Articles

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Out of family, into history

Out of family, into history: A comparative study of the superchild in Corriere dei Piccoli, TBO and The Adventures of Tintin

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Abstract

Through the sagacious insights of Jean-Marie Apostolidès about Herge's well-known character Tintin, this article gathers a comparative investigation on the relationship between the child and the absence of family. More specifically, we address the figure defined by Apostolidès as 'superchild' through a comparison between the publications Corriere dei Piccoli (CdP), in Italy, TBO, in Spain and, in the Belgian case, of the figure that motivated the term used by Apostolidès, Tintin. The article forms a comparative comics exercise from a hermeneutical-historical, narratological methodology linked to the figural study of images (Brenez 1998; Bellour 2013), in order to underline some of the singularities of the bond between the superchild and the absent family.

Keywords: superchild, Tintin, Corriere dei Piccoli, TBO, absent family, tinkering, power

Isn't it a hateful monster, the child who reasons like a man?

(Erasmus cited in Feuerhahn 1993: 27)

In the context of comic studies, hermeneutical studies on the persistence of certain archetypes over time are still scarce. There are, of course, reference works on the narrative and iconographic evolution of the figure of the hero (Frezza 1995; Johnson 2012) and political, religious or narratological readings of the superhero (Saunders 2011; Hassler-Forest 2012; Rosenberg 2013; Lewis 2014), and the mutant or its relationship with politics (Fawaz 2016; Di Paolo 2011). However, approaches to family behaviour and emotional representation such as those that media studies and cinematographic hermeneutics have developed (Gledhill 1990) are still infrequent and only a few books have addressed the figure of childhood in relation to comics and the phenomena of seriality (Frezza 1987, 1999; Abate and Sanders 2016; Gordon 2016). Through the sagacious insights of Jean-Marie Apostolidès (2003, 2007), this article gathers a comparative investigation on the superchild and its absent family. More specifically, we address the figure defined by Apostolidès as superchild through a comparison between the publications Corriere dei Piccoli (The Children's Post, CdP), in Italy, TBO, in Spain and, in the Belgian case, of the figure that motivated the term used by Apostolidès, Tintin. With the awareness that it is impossible to examine in depth a figure as rich as the superchild, the aim of the article is, above all, to outline a comparative comic exercise from a hermeneutical-historical, narratological methodology linked to the figural study of images (Brenez 1998; Bellour 2013), in order to underline some of the singularities of the bond between the superchild and the absent family.

The superchild as a key myth

The superchild, as Apostolidès and Alain Rey (1978) claimed, 'constitutes a key myth of the twentieth century' (Apostolidès 2007: 45). The surenfant embodies the innately good, is generally male, and can best be defined as anti-childish, rational, resourceful, ingenious and intelligent. In a way, this character exalted 'the traditional values of capitalism: property,

security, a family without Oedipus (no parents, but "uncles"), authority, discipline and consent' as Rey has argued (1978: 88). Through the absence of a family, the superchild acquires authority which nonetheless is built on discipline and consent. This article seeks to illuminate both these privileges and prerogatives by close reading the series on the superchildren TBO and BB in Spanish TBO, on Didì, on Moritz and on three Chinese boys in Italian Corriere dei Piccoli and Tintin, the superchild par excellence, conceived not just as a corpus but as an authentic paradigm, in the Foucauldian sense, a 'generalizable model of knowledge' (Foucault 1975: 223), 'whose function is to constitute and make an entire and wider historical problematic context' (Agamben 2008: 11).

Cinema has persistently explored the coming of age, the transformation of the child into an adolescent, thanks to its own ontological condition to freeze appearances (Bazin 1945), in countless films – by filmmakers as diverse as Roberto Rossellini, Morris Engel, Víctor Erice, Abbas Kiarostami, Jean Eustache or Maurice Pialat. In a similar mediological sense, the comic shows at least two singularities: the possibility of turning children into an emblem of any mode of behaviour, and its traditional condition of educational reference, particularly in the European comic tradition. The child can even become, as happens with the 'intellectual humor' of Schultz's Peanuts, Quino's Mafalda, or Bill Watterson's Calvin and Hobbes, in a stroke, in a form of pure thought (Groensteen 2009), in what Deleuze has called, in the field of cinema, an opsign (Deleuze 1985: 13).

Notwithstanding the socio-historical differences all three foundational publications spoke to generations of child readers1 and in all three cases star child protagonists whom thanks to the absence of a family were able to develop a certain set of 'überchildish' skills. These überchildish traits consist largely of altruism (i.e. the abnegation of the principle of pleasure), mature mentality, handiness and creative thinking. They are all capable of inventive problem-solving, bravery and have technological and mechanical knowledge. The differences between these superchildren, on the other hand, are revealing. Early comics (1910s) about superchildren in Corriere dei Piccoli are racially 'othered', in the sense that Italian recurring characters are mainly tricksters while the Dutch or Chinese are doing the exact opposite of mischief.2 During the First World War in Italy and in the 1920s in Spain, on the other hand, the myth of the superchild was differently 'othered'. Not the race but the gender of the mythic superchild was sometimes altered. In the Italian series on Didì a girl-soldier defended her small society during the First World War, while in the only two early Spanish series on recurring child characters the tinkering boy TBO left room for the inventive girl BB. In Belgium, lastly, Tintin forms a synthesis of all the possibilities that the figure of the superchild entails as well as one of the decisive consequences that the absence of family implies: the perpetual need of redefinition of the relationship with authority and social representation.

The autonomous tinkerer

No borders can enclose the superchildren. They are the contemporary form of the universalism of a civilization based on democracy and technology.

(Apostolidès 2003: 102)

Consistent with the work of Frezza (1995), the traditional heroic model of the monomyth described by Joseph Campbell in The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), endorses the figure of the child-adult, whose action is always configured within a dynamic search – a quête, in the sense developed by the tradition of the grailic literary studies (Cirlot 2014) – and, at the same time, as a reaction to the development of tools, of endless resources that give him autonomy. Many of the early comics in TBO and Corriere dei Piccoli star such autonomous boy-adults, also defined in the narratological studies of Wladimir Propp in Morphology of the Folktale (1968) and Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (1976). Ricard Opisso, for one, on the cover below (Figure 1) mythifies the boy TBO by uniting his 'childish' creativity with 'adult' scheming and tinkering. Through a disguise-trick with a goose, the clever kid scares off and traps burglars. Admittedly, the boy needs the adult man's power to actually catch the thief, but it is the boy's wit, imagination and handiness that solves the very real problem of a robbery.

Figure 1: TBO, 1923, issue 303, first two strips of page 1.

One of the few serialized characters and the mascot of the journal itself, the boy TBO embodies Campbell's and Propp's heroic child – the traditional character of Ivan in Russian tales. As a wielder of tools, he is able to acquire autonomy while helping others. Interestingly, the boy accomplishes these mythical proportions also thanks to serialization itself. As Groensteen (2012) remarked in his definition of série, recurrent characters were associated with modern novelties (amongst other tropes) to keep the series going. These innovations were, of course, determined by their sociocultural age, as Groensteen stresses: 'This program is made up of everything that the subject, the era and the definition of the characters carry within them as a set of possibilities' (Groensteen 2012). The boy TBO, thus, interacted with new and original activities as did other protagonists of (children's) comics magazines. As the French Bécassine en aéroplane or Les Pieds-Nickelés radio-reporters, TBO interacts with modern mechanics exploiting the 'potential narrative programme' (Eco 1993: 32), a prototypical formula emphasized and highlighted through serialization, which made these characters recognizable while showing their agency or autonomy.

As opposed to the French magazines, TBO's early series, aiming to address a child-reader, cleverly chose child protagonists, naming them after its supplements (the boy TBO and his female counterpart BB). TBO ran two series on these children whose titles both highlighted their 'überchildness'. TBO y la varita mágica gave the boy superpowers through a magic wand while in the other series, Los inventos de TBO, the boy (and on some occasions the girl BB) acted as a child engineer. In line with Groensteen's view, the 1920s were a period of heightened interest in mechanics which in the face of children's publications are to be linked to a pedagogy of handiness. The introduction of toys (such as Meccano, Lego) to enhance this handiness reflects that concern[3] and underlines the difference of target between cinema – usually addressed to a wider audience – and comics. In the series, the theme of construction empowered the child through agency and invigorated the child's resilience. Los inventos de TBO were vertical strips consisting of three or four panels with captions and rare balloons in which the boy invented all kinds of transport devices. Far from the ridiculous and futile creations by adults in another series in TBO (Los grandes inventos) the boy's mental and physical suppleness was positively highlighted. His constructions made sense. In rare cases his agency disrupted the harmony of

others, and his machines were mischief device gags similar to those of the bad boy engineers described by Gunning (2010: 101). The amphibian boat (Figure 2) allows the child to be a merry captain. He represents the modern and the mechanical clashing with the rural, bucolic landscape, interrupting the family's picnic. The boy's agency is complete, he wields his 'ingenious' 'magic' machine well, the captions could read: 'Out with the old, in with the new', a motto that could also identify the historical avant-garde of Futurism.

Figure 2: TBO, 1922, n. 262, last panel, page 2.

But in most episodes of the series TBO does not harm others. On the contrary, he is first and foremost a highly skilled engineer of a whole array of different ingenious transport systems: he builds an aeroplane out of a box containing a small motor and a propeller, a flying and a foldable boat or a speedy bike (Figure 3). This last invention, which is a trope in European and American illustrated press,4 deepens the boy's autonomy. His inventive intelligence prevails over the hand work of the adult (as in Opisso's cover in Figure 1). The agentic boy thus turns away from the eternal, cyclic behaviour of the typical trickster. He, as a superchild, symbolizes the bridge between present and future. He is oriented towards progression, since he is capable of imagining alternative solutions as no other adult (i.e. the past) has before (Uprichard 2008: 311). His inventions then are a 'promise, through technology, of an experience lived at a new level of intensity' (Duffy 2009: 5), only conceivable by a superchild's brain. His superpower is clever thinking, an essential competency which allows him to approach and 'defy whatever obstacles may come' as the final captions in Figure 3 state. The superchild is a modern human 'becoming' rather than 'being', unabashed by relatively new technological inventions. As Gardner claimed, for every anxiety-filled illustration on modernity 'there is a corresponding comic image which sees these discontinuities as eliciting not anxiety but humor, comfort, and new pleasures' (Gardner 2012: 11).

Figure 3: TBO, 1922, n. 264, central panel, page 2.

Although modern mechanics bestowed new pleasures and freedom upon the child (Gunning 2010: 148) this freedom was mainly to be enjoyed by males. Tintin shares some of these creative capacities. In Tintin au pays des Soviets (Tintin in the Soviet Union) (1930), we can see him create a train with an abandoned motor (1930: 19; Figure 4) or bully a farmer and inflate a flat tire with his breath after a chase (1930: 61). Remarkable for the superchild par excellence is that he struggles with technology and survival. The first train carriage crank breaks (1930: 17); he has difficulty identifying a car breakdown (even Snowy underlines that; 1930: 59) and he comes up with the absurd idea of lighting a fire on the ice of a lake (1930: 88). The superchild fails in Les Pieds Nickelés or Bécassine, when handling technology, he ends up falling repeatedly, builds an inverted propeller for the aeroplane in Tintin au pays des Soviets (1930: 113–14), and tries to hold onto the wing of an aeroplane in L'affaire Tournesol (The Calculus Affair) (1956: 41). Tintin's überchildishness then is less related to his manual skills than to a radical enhancement of inventiveness, although not always completely successful, which is one of the singularities of the character's behaviour and the distinctive feature of its status as a paradigm: the integration of the various possibilities with which it responds to a problem or social question.

As the mainly white, male examples shown, we must acknowledge that 'discourses of childhood are inextricably linked with discourses of race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationhood, and

citizenship' (Saguisag 2019: 5). The stayed association between males and mechanics (even up until today when we think of Brian Selznick's hybrid The Invention of Hugo Cabret (2008), was on rare occasions modified in TBO, as it is in contemporary series such as Moon Girl (2015). The super-inventive child could, seldom, be a girl, as was the case with some strips on Los inventos de BB. As the image in Figure 5 shows, BB's inventiveness is rather non-technical. Her ingenious problem-solving mocks modern inventions, i.e. luxurious Hispano Suiza cars built in Barcelona at the time, by resorting to natural resources. Her dog is the 'engine' of her 'car'. Albeit funny, the Pavlov effect on her dog Sultan relates the girl rather to a pre-industrial world than to technological progression and modernity. Still, her ironic words in the balloons reflect intelligence and emphasize her knowledge and critical awareness of existing technology.

The choice for the companionship of a dog, is also relevant. The dog reinforces the dominant position of the child, as in children's literature 'to dogs, men are gods' (Le Guin 2004: 23). Superchildren, apparently, can need an animal helper to overrule the social status quo. The word 'underdog' seems no coincidence. BB needs Sultan, Tintin commands Snowy. In the first Tintin adventures, for example, there is no sign of ingenuity nor, therefore, does the figure of the superchild appear in any way. Instead, Tintin embodies a heroic archetype based on strength, which displaces mischief and even sophistication towards Snowy. The dog is the main character of the type of gags that were typical of children in the American comics that Hergé had read, such as Buster Brown (1902), by Richard Felton Outcault, while Tintin struggles to define himself as a virtuous child.

Figure 4: Tintin au pays des Soviets (1930), page 19.

Figure 5: TBO, 1922, n. 242, last two panels, page 2.

The Spanish girl BB can enjoy the pleasure of modern progress in a rapidly changing society, also thanks to the help of her dog-companion. Her attitude reflects the progress felt in Spanish cities, as Spain profited from its neutral position in the First World War (Beascoechea Gangoiti and Otero 2015: 9). Italian children and their comic characters, for their part, lived through a very different decade. Italy entered the devastating the First World War in 1915 and war propaganda was propagated, even in magazines for children. The periodicals serialized boys and girls selflessly committing to the Italian cause, warmongering and irredentism. War, thus, changed what was 'super' about the superchild, turning it into a soldier-child, brave enough to face battle. On rare occasions this all-too-soon-mature soldier-child was female. The 'guile girl' stereotype in Corriere dei Piccoli did not display BB's playfulness, but ardent nationalism and bravery. Didì finds her parents arrested and is able to lock the Croatian enemy in the house thanks to her guile. Both girls, BB and Didì, share the ability to become independent people. Didì exceeds the expected competencies and knowledge attributed to girls and embodies the audacious and brave qualities normally linked to male characters, a behaviour in line with the construction of the female archetype and the feminine section within Italian fascism. Comics characters such as BB and Didì, although only to a certain degree superchildren given their dependence on their animals, offer 'othered' visions of the mental and physical resilience of a superchild while remaining linked to their historical momentum.

On the absence of family: Other bonds

One of the main characteristics of the superchild is his/her mythical quality of 'self-reproduction' (Apostolidès 2007: 50). Rather than a family, the superchild counts on a substitute community of friends both animal and human. These children are mostly orphans,5 but not pitiful orphans as they create a family of their own. Moreover, they are 'capable of taking on adult roles, such as the surrogate parent, and […] of functioning safely, responsibly and successfully independently of adults' (Hollindale 1997: 80). These series thus offer another take on the notion of 'childness' as defined by Hollindale. Superchildren reverse normal adult-child roles and can assume leadership (Hollindale 1997: 81). One example of this alternative vision on 'childness' is offered by Didì who in the face of a big conflict, of her parents' imprisonment, tries to outwit the enemy and offers 'parental' protection. Although dependent on her animals, she is able to develop into a 'caring' soldier in war time. Similarly, Tintin needs substitute friends who allow him to abolish the idea of the passage of time and of suffering: Calculus' fragility supports the story of his abduction in L'affaire Tournesol, and Tchang's friendship is the cause of the only two tears that Tintin lets run throughout all his adventures.

Corrierino starred further superchild characters lacking a nuclear family. For one, the series on three Chinese brothers (30 January 1909 until 30 January 1910), stereotyped as 'shrewd and delicate',6 work together with no parents in sight. Their brotherhood strengthens their mental and physical abilities (more specifically their ponytails) that grant them both entertainment and tools to accomplish things. The artist Attilio Mussino is both mocking their racial otherness, using an orientalist signature, and using these 'others' to instil proper social behaviour in the Italian bourgeois child reader.

The discourse of race in early-twentieth-century Corriere dei Piccoli is important as most (the only exception being Bilbolbul see endnote 1) of the pre-First-World-War superchildren are othered. The othered child in the Sunday pages exhibited welcomed characteristics to thrive in the capitalist-democratic society (Saguisag 2019: 5). But contrary to characters like the Yellow Kid, the Dutch or Chinese children in CdP are not diminished or infantilized. Instead, they symbolize überchildish traits and are both 'good' and 'mature'. An essential element of their good nature is that the Chinese boys show social engagement. With their ponytails they save younger children or care for the elderly. They put their physical and mental qualities to service in society, thus reconciling generations, a capacity Apostolidès deemed unique, paradigmatic, in relation to Tintin (Apostolidès 2007: 45–46).

Even when these othered characters are solitary, such as Attilio Mussino's serial character the Dutch boy Moritz (sometimes called Max, 1919–20), they selflessly assist aunts, uncles, strangers and peers alike. Far from being cunning tricksters, these characters exhibit wit at the service of others. Wit is the main characteristic which the anthropology of imagination created by Gilbert Durand (1999: 105) has defined as 'binding hero' and which points towards an androgynous synthesis of masculinizing heroic logics based on force – what Durand calls the diurnal regime (1999: 66–183) – and the figurative formulas that Durand links to the feminine, to the deep intelligence and intuition of the nocturnal-mystical regime.

A binding superchild like Moritz thus '[s]hares the burden of the weak, empathizes with the unlucky/unhappy, keeps on the side of the victims and the oppressed' (Apostolidès 2003: 101). While the name Moritz reminds any comics scholar of Busch's horribly punished trickster,7

Mussino's Moritz makes life easier for the small agricultural society he lives in (Carabba 1976: 20, 21), helping his bedridden grandfather in his battle against the irritating flies in summertime ;. (Figure 6) or to open his door; a blacksmith to keep his fire going; his peers to eat a healthy apple; his aunt to rock her baby without effort; or his uncle to motivate his mule. In short, he does the very opposite of Busch's Moritz, rather than unsettling adults' lives Moritz unites the village and the generations living within it. In doing so the village and all its generations fill the void of not having a nuclear family with a mother and/or a father, Moritz is situated in a self-reproduced circle of a larger society in which his 'überchildish' capacities – the pragmatic, autonomous and brave tinkerer – are put to the service of others.

Figure 6: CdP, 14 August 1910, n. 13, page 1.

Figure 7: TBO, 1922, n. 245, panels 4 and 6, page 2.

Italian serial character Moritz and Spanish mascot TBO are witty tinkerers; they design clever tools to put different generations to sleep. This almost identical invention reveals the lavish copying and spreading of children's comics in Europe and beyond, while showing the prominence of the superchild and its empathy and intergenerational bonding. The Spanish example (Figure 7) even highlights the fact that the superchild, after solving everyone else's problems, 'can finely dedicate himself to his endeavours in tranquillity' (translation of the final captions in Figure 7). He is a voracious, disciplined student who can contain his need for pleasure but he also needs his independence from parental control to fully realize himself.

This myriad of examples shows it is not so much the boy's physical strength – which in an agricultural society might have been of great(er) value – but his wit, cunningness and resourcefulness that makes him a respectable member of society. He is 'a projection of the patriarchal hero onto a younger representative. […] a living positive social myth' (Sutliff Sanders 2016: 102) that always flourishes outside of the bourgeois nuclear family circle.

The superchild vs. power and law

Precisely because of this oblique relationship with the family nucleus, these superchildren confront us with a question of greater significance in the definition of the character of the superchild and the nuances of its differentiation with respect to the virtuous child and the trickster: the assumption of authority and law. What most profoundly differentiates the child from the adolescent is his/her relationship with the law, which the former assumes while the latter, by definition, questions and rejects. This relationship allows to define the scope of the notion of the superchild in the comparison established in this article. In some of the TBO or CdP series, we have underlined episodic narrative sequences in which the child finds solutions based on ingenuity, alongside to those expected. The patriarch is missing, but the boy has emancipated himself. This emancipation unfolds, in the case of Tintin, following a geographical movement that allows him to encounter the other.

As both Apostolidès (2007) and Rey (1978) have pointed out, Tintin embodies all the mutations that the twentieth century introduces between the figure of the child and the different images and personifications of authority and power, from which emerges a certain model of innocence as well as of ethnocentric and cultural projection. Let us consider then, the condition of Tintin's

paradigm, understanding, with Agamben (2008: 33), that in the paradigm exemplariness and singularity are linked, and that it does not constitute an arché or original image, but a model of knowledge marked by historicity: The world of Tintin always illuminated by the midday sun (Vidal-Folch and De España 1996; De Santis 1998), and filtered through a 50-mm lens, translates into a unique narrative form the complex experience of child emancipation and the relationship between the individual and power in the twentieth century. Beyond the two figures indicated by Apostolidès (2003: 91), the despot embodied in Rastapopoulos and the monarch legitimized by the affection of his subjects, Tintin is stuck in a maze guarded by an endless number of guardians of the law. It is in this labyrinth that the superchild that is Tintin reveals the plurality of his nuances in the context of the history of European comics.

With Tintin, the hero without ties or family, seemingly innocent but at the same time shrewd and perpetually pushed into action – what Xavier Pérez and Núria Bou (2000) have called the 'acrobatic hero' in the field of cinema – coexists with the remainders of educational models based on the parables and lives of child saints, always ready to sacrifice for others or for their religious beliefs and, curiously, almost always without the protection of the family. The Golden Age of adventure, which emerged practically at the same time in the comic strips of the great American press and in the work of Hergé under well differentiated formulas, assembles in a new and permeable model the traditional heroic archetypes and Christian bourgeois morality with the singularities of capitalist societies in perpetual acceleration.

Figure 8: CdP, 22 June 1913, n. 25, last panel, page 1.

As discussed above, the superchild forms other bonds to substitute patriarchal structures, for example with peers. In this interrelatedness, and with the help of objects, (super)children achieve power and create their own law interacting with others through play. From the field of child psychology, the toy has usually been identified with the phenomenon of 'transitional space', which reveals the intermediate area of experience of the subject, of indistinction between inner subjectivity and the objectively shared world, based on a feeling of 'faith related to the credibility of the mother figure or environmental elements' (Winnicott 1974: 173), something that authors such as Gino Frezza (1999: 45) have applied to the field of comics. But nevertheless, for what concerns us regarding the superchild, objects also 'alter time and allow […] them to free [themselves] from sacred time and "forget […]" it in human time' (Agamben 1993: 70). In the evolution of the superchild from its initial configurations to the historical complexity of Tintin, the role of objects and even 'toys' in this profanatory role of play (Agamben 1993, 2005) is a fundamental aspect. Objects are a central issue in the desecration of ritual with which the game destroys and at the same time sustains social guidelines.

The toy is what belonged – once, no longer – to the realm of the sacred or of the practical-economic […] the essence of the toy […] is, then, an eminently historical thing; indeed, it is so to speak, the Historical in its pure state.

(Agamben 1993: 71)

Hence, objects, toys and mechanisms are fundamental in linking the figure of the superchild with its historical world. In the comic above (Figure 8) the boy Moritz creates a mechanical object to solve a blacksmith's problem. This pre-industrial tool links the characters to a different

historical context. While keeping the forge blowing, the boy binds his peers in play. This pre-industrial world and the intergenerational utopia within would have been light years away from the reality of 1910 Milan that was becoming an increasingly illuminated and electrified city (Righi 2013).

The peculiarity of these objects is that, in addition to being a threshold in which game, desecration of ritual, and time collide – that is the case of the modification of objects in BB and in the comic above – in the adventures of Tintin, objects carry two other mechanisms: the colonial logic of the museum, through objects such as the figurine of the broken ear (L'Oreille cassée) (1937), or the sign of the Pharaoh Kih-Oskh in Les cigares du Pharaon (Cigars of the Pharaoh) (1934), imported from exotic places, and the idea of the model. Before contemplating the rocket of Objectif Lune (Destination Moon) (1953) and On a marché sur la Lune (Explorers on the Moon), his scale model appears, in the same way that happens with the ultrasonic weapons of L'affaire Tournesol. Just as/in the same way that superchild internalizes social modes and instances, the objects or models in which each of Tintin's albums can be summarized embody contemporaneously the law and the possibility of a liberation from that law. As Agamben himself has pointed out in 'Magic and happiness' (2005) according to Walter Benjamin, 'the first experience that the child has of the world is not that "adults are stronger" but rather their inability for magic', understanding that only magic can bring happiness. However, the narrative form created by Hergé is increasingly complex, inasmuch as it gradually integrates the experience of the subject before the history of the twentieth century. In a broad sense, we can affirm that, in the trajectory of CdP, TBO and the interval that opens between Alain Saint-Ogan and Hergé, a change of status is formulated in the representation of the child, which in addition to becoming an object of family care and an 'investment' of the bourgeois family it also becomes an engineer of himself and a complex historical subject.

Unlike the linear episodic and serial comics in TBO and CdP, the narrative structures created by Hergé from Les cigares du Pharaon never resolve situations self-conclusively, as could be presumed in a sequence structured according to the monomyth or in the narrative phases of the traditional tale described by Propp (1968) or Bettelheim (1976). Rather the action is constantly rushing towards new directions (Pérez 2007). The founding enigmas, the initial clues that instigate the investigation of Tintin, are always a threshold towards a geographical displacement, on the one hand, and towards the confrontation with an endless number of non-sequiturs, on the other. The search for Tintin breaks down, recedes and becomes entangled in increasingly complex plots that project his character towards a different drift from the heroic profile that, with authors such as Jacques Martin, Willy Vandersteen or Paul Cuvelier, crystallized in Le Journal de Tintin from 1946.

Often seduced by the mystery of a pregnant and enigmatic image – the sign of the Pharaoh, the intact statuette replacing the museum's stolen idol in The Broken Ear, the label on the tin can of Le Crab aux pinces d'or (The Crab with the Golden Claws) (1941) – Tintin is a subject who struggles to clarify the definition of his own identity in the face of power and law. As for the characters in CdP and TBO, the absence of a family is the condition from which to re-read the idea of a social law. Tintin assumes and respects a patriarchal power embodied, through a hereditary pact, in paternal figures such as the monarch of Sildavia. Nevertheless, the king is a character who rejects the totalitarian impulses of Dr Müller, Rastapopoulos or Colonel Sponsz,

echoes of historical figures such as Hitler or Mussolini but, above all, personifications of what Lacan has called the father-of-jouissance (Lacan 1991: 135; Žižek 2000: 50), a haunting figure driven by a libidinal will for power, destruction and rupture of social forms.

The basis of an education capable of generating an emancipated child – not necessarily a virtuous child or an adult perfectly embedded in society but a child skilled and able of knowing in the sense defended by Comenius in works such as his Didactica magna (1633–38) and Schola Pansophica (1650–51) supposes his/her ability to know how to dialogue, integrate and subjugate or circumvent the laws of social functioning when they demand unthinking obedience. This question, as essential for CdP, TBO and, for obvious historical reasons, Hergé as for theorists like Hannah Arendt (1958, 1987, 1997, 1999) is a warning about the role played by blind obedience and the bureaucratic spread of guilt in the greatest disasters of the twentieth century, and can be clarified with precision by dissociating Tintin from one of the ideas contemplated in CdP: sacrifice. There are only two key moments in which it is highlighted in the adventures of Tintin, in Tintin au Tibet (Tintin in Tibet) (1960) when Haddock is about to cut the rope that binds the young reporter in a moment of extreme danger (Figure 9), and in On a marché sur la Lune (1954), with the suicide of the engineer Wolff (p.55), tepidly euphemized by editorial demands, as Hergé himself pointed out in his interview with Numa Sadoul (1975).

Figure 9: Tintin au Tibet (1960), last two strips, page 40.

This idea of sacrifice, which Sadoul explores based on Hergé's experiences with psychoanalysis, appears at the limit of the creation of the social group, where the proximity between the characters is greatest. As Pablo de Santis has pointed out, unlike the comic characters of a modernist author like Pratt, who 'live by saying goodbye', shunning social norms, Hergé's characters 'live by meeting again' (1998: 63). In his first solitary formulation, Tintin is a boy who has internalized the law, and exercises it in a brutal and vertical way through violence, on the Congolese – whom he dictates orders to straighten a locomotive while he does not deign to collaborate – and on animals.

In Tintin in America (1932) an image emerges that will accompany Tintin throughout all the albums: that of police violence and the need to flee from the social incarnation of the forces of order. While in this album the disagreement with the police is redeemed by understanding and final collaboration, in Les cigares du Pharaon, the pursuit of Dupont and Dupond inaugurates an endless escape. From that moment on, Tintin must find the ethical conditions of his performance outside the space of the socially agreed law, as far as children from CdP and TBO must perform their own behaviour out of the family circle. The continuous escapes of the reporter in The Blue Lotus, with the forces of the international protectorate and Dupont and Dupond in his wake are only a tepid omen of the evocation of the war in the Gran Chaco and the conflict of legitimacies in The Broken Ear, with corrupt military, police or hierarchies trying to put an end to Tintin activity.

While the American slapstick had cultivated the idea of the stupid cops, the famous keystone cops, at the dawn of cinema, this confrontation represents a development of the superchild's traits of ethical independence in publications such as CdP and TBO mediated by the perception of a history that always ends up finding a new nuance in legitimacy, another in the other, such as the dispute between tribes in The Broken Ear, the tragic figure of the gorilla in L'Île noire (The

Black Island) 1938), whose treatment would have been unimaginable in Tintin in the Congo. But Hergé is also capable of introducing a displacement comparable to the ironic games that Georges Herriman could incorporate in Krazy Kat (1913–44) and Rudolph Dirks in his Katzenjammer Kids (1897–present): after presenting Tintin as an embodiment of the affection towards the legitimation of European monarchies in the face of Nazism in Le Sceptre d'Ottokar (The Scepter of Ottokar) (1939) Hergé dislodges the condition of superchild to Haddock in L'affaire Tournesol. Led by his friendship with Tournesol, Haddock advances guided by that faith in indestructibility (Bloom 1994: 127 ff.) that links the figure of the superchild to models of the modern novel such as Cervantes's Don Quixote.

Afterlives of the superchild

Both the image of Tintin fleeing or fighting any official incarnation of the law and Hergé's awareness of the divergence between his model and those of those comics that had accompanied his adolescence – the image of Abdallah writing the word 'End' in Tintin in the Land of Black Gold is a direct allusion to Buster Brown – are figures that acquire complexity until they reach a confrontation with the irrational in The Seven Crystal Balls or The Shooting Star and the media universe of mirrors, falsehoods and ambiguity of Tintin and the Pícaros or Flight 714 to Sydney, where the idea of ubiquitous power and the 'society of the spectacle' (Debord 1967 n.pag.) takes over the modelling of the superchild. It is important, at this point, to remember that Hergé's characters preserve strong roots in the European tradition, in this long lineage that opens up between illustrated children's stories and the comic thought as an object for childhood, from CdP and TBO to Quick et Flupke (1930) and The Adventures of Jo, Zette and Jocko (1935). That is why Tintin assumes the heroic structure of the adventure but remains outside the assumption of the tragic in the North American narratives of the time – Gasoline Alley (1918–), by Frank King, The Newlyweds (1904), by Georges McManus, Terry and the Pirates (1934–45), by Milton Caniff – designed for all audiences consumption in mainstream press. In the comics in our corpus the forever young did not face ageing or death. As Pérez (2012) has pointed out, Tintin is a character that frequently, even in situations of extreme danger, falls asleep, and wakes up like a child. The objects that populate his adventures are, like toys, also thresholds towards an adventure in which his superchild status can interact directly with a world of adult threats, dangerous and unethical modulations of the law. That is a first and key conclusion of this hermeneutic comparative comic approach: as far as connected with traditional heroic structures and archetypes, the superchild figure admits confrontation with history, allowing a perpetual tension between fairy tale skills of the adult-child and the real adult world of complexity. The group of friends, conceived as a supplementary family, is not an invariable Arcadia, but a perpetually reformulated network of relational threads always in danger. From the mechanical skills of TBO and BB wanted in the increasingly technological-mechanical labour market of the 1920s and 1930s to the society represented in late Tintin adventures there is a pseudomorphosis8 that sustains the essence of the archetype: the authority, discipline and consent of the superchild, his or her abilities to become an emancipated figure – not an adult, but a child-adult – that always implies the absence of family and the simultaneous phantom of the trope of family.

This absence of family and his permanent spectral presence, and this is a second important conclusion, does not suppose a major break with tradition to reconnect with individual and

property values of capitalism. As insinuated in CdP and TBO characters and confirmed by Tintin, the superchild archetype integrates this contradiction. As a consequence, it is possible to open this research towards a further expansion in contemporary characters in order to validate one of the most significant intuitions involved in this archaeological – in the sense of Foucault (1969) and Agamben (2019) – comparison: the coexistence of magic and a principle of reality opened to politics and history. Magic, Agamben points out,

means precisely that no one can be worthy of happiness; that as the ancients knew, happiness for man is always hybris, it is always arrogance and excess. But if someone manages to reduce fortune with deception, if happiness depends, not on what that person is, but on an enchanted nut or an open-sesame, then and only then can one say truly happy.

(2005: 22)

The question is that the superchild is a trans-historical archetype precisely because it integrates complex historical contexts while not being limited to a singular moral or ethical moment. As Agamben points out, morality has taught the child that happiness is to be deserved, that one has to be worthy of it (Agamben 2005: 22). Modern fables, fables that emerged from the tension between productive society and a numinous consciousness of nature, enhance a happiness that arises from merit. The most archaic fairy tales, on the other hand, guard a wisdom in which emancipation also involves trust in magic. The superchild and its figural (Brenez 1998) and iconographic representation as a pre-teenager and adult-child, in the examples studied in this article, profoundly evaluates questions of family law, morality, reason, inclination, game, ritual, order and authority. Through the figure of the superchild, these issues are reordered in a new field of tension, that can be extended to other central aspects for understanding the evolution of European comics, such as the gender issue and the birth of archetypes of modernity in the 1970s of the twentieth century marked by a coincidence between super-maturity and adolescent condition, and always without family: Hugo Pratt's Corto Maltese, Jean Giraud's (Moebius) Lieutenant Blueberry or even Guido Crepax' Valentina.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

1.   TBO and Corriere dei Piccoli are both the most longevous publications of children's comics in their national context. TBO's popularity resulted in the official use of the Spanish term to denominate the medium or at least that format of publication intended for a juvenile audience, i.e. tebeo. Corriere dei Piccoli was a product of a major newspaper and very well known among both the literate and the illiterate, it is considered the first true comics' magazine for children in Italy (Brancato and Abruzzese 2008: 61).

2.   An important exception is the African boy Bilbolbul who literally suffers a panoply of metamorphoses that visualize linguistic expressions. Colonialism, as Mariella Colin has shown, was, in the 1910s, a predominant theme in Italian children's literature in general (Colin 2005: 310). Laura Scarpa recently edited a volume on colonialism in early Corriere dei Piccoli: Le storie nere del Corriere dei piccoli: il colonialismo italiano del primo 900, a fumetti (Scarpa 2019).

3.   This could, as Dionisio Platel suggested, reflect a general tendency towards the child engineer, as can be seen in the introduction of Meccano in the 1920s in Spain: http://www.meccanoweb.es/historia.htm. . Accessed 1 September 2021.

4.   The history of the caged animals used for propelling machines is described by Sausverd:

The idea of the circular cage in which an animal (squirrel or other) rotates, and which serves as a motor for various machines designed by G. Ri is not original either. We have spotted a first appearance in the German magazine. Fliegende Blätter in 1893. Simply entitled Praktisch ('Practical' in English), the drawing, signed by Adolf Hengeler, shows how a German settler living in Kentucky replaces the wheels of his cart with circular cages in which bear cubs are locked. This ingenious animal-driven vehicle operates using meat bait perched above the hungry animals who go chasing after them, which makes the wheels spin.

(http://neuviemeart.citebd.org/spip.php?article1304&fbclid=IwAR2p2KhQhyUpwJQwPTE3_OvF G3lznYo4C9WS4zuWqpURPAOeU7A5vhOLPOk. Accessed 3 September 2020, translation added)

5.   Apostolidès indicated 'the implicit link between being an orphan and being a superchild' (2003: 22).

6.   The rhymed couplet goes: 'shrewd and fine they know how to make use of pigtails'.

7.   Max und Moritz – Eine Bubengeschichte in sieben Streichen (1885) by Wilhelm Busch constitutes a model of imitation with respect to the figure of the trickster, mischievous and, sometimes, also ingenious children.

8.   We understand by 'pseudomorphosis' not just the survival of iconographic traces of the past but also the reappropriation of forms, features and gestural constellations, on which new meanings and connotations are deposited, in accordance with the use of the term modelled by Erwin Panofsky in his Studies in Iconology (1972) and in Tomb Sculpture, four lectures on its changing aspects from ancient Egypt to Bernini (1964). It should be noted that the term was previously used by Oswald Spengler in Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte (The Decline of the West) (1918–22).