricatures of foreign cultures in the Tintin books are hardly virulent, just indicative of a smug ignorance pervasive throughout the Western world then, but the treatment of the Congolese is shocking because its grotesque simplifications had to have been based on self-serving firsthand accounts by the colonizers. To confirm this, all I have to do is look in my family album. My Uncle René, a drunken ne’er-do-well who lived in the Congo in the 1950s, is pictured with a much more mature-looking African gentleman standing a few paces behind him; this man is identified on the back as his “boy.” The English word was used to mean “manservant” for obvious reasons–it wouldn’t do to think of the Congolese as adults. Tintin is not an adult, either; he is the champion of youth, fighting the scary and corrupt adults of the world on their behalf. In the Congo these inimical adults are nearly all white, while the natives belong to Tintin’s constituency regardless of their ages–it is the only country he visits where everyone recognizes him. When he leaves, the people cry.

Possibly the most striking thing in the Tintin universe is the almost complete absence of women. Of the 117 characters pictured in the portrait gallery on the endpapers of the hardcovers, only seven are female. Women are thin-lipped concierges or very occasionally the silent consorts of male characters; few have more than walk-on parts. The only significant or recurring female character is the overbearing diva Bianca Castafiore, who periodically appears to sing the “Jewel Song” from Gounod’s Faust, a performance that has the effect of a gale-force wind.

This is not so much misogyny as, again, the perspective of a nerdish pre-sexual twelve-year-old. There are no young girls, or attractive women of any age, because the frightened boy is determined not to see them. Tintin has been psychoanalyzed voluminously–the critical literature is vast, and canted upon every sort of postmodern theoretical framework–so that I’m certain that some academic somewhere has already suggested how much Tintin’s family, as it were, resembles the Holy Trinity: the boy reporter as Jesus, Captain Haddock as an irascible Old-Testament Jehovah, and Milou–small, snow-white, and ever-present–as the Holy Ghost. You might still expect women to hover on the periphery of consciousness as mothers and whores, although both would distract from the serious business of adventure and crime-fighting, and introduce all kinds of unwanted ambiguity. Hergé, ever the Boy Scout, simply excised them.

Hergé redrew the first several stories (with the exception of the irredeemably crude Land of the Soviets) for their postwar publication in album form. Nevertheless, they are set in a period that while undefined necessarily predates May 1940, when the Nazis invaded Belgium. Even the later stories seem to take place in the 1930s, although none of us kid readers of the late ’50s and early ’60s minded or even noticed, since until the “economic miracle” of 1964, postwar Belgium itself effectively lived in the prewar era, at least with regard to technology. The world of Tintin’s adventures is one in which servants wear livery, savants wear long beards, men emerge from fights with their false collars jutting out, and the lower orders are identified by their caps. The world is big enough to include little-documented countries you’ve never heard of, although no subject is so obscure that there isn’t in Brussels some smock-wearing expert who knows all there is to know about it, and possesses the book- and artifact-stuffed apartment to prove it. It is a cozy world in which every detail is correctly labeled and filed away on the appropriate shelf. The world may contain its share of evil, but it is regularly swept and, like Belgian sidewalks, washed every week. There are no areas of gray. Villains–they are most often drug smugglers, sometimes counterfeiters–look and act like villains, and if heroes have their share of human failings (Captain Haddock’s alcoholism being the major case in point), there is nevertheless no doubt about the purity of their souls. Sex, of course, would mess up everything.

The clear moral line is beautifully expressed by Hergé’s graphic style, which is in fact called “clear line.” This method of rendering the world accurately, sensuously, and yet very simply by distilling every sight down to its primary linear constituents derives most obviously from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japanese popular woodblock-print style called ukiyo-e, and its masters Hiroshige and Hokusai. Those graphic artists were introduced to European eyes in the late nineteenth century, when their work had a particular impact upon the French Impressionists, especially Manet and Degas, who learned from them the value of cropping and of visual shorthand. Hergé absorbed not just those lessons; he swallowed their style whole. He enclosed every particule of the visible, no matter how fluid and shifting, in a thin, black, unhesitating line; made that line carry the burden of mass and weight without modeling; and endowed the line with an accomplice in the form of pure, clear, emphatic but not garish color. The style makes the world wonderfully accessible, in effect serving as an analogue to its hero’s mission: Just as Tintin, a mere boy, can travel the world and navigate its dark passages and defeat its oppressors without himself succumbing to corruption, so you, too, whether you are seven or seventy-seven (the advertised age-range of the weekly), can confront the overwhelming variousness of the perceptual universe and realize its underlying simplicity without sacrificing your sense of wonder. And that is the core of Hergé’s genius: to mitigate his young audience’s fears and convert them into sensual delight.

When Tintin, menaced by Chicago gangsters in Tintin in America, must exit his hotel room through the window and make his way to the next one by inching his fingernails and shoe soles along the mortar between the bricks, the young reader prone to acrophobia (me, that is) can translate his trepidation into pleasure at the magnificent geometry of those many unyielding rows of windows as depicted very precisely from a dizzying oblique angle.

The terror of suddenly coming into an entirely foreign landscape–notably, Shanghai in The Blue Lotus–can give way to joy at the immense panels of streets crowded with very individual pedestrians and surmounted by overlapping ranks of colorful banners and signs filled with intriguing if indecipherable Chinese characters. (For this volume Hergé sought the advice of a young Chinese artist then resident in Brussels, Chang Chong-Jen–who became a character in the story–so that the details possess particular authenticity.) The great heights, deep cold, and blinding snows of Tibet; the horror vacui of the featureless Sahara; the threat of a tempest at sea as experienced on a raft; even the empty and unknowable surface of the moon (circa 1955)–all of these can be not only managed but appreciated. To say that Hergé domesticated those locations and experiences would be putting the emphasis in the wrong place. What he did was to bring them into the child’s compass, not only through the heroic surrogate of the boy reporter, but also visually, by scraping away murk and muddle and purifying it, revealing the world as an awe-inspiring but comprehensible series of planes.

In every way but the visual it is easy to dismiss the simplifications of the series. They are the legacy of the comfortable world view that rationalized colonialism–that complacently taught African children in French possessions to remember “our ancestors, the Gauls.” They are of a piece with the creed of scouting as devised by Baden-Powell, with pen-pal clubs and ham radio and collecting stamps, which Walter Benjamin said were the visiting cards left by governments in children’s playrooms. They belong to the same branch of literature as the Rover Boys and Tom Swift and the fantasized travels of Richard Halliburton. They are predicated on nostalgia for a world in which strength rested upon ignorance, and this was so even in the ostensibly simpler times in which Hergé conceived them. Their world is the cosmos of childhood, after all, and childhood past is what all nostalgia refers to, even if wrongheaded adults insist on situating it within historical coordinates.

The visual, by today’s lights, might be diminished just as easily, you might think, considering by contrast the dark abstract tangles that represent the world in many of today’s strips, including some of the better-known superhero adventures, or noting that the heirs of the clear line, most famously Joost Swarte, have applied it to an ironically jolly delirium in which there are not only no moral certainties, but not even any definite up or down or inside or outside. But even Batman has one foot in the adult world these days, even if politicians are no closer to growing up. That the adventures of Tintin remain unsullied by maturity or experience allows them to preserve their power as a visual primer. They are an Eden of the graphic eye, in which every object–each shoe, each road, each flame and book and car and door–is in some way the first, the model that instructs the beholder on the nature of the thing and makes it possible to grow up knowing how to cut through fog and perceive essentials. What Hergé did is as serious and as endlessly applicable as geometry. Small-minded, reactionary, immature, he is not the Rembrandt or the Leonardo or the Cézanne of the comic form–he is its Euclid.

2004