

# The Adventures of Tintin: A generic boy scout travels a computer-generated world

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*Directed by Steven Spielberg, based on comic strips by Hergé*

In *The Adventures of Tintin*, director Steven Spielberg sets out to render the Belgian comic strip Tintin in film using motion-capture animation technology. The film recently won Best Animated Feature Film at the 2012 Golden Globe Awards.

Loosely based on several of Belgian cartoonist Hergé's Tintin books, primarily *The Secret of the Unicorn*, the film tells the story of how teenage reporter Tintin finds himself embroiled in a search for buried treasure in pre-World War II Europe and Africa, after gangsters kidnap him to get a model ship he purchased in an open-air market. Along his way, strewn as it is with rapid fire action sequences, Tintin meets Captain Haddock, lays waste to a hapless Moroccan city, and relies critically on his bumbling policemen friends, Thomson and Thompson.

It turns out that the story revolves around a confrontation between the ancestors of a leading gangster and of Haddock, to whose ancestor the treasure belonged. The story ends happily (as always, in Tintin stories) and with the promise of a sequel—as nearly always, in movies these days.

The idea of bringing a Belgian comic strip to an audience outside Europe through animation is interesting, and has a successful track record. In the 1980s, Hanna Barbera studios turned Peyo's *Les Schtroumpfs* (*De Smurfen* in Flemish) into the popular *Smurfs* series on US television.

Its Golden Globe notwithstanding, *The Adventures of Tintin* does not seem destined for such success. Despite the varied locales and plot twists of Hergé's books, and

the digital wizardry of contemporary Hollywood, it is an oddly synthetic, colorless film.

Partly, it is that digital imaging technology by itself does not solve every problem. It generates landscapes recreating something of Hergé's often striking drawings; the human characters are certifiably plastic, however, stuck somewhere between Hergé's simple lines-and-dots sketches and actual humans. The physical humor in Hergé's drawings also falls somewhat flat, with the Thomson-Thompson gags feeling unexpectedly labored.

The problem of making a cartoon character seem genuinely human in a feature film is, of course, a difficult one. Hergé was a gifted cartoonist, despite his unspeakably right-wing politics, with remarkable visual imagination and a sure sense for building a well-paced plot line over his 62-page books. However, Tintin's easy and uncomplicated personality, which makes him accessible to children, does not give a filmmaker much material for character development.

*The Adventures of Tintin* manifestly calculates that audiences will expect drama, romance, or other adult emotional content in a feature film; it tries and fails to inject such content into the main characters. A totally uncharacteristic bout of discouragement on Tintin's part elicits a motivational speech from Haddock, whose outsized consumption of whiskey the film makes the subject of moral philosophizing about alcoholism and personal failure.

Even leaving aside the fact that introspection and guilt have little to do with the ethos of the original comics, such questions cannot be effectively treated with two-dimensional cartoon characters like Tintin or Haddock.

The blankness of the main characters is, moreover, deeply bound up with the tortured history of the Tintin

comics, which emerged from Hergé's close ties to ultra-right Belgian youth groups and political circles. Hergé (the pen name of Georges Remi) began the Tintin series while working for the children's publication of *Le Vingtième Siècle* under fascist Abbot Norbert Wallez, an admirer of Mussolini. Hergé drew cartoons of a boy scout character, Totor, who was a prototype for Tintin.

In their original versions, the early Tintin books were often propaganda cartoons based on current events and serialized in the Belgian fascist press. *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* (1929) is a crude work of anti-Communist propaganda; *Tintin in the Congo* (1931) gives a racist endorsement of Belgium's bloody colonialism in Africa.

During the 1930s, Hergé knew Léon Degrelle, the leader of Belgium's fascist Rex Movement and future leader of its SS division. The current film is based on escapist cartoons Hergé prepared in Nazi-occupied Belgium during World War II, when he worked for the collaborationist Francophone paper *Le Soir*.

After World War II, Hergé benefitted from the Belgian and French bourgeoisie's campaign to cover up their collaboration with Nazi Germany. Though Hergé was detained four times on collaboration charges, Tintin's popularity helped save him from prosecution; Wallez escaped the death penalty and served only a few years in prison, though Degrelle was shot. Hergé emerged unscathed, though he suffered from psychiatric problems, and sections of the Belgian population who had fought in the Resistance boycotted his books.

In the late 1940s, Hergé extensively edited his pre-war books. *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* disappeared from bookstores; several books—including *Tintin in the Congo* and the wartime book *The Shooting Star*, with its anti-Semitic imagery—were redrawn and given less offensive texts. The result was a cartoon series that remained popular, though Hergé's output of new albums slowed after the war.

The new, politically sanitized Tintin remained essentially a Belgian boy scout traveling a morally black-and-white world, getting into various scrapes—a reporter with no deadlines, girlfriends, or limits on his budget, but who always has a plan and knows the right thing to do. The details of his life are generic enough that he can be transplanted from Belgium to Britain, as Spielberg does in *The Adventures of Tintin*, without the

moviegoer noticing that much has changed.

Involving as it does a film adaptation (and by an American director!) of what has become a European cultural icon, *The Adventures of Tintin* has elicited a goodly share of absurd reactions from Tintin aficionados, particularly in the European press. The most outsized may have come from the *Guardian* in Britain. Denouncing the “bombast of the modern blockbuster, Tintin for morons,” the newspaper commented: “Something of great subtlety, beauty and artfully deceptive complexity, resonance, and depth has been betrayed, and it is time to make a stand.”

Even more disturbing, however, are the few instances where the mainstream press has tried to take up the issue of Hergé's past.

One such article, published in the *Australian*, declares: “The magic of Tintin derives directly from Remi's wartime experience—not because the comic strip reflected Nazi thinking, but because Remi deliberately divorced his creation from the ferocious ideological currents at the time, and in so doing forged the ultimate hero for children.”

Leaving aside the falsification of Remi's record, one does not know what is more distasteful and reactionary here. Is it the idea that the “ultimate hero” for children in the World War II period would necessarily have been created by someone who successfully made a career amid mass murder and fascism in Nazi-dominated Europe? Or is it the idea that artistic “magic” comes from the artist's ability to hold aloof from and cover up the realities of his time?



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