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### Tintin as a metonym of the twentieth century

#### ABSTRACT

*The backstory of the Tintin franchise is one of commodification that appears, in retrospect, metonymic for key developments of the twentieth century, particularly in relation to capital and its increasing inextricability from mass media. This paper offers a post-Situationist reading of Tintin, building on notions of commodity fetishism (Marx 1867) and postmodern spectacle (Debord 1967). The decades prior to 1950 can be viewed revealingly through the lens of John Crary's elaboration of Debord's symbolic birth date for his Society of the Spectacle: 1927 (Crary 2004). Jameson's analysis of late capitalism's decadal phases through the 50s, 60s, and 70s (Jameson 1991) supplies similar frames for the period post-1950. I argue that Tintin's progressive conscription into late capitalist spectacle reflects and reinforces this broader process of commodification within intermeshing global culture flows.*

#### KEYWORDS

Tintin  
Hergé  
Situationists  
commodity  
fetish,  
Spectacle

#### INTRODUCTION

Viewed in retrospect, the history of the Tintin franchise is a story of commodification that appears metonymic for key developments of the twentieth century, particularly in relation to capital and its increasing inextricability from mass media. This paper engages in interpretive play by offering a post-Situationist reading of Tintin as cultural production. I do this by viewing the *Adventures* through two key elaborations of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism (Marx 1867), pivoting around the symbolic mid-point of 1950. First, for the decades prior to 1950, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* – and in particular Jonathon Crary's (2004) take on Debord's enigmatic claim that it all began *precisely* in 1927; and second, for the decades post-1950, Fredric Jameson's (1991) characterization of the 50s, 60s

and 70s phases of late capitalist postmodernity. Bringing this ‘post-Situationist’ timeline into juxtaposition with key milestones in the development of the Tintin franchise is a revealing exercise that charts another strand in what Jameson famously called the cultural logic of late capitalism, at the same time offering us new ways of reading Tintin.

In *La Société du spectacle* (1967) Guy Debord dates the beginning of his Society of the Spectacle to the late 1920s; some twenty years later he elaborated that the precise year was 1927 (Debord 1988: 13). John Crary, in an article titled ‘Spectacle, Attention and Counter-memory’ notes that, unfortunately, Debord provides no rationale for this ‘surprisingly precise date’ (Crary 2004: 457). Debord defined ‘Spectacle’ as the identification with products that effectively celebrate *themselves* and the leisure-time consumption culture within which they are staged. The replacement of social life with representation leads to degradation, relations between people having been overtaken by that of commodities within the all encompassing ‘advanced capitalist’ system. Crary takes up the baton in offering some ‘fragmentary speculations’ as to why 1927, in particular, should serve as its starting point, namely:

1. The technological perfection of television.
2. The arrival of synchronized sound film (‘talkies’).
3. The rise of fascism, Stalinism and associated forms of sound/image propaganda (457-451).

For Crary, 1927 thus becomes a symbolic marker of ‘the moment when sign value takes precedence over use value,’ as he paraphrases Baudrillard (2004: 457). Crary’s three factors inscribe a surprisingly precise parallelism with the formative period of the Tintin franchise prior to 1950, particularly his genesis in the late 1920s and evolution in the 1930s and 40s, which is the subject of the first part of this paper.

Jameson’s analysis of late capitalism’s post-war phases can supply us with similar frames for charting the decades post-1950. *Postmodernism: or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1991) has, of course, been widely deployed in the study of popular culture. I am concerned particularly with two of its focalizations: new forms of media interrelationship and new forms of business organization in concert with the internationalization of business (xix). Jameson’s use of the Frankfurt School-derived term ‘late capitalism’ can be, as he suggests, just as well inscribed by a number of others, including ‘the spectacle or image society’ (xvii) – a reference to Debord’s formative work. Part of the condition of postmodernity, in

Jameson's analysis, lies in the fact that popular cultural products function not merely as physical commodities but have become enmeshed in 'the consumption of sheer commodification as a process' (ix). Thus Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, by which capitalism is 'naturalized' as a kind of given, metastasizes into an all-encompassing condition. It is no longer simply an aspect of capitalism, but a metonym for capitalism itself. Jameson goes on to say that this state of affairs 'stands in relation to Marx's 'fetishism' of commodities as these most advanced monotheisms [stand in relation to] to primitive animisms or the most rudimentary idol worship...' (ix). So complete has the consumer culture become that it has replaced nature and reified endless consumption: commodification itself is fetishized. All cultural production becomes complicit in the process.

In a deliberately provocative assertion of historical materialism against the ahistoricizing tendencies of PoMo, Jameson charts late capitalism's development decade-by-decade from the mid to late twentieth century: the preparatory phase of ramped-up new product and technology production in the 1950s; the 'psychic break' with wartime shortages and cultural, as opposed to merely economic, turn to late-capitalist sensibilities of the 1960s; and the crystallization of the economic and system and 'culture of feeling' in the crisis-ridden 1970s. Jameson's phases prove to be of particular relevance to the evolution of the Tintin franchise in the second half of the twentieth century, hinging on the symbolic turning point of 1950, and the subject of the second part of this paper.

## **BEFORE 1950**

Crary's identification of television, sound film ('talkies'), and dystopian uses of sound/image for propagandistic purposes at the genesis of Debord's Society of the Spectacle in 1927 frame Tintin from his very inception. Hergé's famously 'cinematic' style of representation took major cues from movies, first silent, then talkies. Indeed, Tintin's prototype, Totor, is introduced in his first, July 1926, adventure as follows: 'United Rovers presents a great comedy film: *The Extraordinary Adventures of Totor, Patrol Leader of the May Bugs in Le Boy Scout Belge*' (Maricq, 17). Filmic influence was equally strong two and a half years later with Tintin's debut proper on 4 January, 1929, in *Les Aventures de Tintin reporter du 'Petit Vingtième' au pays des Soviets / The Adventures of Tintin, reporter for 'Le Petit Vingtième' in the Land of the Soviets*:

Acutely aware of the key aspects to be considered in the production of a dynamic film narrative – movement, action and scene splicing – [Hergé] endlessly varies angles and shots with the express intention of making his stories as authentic as possible. (Maricq, 2010: 21).

Indeed, Hergé went so far as to state in 1942 that:

I consider my stories as films. Thus, no narration, no descriptions: I give all importance to the picture. But my films are 100 percent *talkies*, with *sound effects* [my italics], the dialogue coming directly from the mouths of the characters (Hergé in Assouline, 2009: 83).

With regard the birth of ‘talkies,’ Crary writes:

The full coincidence of sound with image, of voice with figure, not only was a crucial new way of organizing space, time, and narrative, but it instituted a more commanding authority over the observer, enforcing a new kind of authority (2004: 458).

In a neat conceptual loop, Crary cites Fritz Lang’s *Dr. Mabuse* films, which Hergé knew and references intertextually, such as the magician performances in *The Seven Crystal Balls* and, much later, *Tintin and Alph Art* (see Fritz Lang: inspiration of Hergé?, 2006: n.pag.). The foundations of Tintin, therefore, comprised in part a transplantation of the dominant elements of American-style cartoons, including speech balloons, into comics, making his ‘films’ into ‘talkies.’

More disconcerting are the parallels with the birth of fascism circa 1927, and its propagandistic requisitioning of the new aural-visual media. Crary cites, as examples, Stalin and Goebbels’s ‘synergetic use of every available medium, especially the development of sound/image propaganda, and ... devaluation of the written word...’ (461). Hergé’s early familiarity with the comics medium was fed to him from 1928 by a foreign correspondent, Léon Dagrelle, for the right wing, staunchly Catholic magazine, *Le Petit Vingtième*, where Hergé worked. Dagrelle went on to found the Rexists, the Belgian equivalent of Fascists, becoming their leader in 1935. It was he who ‘introduc[ed] Hergé to the latest transatlantic developments in the strip cartoon’ (Farr 2001: 18) and may indeed have inspired his first use of the speech balloon in 1928 (Assouline 2009: 17). The first two Tintin albums are blatant right wing propaganda. *Soviets* was a committed anti-Communist diatribe, *Tintin au Congo/Tintin in the Congo* (1930-31) a sustained valorization of the appalling Belgian colonial enterprise (see Bate 2003, van Braembussche, 2002; Mountfort 2011: 36-38).

Hergé's dalliance with 'comic art propaganda' (Strömberg 2010) would continue to inflect Tintin albums at least up until the pro-Axis – and faintly anti-Semitic – tone of that 'untimely script' (Peeters 2002: 270), *The Shooting Star* (1941-2).

Tintin was from the start a commercial enterprise designed to sell copy as well as ideology, and he rapidly morphed into a popular culture phenomenon. Concomitant with the publication of the above volumes, Tintin was breaking out linguistically and geographically, first into neighbouring countries and then further afield in an early European forerunner of today's globalized culture flows. The strip was published from 26 Oct, 1930, in the French weekly, *Cœurs Vaillants*, from September 1932 in the Swiss magazine *L'Écho Illustré*, and from 1934 in the Portuguese Catholic magazine, *O Papagaio* (Assouline, 2009: 35). From 26 Sept, 1946, with the premiere of *Prisoners of the Sun*, the series was published in the newly-formed *Tintin Magazine*, run by war-time resistance hero Raymond Leblanc, who aided Hergé's rehabilitation following his exoneration from the charge of wartime collaboration with the Nazis. It was a wild success. Moreover, Hergé's work may be peppered with critiques of unfettered American-style capitalism, but in a decade in which Disney was pioneering character-branded product, 'Tintin was being busily merchandised' (Assouline 2009: 55) as early as 1936 in a range which included puzzles, calendars and cushions.

As well as being inspired in part by cinematic storytelling, Tintin was also adapted to the big screen from an early period, commencing with two 1946 releases: Les Beaux Films' series of short 'films,' really more akin to slides, derived from black & white stills from the albums, and a publicity film directed by Claude Misonne for *Tintin Magazine* using puppet animation (Capart 2011: n.pag.). The following year, a 75 minute version of *The Crab with the Golden Claws* using animated models became the first cinematic adaptation proper based on the albums. Approaching the pivotal – if symbolic – year of 1950, Tintin already represented a European pop culture phenomena of almost unparalleled proportions, but the spectacle was only set to grow in scale.

## **AFTER 1950**

We saw that Jameson identified, among others, the following key features of late capitalism: new forms of media interrelationship and new forms of business organization in concert with the internationalization of business (xix). In terms of its phases by decade, he specifically sites the ramped-up new product and technology production in the post-war 1950s, the cultural and thus psychological turn to late-capitalist sensibilities of the 1960s, and

crystallization of a ‘culture of feeling’ in the 1970s. It is fitting for this analysis that two of the most momentous events in the evolution of the Tintin franchise happened precisely on, and shortly after, the mid-century mark. On 6 April, 1950, the Studio Hergé was founded, inscribing exactly the sort of new forms of media interrelationships and business organization Jameson associated with the Spectacle Society. Artistically, the Studio brought to bear the talents of Bob De Moor, Jacques Martin, and Roger Leloup to the Adventures *Destination Moon* (1953) and its sequel, *Explorers on the Moon* (1954), which exemplify both in their subject matter and means of production the new product and technology ethos Jameson identifies with the 50s. The Studio model, furthermore, brought with it a concomitant new commercial focus, since Hergé was no longer working for a salary but heading up a business. Sales and profits soared: as Dominique Maricq writes: ‘What was in many ways a cottage industry became a small and successful business’ (45).

This development was concurrent with Tintin’s penetration of the English-speaking world – a major step towards participation in truly globalized culture flows – with translations of *King Ottokar’s Sceptre* by Eagle appearing in 1951-52 and *The Secret of the Unicorn and Red Rackham’s Treasure* in 1952 in English by Casterman (Methuen followed suit in 1959). The release of paperback editions by these publishers and, subsequently, Egmont made the series available to an ever-widening audience, and provided a major boost to its commercialism. As Farr writes, ‘In the [postwar] years worldwide sales of the Tintin books totalled over 120 million, with the annual figure topping four million as the adventures came to be translated into more than fifty languages.’ (2001: 8). Today the figure is calculated to stand closer to 350 million, comparable in sheer scale to the estimated 450 million sales of books from the Harry Potter series. (Harry Potter 2012). The combination of industrial scale production, translation, merchandising, and cross-media adaptation place it as a forerunner of today’s transmedia franchises decades before the release of the Spielberg/Jackson production of *The Secret of the Unicorn* (2011), even if, ironically, the United States was one of the few places where Tintin never really took off, either as a periodic strip, set of albums, on film, television or as a merchandized franchise (Tintin Crosses the Atlantic 2007: n.pag.). Today, the Hergé Foundation’s merchandizing occupies the elite of culture commodity fetishization, its objects carrying eye-watering price tags: at Tintin shops you can buy, at the time of writing, Moulinsart-branded figurines from £72 resin for an 11cm tall Snowy to £315 for a 22cm tall Castafiore. A 43.5cm long replica of Calculus’ submarine sets the buyer back £229.00, while a 55cm moon rocket fetches £310.

The resin models occupy only one category out of twelve, from crockery to stationery. (All the Adventures 2013).

In terms of the spread of Tintin via adaptation across media, there were several film adaptations in the late 50s, but the first television series commenced at the start of the next decade with Belvision's *Les Aventures de Tintin* (1961). It was dubbed into English in 1962, and was aired in the United States from the same year and in reruns until 1971, neatly inscribing the second decade in Jameson's analysis, characterized by capitalism's cultural and psychic turn, particularly in relation to new media interrelationships (in this case comics adapted to a syndicated tv series). In the early Sixties Tintin also crossed from the world of animation to that of live action with two French films, *Le Mystere de la toison d'or/The Mystery of the Golden Fleece* (1961) and *Tintin et les Oranges Bleues/Tintin and the Blue Oranges* (1964) – directed and written by André Barret and Rémo Forlani, and by Barret alone, respectively. In 1969 a Raymond Le Blanc and Darguad (of *Asterix* fame) co-production of *Tintin – Le Temple Du Soleil/The Temple of the Sun* was authorized by Hergé and produced by members of his studio staff and Tintin Magazine, in a further fusion of (then) new media and business organization elements.

The sense of crisis that Jameson identifies with the 1970s – where late capitalism is confronted by its vulnerability in light of the Oil Shocks and structural economic decline – coincides with the culmination of a widely diagnosed anomie in the series, where Hergé 'corrodes' (see Cook, 2010: 146) his own hero-myth across his final 'triptech' of completed albums (*The Castafiore Emerald* 1961-61; *Flight 714*, 1966-67; *Tintin and the Picaros*, 1975-76). The first is a tale about nothing, which Tom McCarthy has interpreted to be a cipher for diva Madam Castafiore's clit (see McCarthy 2004: 93-116), the second requires the intervention of a UN-style mission led by humanoid alien to rescue Tintin and company from an exploding volcano, while the third depicts an adventure-shirking Tintin sporting a CND symbol on his motorcycle helmet. The works arguably express the shadow side of the culture of feeling, its spiral of self-referentiality. Even the main movie release of the decade, *Tintin et le lac aux requins / Tintin and the Lake of Sharks* (1972), was a homage to the franchise which Hergé had no direct input into, and which was subsequently issued as a kind of ersatz, non-canonical Tintin album, gracing in thumbnail form Egmont and Casterman editions in an apparent attempt to complete the famous back-cover 'grid' of completed albums.

Finally, the last (unfinished) album, *Tintin and Alph Art* (1978), marks a truly postmodern dénouement to the *Adventures*: an ending which reader/viewers must fill in for

ourselves. Only 42 of the standard 62 pages were sketched, with none complete, leaving readers forever in the dark as to whether, like Holmes with Moriarty, Tintin's arch villain Rastapopoulos will see him dispatched – in this case, eternally embalmed as a work of art *a la* Damien Hirst's formaldehyde installations. *Tintin and Alph Art* was first issued in 1986 and then in 2004 as facsimile editions, as have the original B&W albums of the series, thus coming to occupy the middle-ground between valuable archival resources and fetishized commodities – tokens of connoisseurship – for fans and dedicated 'Tintinologists.' From the 80s to the 2010s, the franchise would continue to grow in terms of its conquest of media forms and concomitant commercial success. The relative stasis following the 1990 Ellipse-Nelvana French/Canadian television co-production of the full (albeit bowdlerized) series was well and truly exploded with the long-anticipated Spielberg-Jackson movie production of 2011. At the time of writing, with another movie to be directed by Peter Jackson in the wings, Tintin has finally made it to both Hollywood and Wellywood, and the resulting spectacle is unlikely to be the last in the uncanny parallelism between the franchise and the unfolding phases of late capitalism's fusion of new and emerging corporate media inter-relationships.

## CONCLUSION

This brief exploration of parallels between a post-Situationist timeline of the Society of the Spectacle and that of the Tintin franchise throws light on both the post-Situationist critique and the famous popular cultural phenomenon Hergé unleashed. Perhaps the most striking parallelism is that the symbolic year chosen by Debord and elaborated on by Crary for the birth of the Society of the Spectacle – 1927 – falls in the exact gestation period between the appearance of the comics prototype, Tortor, in 1926 and the debut of Tintin proper in 1929. Further, the factors Crary identifies with 1927 – particularly talkies and their genetic affinity with the rise of modern propaganda techniques – are implicitly and explicitly embodied in the early Tintin albums. Hergé's requisitioning of cinematic elements, and particularly the speech balloon as a visual correlate to sound in movies, were first utilized in the service of reactionary propaganda. Equally, in a kind of popular cultural feedback loop, no other European comics artists would be as successful as Hergé in seeing his creation cross media into film and ultimately television. Concomitantly, Hergé was an early adopter of the kind of merchandising strategies we have come to expect from transmedia franchises, and the rapidity with which Tintin spread geographically and linguistically via translation and

magazine syndication looks in retrospect like a European forerunner of today's globalized culture flows.

Jameson's characterization of new forms of media interrelationship and new forms of business organization in concert with the internationalization of business as key features of postmodernity neatly capture Tintin's sites of production from the 1950 founding of the Studio Hergé to the intensifying commodification of the franchise in the following decades. Jameson's phases are ramped up production in the 1950s, the cultural turn to late-capitalist sensibilities in the 1960s, and the rise of a 'culture of feeling' at the same time that triumphal capitalism was experiencing speed wobbles in the context of converging crisis in the 1970s. They neatly dovetail with the development of both the franchise and mood of the *Adventures* as Tintin developed post-1950, from the technological positivism of the 50s with the moon rocket narratives mirroring the ramped up production of the Studio Hergé itself to the anomie and corroding of affect in the final volumes of the late 60s and 1970s. Tintin, thus, inscribes and reinscribes the arc of the twentieth century as sketched by post-Situationist cultural critics such as Crary and Jameson, not simply as a product of the twentieth century, but as metonym that helps define aspects of the Society of the Spectacle.

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### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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