

# Special Feature

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Philippe Videlier & Pierine Piras

## Health in strip cartoons

Strip cartoons are among the most vivid means of communication at our disposal, and they are particularly popular with the young. Medical matters have featured in many stories, though usually in a peripheral role. Could more be done to use this powerful medium, or would deliberate exploitation destroy it?

Hergé said in his last interview that he had always refused to put Tintin at the service of a cause, even a humanitarian one, mainly because of the structure of the medium. He maintained that the strip cartoon by its very nature was not suitable for major subjects: "Raoul Follereau, the missionary of the lepers, once asked me to write a story set among his charges. I could not accept. One cannot be humorous about such a subject. The Tintin stories are not just adventures; they contain a certain type of humour also" (1).

It is indeed important to distinguish strip cartoons made for entertainment—an art form—from educational productions that use the narrative technique. It is the difference between a Jack London novel and

a first aid manual, or between a Hollywood feature film and a documentary on the eradication of malaria.

Educational films do not always produce the expected effect. In *The Gutenberg galaxy* (2), Marshall McLuhan relates how a short film on the drainage of stagnant pools was once shown in an African community, to demonstrate what could be done to improve the health of the village. When the villagers were asked what they had seen in the film, the unanimous reply was "a chicken". In fact, for a fraction of a second, a chicken *had* crossed in front of the camera, and it was that fleeting image that had registered on the villagers. They had registered nothing of the subject of the film; instead they had seen an insignificant detail that the film-makers themselves had not noticed until then. McLuhan used this example to show how images are culturally situated and culturally determined. The image is a convention, a social artefact. This is the way to approach the health message of strip cartoons, both when the point seems obvious and when it seems irrelevant.

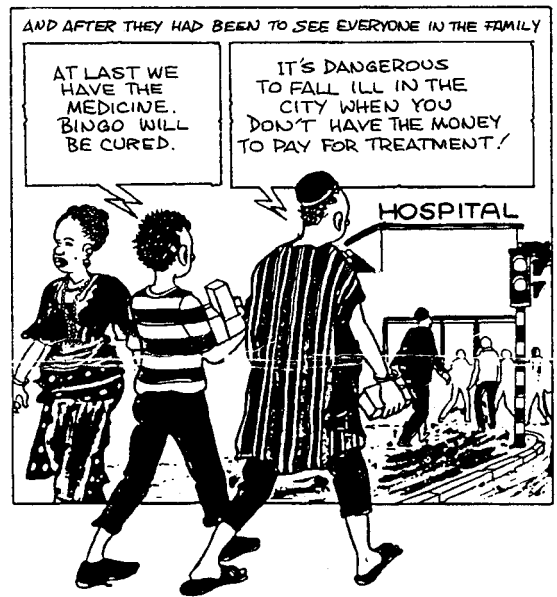
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## A popular medium

Health in the broadest sense is often represented in strip cartoons—naturally enough since this narrative mode portrays society, and no aspect of society is foreign to it. However, as is the case with all cultural artefacts, the image it conveys has its own properties, which might be termed “formative” rather than informative in that they help to mould a perception of the world. By the time of his death, Hergé had sold 90 million albums of the adventures of Tintin, which is an indication of the influence he had. This wide distribution of strip cartoons in itself justifies an interest in the medium from several points of view. Since the Hearst Group in the USA founded the King Features Syndicate in 1914 to have the strips drawn by its artists published in the greatest possible number of newspapers, millions of readers have taken a daily ration of comics. *Bringing up father*, begun in 1913, was a great popular and commercial success that earned its author 20 000 dollars a week in 1925. 1990 is the 40th anniversary of the *Peanuts* strips by Charles M. Schultz, which appear in 2293 newspapers in 77 countries. In France, a survey of borrowers in libraries in 1989 revealed to the chagrin of librarians that the most-read author was René Goscinny, the creator of Asterix (drawn by Uderzo) and the writer of Lucky Luke (drawn by Morris). Almost as popular was Franquin, creator of Gaston Lagaffe (3).

In an essay of 1939, George Orwell opined that the best available indication of what the mass of English people really felt and thought was to be found in the contents of newsagents' shops in poor areas—a few dailies, twopenny magazines devoted to various hobbies, boys' weeklies, and comics (4). But the comic strip is not just an American or European phenomenon: colonial domination and post-colonial hegemony have spread it to many parts of



*Bingo en ville* by Mongo Sisé, Zaire, 1981, published by Eur-Af.

the globe. Orwell said that the boys' weeklies of suburban England were awaited with as much impatience in Australia, Canada, and Malaysia as in England. Hergé was always puzzled and delighted that his hero was as popular in Calcutta and Kinshasa as in Brussels. Some countries have just as long a tradition of strip cartoons of their own—Argentina, China, and Mexico, for instance. In 1932, the writer Mao Dun described the racks of *lianbuanhua* (picture chains), which were always surrounded by children in the streets of Shanghai. “Strangely enough”, he said, “these mobile libraries have become extremely popular and are the most powerful and widespread channel of mass education” (5).

Strip cartoons are now produced in Algiers, Dakar, and Bangui and are a well-established tradition in Madagascar; the Latin American strip cartoons—Luis Salinas, Breccia, and Quino—are world-famous, and new areas of the medium are being explored

in Brazil and Peru; strip cartoons are thriving in Japan, and there is one in the Philippines that is very popular but not always of high quality. A world tour of comics would never end. Although

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dominated by Western production, strip cartoons come from various sources and have many different messages, graphic strategies, and audiences.

To find out what strip cartoons have to say about health, even if we limit ourselves to the European and American scene, entails two procedures—to discern what a genre that works mainly through archetypes may reveal of conscious and unconscious attitudes to health, and to show how the various messages depend on the series they are in—whether for adults or children, in dailies or weeklies or albums, whether humorous, romantic, or escapist. Strip cartoons, like cinema and literature, must always be analysed in context.

In a century, strip cartoons have passed from a primitive stage (from the nineteenth century until the 1920s) through a classical stage (from the 1930s to the 1950s) to a modern age that emerges with productions like *Peanuts* (1950), *Mad* and *Help!* magazines in the USA, and French magazines such as *Pilote* and *Charlie* in the 1960s. The strip cartoon generally goes from humour (they were mostly humorous in the early days, hence the American names “funnies” or “comics”) to adventure stories (nonexistent in 1929 and already 50% of total production

a decade later) to aesthetic and perhaps intellectual or anti-Establishment concerns in the modern day.

The strip cartoon delivers a multifarious social and ideological message whose development is aesthetic and narrative and whose language differs from that of cinema or literature, although it contains elements of both. Roland Barthes said that the image is more imperious than the written text in that it imposes its meaning at once, without analysis or dispersion (6).

This is the starting-point for any thematic analysis. As a genre—literature expressed graphically, to borrow the phrase of the cinematographer Alain Renais—and subject to certain rules (sequences of images forming a meaningful whole, integration of text and image), the strip cartoon has its own way of discussing our society that can never be reduced to the message of its individual stories.

Health comes into strip cartoons in at least three ways:

- medical adventures or stories focused on a physician;
- health as an element of suspense, or part of the adventure;
- the depiction of ways of life.

### Medical adventure stories

Adventure stories whose heroes are doctors are not uncommon. The famous flying doctors of Australia, for example, allow for a combination of heroic characters with aviation in a new country, and for this reason they have inspired a variety of authors, including John Dixon, whose *Air Hawk* appeared in Australia in 1959, Willy Lambil, who produced *Le docteur volant* (The

flying doctor) in Belgium in 1964, and Guy Vidal, whose *Ian McDonald, le médecin volant* (Ian McDonald, flying doctor) was published in France in 1969. In the same way some African adventure cartoons have a doctor as the main character, such as *Dr Gladstone* by Jijé, Herbert & Jadoul (Belgium, 1964-71). This type of character is a well-intentioned hero—Gladstone helps the blacks and has a black assistant—but such characters are giving way to the modern heroic type of roving doctor inspired by Médecins sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde.

WHO itself has been the basis of a number of strip cartoons. Stories were published in *Pilote* in 1966 about exotic missions conducted by a team from the Organization. Similarly the French weekly *Pif* ran a popular strip called *Dr Justice*, by Ollivier and Marcello, that started in 1970 and was put on screen five years later (7); it always began with the phrase: "My name is Justice, Dr Benjamin Justice of WHO". A footnote expanded the acronym, to add authenticity no doubt. Later the WHO acronym was replaced in the story by the fictitious IHO (International Health Organization), which perhaps gave greater freedom of action.

In the 1980s the Paris-based organizations Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) and Médecins du Monde (MDM) eclipsed WHO as a symbol of emergency medical aid. The hero of MSF, a roving doctor with the right to intervene, enjoys great prestige in Europe because the stories relate to events widely reported on television, such as the rescuing of boat people from the *Ile-de-Lumière* (Island of Light) in the China Sea. This, it can be said without offence, is the modern substitute in the European collective imagination for the "good doctor" of the old colonial stories, a kind of human rights superman—a figure

not entirely devoid of ambiguity. The first Jeanette Pointu story by Wasterlain, *Le dragon vert* (The green dragon), which appeared in Belgium in 1982, was based quite clearly on the *Ile-de-Lumière* story on the margins of the Vietnamese conflict. Jeanette Pointu, reporter and photographer, returning from Babuchistan (Afghanistan), meets a team from MSF on their way to Zailand to help Khompotian refugees.

With MSF's agreement, there is a series bearing its name in *Okapi*, a French fortnightly publication of Catholic tendencies, whose educational role is much appreciated by parents. In a short preface to the album, the Vice-President of MSF catches the link between real life and the strip cartoon when he says that this cartoon is "the sign of the bond between those children with dreams and those, hardly older, who have taken up the struggle in their name, throughout the world... Because they are living in the midst of human tragedy, their experience can be recounted in the language of the strip cartoon" (8).



*Dr Justice* by Ollivier and Marcello, France, 1970. © VMS Publications/PIF.

Adventure is part and parcel of strip cartoons. This is clear from the titles of series published in the French-speaking world: *Les aventures de Jeanette Pointu, reporter-photographe*, *Les aventures de Tintin*, *Les nouvelles aventures des Pieds Nickelés*, *Une aventure d'Astérix Le Gaulois*, *Les aventures extraordinaires d'Adèle Blancsec*, and so on, or in the names of the popular illustrated magazines of Italy in the 1930s such as *L'Avventuroso*, *L'Audace*, and *Intrepido*, and those in Spain such as *Cine-Aventura*, *Aventurero*, and *Aventuras y misterio*.

There are basically two themes in strip cartoons — humour and adventure, although they are not mutually exclusive. This is equally true of those whose subject is the medical world. In this narrative genre, health tends to be more the pretext for the story than its centre: the nub is detective or military suspense. The “health” component, in other words, is subservient to the adventure story, which is in the world of conflict. In *Le dragon vert*, whose background is the Cambodian drama, MSF plays only a minor role, a foil to the central character, providing the ideological background to the

with dangers. In *Mission en Afrique* (African mission), where the emergency doctor is very much in evidence (setting up a field hospital, conducting surgical operations and decontaminations), the MSF hero protects the embattled villagers from the ill-disciplined troops of the Life-President of Nagorah, a fictional African country, and from the leader of the rebels. If there is a lot of healing in *Mission en Afrique*, it is because there is a lot of shooting, and the mainspring of this story is a power struggle compounded by trafficking in lucrative commodities. The adventures of Dr Justice often have even less to do with medicine: Dr Justice usually arrives in a country for a medical congress and is hardly off the plane before he is involved in incredible adventures that give him ample scope to display his skill in karate.

The adventure side, without which strip cartoons lose most of their attraction, is apparent even in the title of a Third-World series: *Les baroudeurs sans frontières* (Fighters without borders) by Jarry, which combines the attraction of the swashbuckling *baroudeurs* with the idealistic implications of the *sans frontières* tag. Paradoxically this series gets to grips with real health problems in a way that the doctor stories do not — blood-trafficking in Brazil, the promotion of powdered milk in Africa and so on — all presented in the form of detective stories.

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story, the focus of which is the heroine's search in a war-torn country for a young man on a mission from the European Economic Community (EEC) — in other words a chase through an Asian jungle beset

Humour is another approach to the medical world. It is to be seen in *Dr Smock* by George Lemont (USA), and there is also a degree of social satire in the French cartoons *Docteur Ventouse, bobologue* (Doctor Ventouse, treater of trivial ailments), *Le destin de Monique* (Monique's fate) by Claire Bretécher and Binet's *Les Bidochons assujettis sociaux* (The downtrodden Bidochons). The Claire Bretécher albums contain mordant satire of both the aberrations of high-tech medicine (pointless use of artificial insemination,

inadequacies of computer diagnosis) and the snobbery of certain medical circles in Paris. Diseases tend to be the result of excessive tennis or golf and unhealthy middle-class living, while the physicians themselves cut a dash in society (thanks partly to their involvement with Médecins sans Frontières). Binet, on the other hand, sets his satires among working-class people. Instead of “tennis-elbow”, the problems are lung cancer or infarction. The Bidochon characters, unlike Claire Bretécher’s, are not on the same social footing as the medical profession: they are disparaged by the unsympathetic doctors, and they go to the public hospital — six beds to a ward and cabbage for dinner.

comprised a series of cliffhanger endings in a storyline so tenuous that, when they were published as albums, it was possible to omit a quarter of the strips without really damaging the whole. These were the adventures of a gang of tricksters who

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### Health as an element of the adventure story

Time in the strip cartoon, as in the cinema, is condensed, foreshortened, and intensely lived. Of “real life” nothing remains but that which advances the story: events where the ordinary is minimized. Adventure, suspense, and humour come from abnormal situations. The adventure genre usually boils down to a struggle against adversity, while the comic genre is basically a distortion of conventional roles.

In this dual context, health is an ingredient of the story. For strip cartoons, the hospital, accidents and illness are elements that can be used to construct a plot.

In the early days, when the story did not have a proper script, strip cartoons comprised a simple succession of events whose only unity arose from the need to keep up the interest of the reader from one day to the next or one week to the next. Thus, the adventures of the *Pieds Nickelés* (The Layabouts) created in 1908 by Forton,

wandered far and wide, neatly hoodwinking their victims in every possible way. In the early 1930s, for example, they open a “Medico-Homeopatho-Therapeutic Institute” whose purpose is to relieve patients of their savings to the amusement of the young reader. When that vein was exhausted, they moved on to a sea story, making the transition in a few frames, between the observation — “Things are going wrong/it’s time to hop it/thats our best bet” — and the relocation — “Meanwhile, the Pieds Nickelés, who had made themselves scarce, met up again in a bar in the old port”. *Tintin in the land of the Soviets* (1929-30) is no more complex in structure. Incident, illness, drunkenness, etc., all help the story to progress.

The exact opposite of these frantic romps is the stretched-out time of soap opera. Health once again is a dramatic resource, but this time in an atmosphere of shop girls’ romanticism. The sob stories of poor but talented doctors and devoted nurses are the

## Three ways of speaking of health

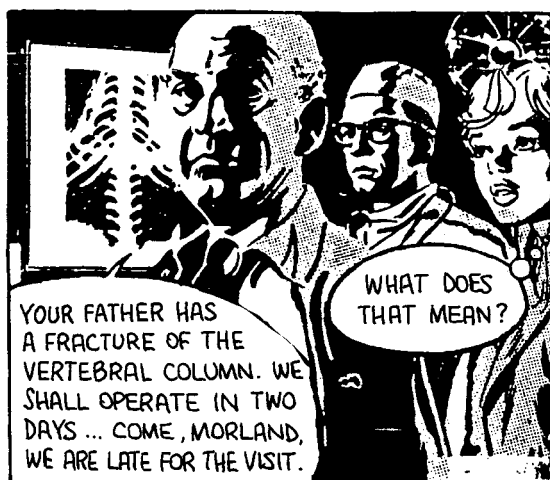


From that moment he devoted himself entirely to his work. In the first week he examined 520 casualties, and in a month he operated on 147, who were soon back on active service.

*Norman Bethune in China, by several authors, China, 1973.*



*Le secret de Jimmy Torrent by Raymond Reding, Belgium, 1960. © Lombard/Reding.*



*13 rue de l'Espoir by Paul Gillon, France, 1959. © Humano S.A./ Humanoïdes Associés.*

stuff of Middle American dreams and tears in *The heart of Juliet Jones* by Stan Drake, which has, since 1953, been presented to the public by the King Features Syndicate as “an exciting story of life and love seen through the eyes and heart of a new and different type of daily strip heroine”. Gillon’s *13 rue de l’Espoir*, (13 Hope Street), published daily in *France Soir* between 1959 and 1972, began with an accident, and this set the tone of the serial, whereby the daily life of the characters unfolded between the afflictions of the heart and those of the body.

Ill health in strip cartoons is one event among others. Good health has no discernible existence; it is only its opposite, disease or accident, that is depicted in a variety of forms. In contrast to the cinema, which has many ways of expressing concepts through movement and words within the physical limits of the material world, strip cartoons are hybrids of text and image that meld in a graphic universe unburdened by the constraints of our physical world, a universe where fantasy and imagination have free rein but where the means of representing complex or abstract ideas are slender. Health problems cannot be depicted graphically as easily as a film about the destructive effects of disease or the carrying out of a surgical operation. This is why health in strip cartoons is a *representation*, a formulation in which reality is suggested by the actions of archetypal characters embodied in line and text in a great variety of ways.

Running the gamut from the most outlandish fantasy to the most scrupulous realism via the semi-realistic genre (which is very common since it allows the artist to play on different feelings), the strip cartoon is a graphic expression of the concerns of our world. It shows them, and it shows them in a single frame or a sequence. It sums them up.

Graphic narrative cannot give a true account of disease, pain, or treatment, because its mode of expression cannot cope with such complexity. The reality is therefore reduced

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to iconic or linguistic symbols that suggest the truth. In a comic cartoon, colds are represented by sneezing, measles by spots on the face, bruises by a black eye. Ill health is symbolized chiefly by its environment—medical surroundings, ambulance, doctor, hospital ward, operating theatre, dressings—or by a speech bubble that reduces the condition to its essence—a diagnosis or a groan.

Depending on the degree of realism of the strip and its subject, the depiction can vary considerably, from a simplified and exaggerated depiction of a body swathed in bandages to a detailed image of a surgical team working on a patient, from the use of esoteric medical terms to a mere mention of the disease enhanced by graphic techniques such as a solemn gesture or the use of thick lettering.

### Depicting life-styles

A more diffuse presence of health problems is to be seen in the depiction of healthy or unhealthy life-styles. Food, tobacco, alcohol, environment, and general approach to the world all add up to a health message, which, although difficult to pin down, is the one in which the effect of change is most clearly seen.



Not so long ago, comics were the object of smear campaigns in educational circles because of their so-called disastrous effects on the moral health of young people. Strip cartoons were similarly regarded by many as a pernicious subculture. In 1955, Jean-Paul Sartre's review *Les temps modernes* saw them as a sign of "social disintegration". In a quite unjustified generalization, based on carefully selected examples, the author of an American article maintained that studying "the influence of comic-books is rather like studying an infectious disease: it is a matter for clinical and laboratory analysis"(9). The Catholic press in France, which called itself "the good press", advised families against *Pieds Nickelés*, *Bibi Fricotin*, and the *Captain and the kids*, while the Communist press fulminated against American publications that "poison young minds with their stupidity" and "their outrageous immorality"(10). Physicians, too, worried about the wide distribution of children's comics — "publications that are still dangerous" and that tended to separate the child "from any real and deep culture"(11). In 1957, *Hygiène mentale* saw in Superman only a "monstrous fighting-machine" and a "cult of brute force", whereas Umberto Eco was to analyse him as a symbolic figure of

moralizing kind. Any attempt to create a sanitized imaginary world for the child would be disastrous. President François Mitterrand admits to having a weak spot for Ribouldingue, Filochard, and Croquignol because of their cheek and obstinate imagination (13). It cannot be seriously maintained that the *Pieds Nickelés*, those likeable bad boys, have introduced their readers to a life of crime any more than Captain Haddock teaches children to drink or Obelix leads them to guzzle. Identification mechanisms are more complex than that. To take only the most widespread clichés, it would be quite wrong to see the depiction of a drunken character as an advertisement for alcohol or of a smoker as approval of tobacco.

Food, alcohol, and tobacco, as well as disease and accidents, are merely elements of a story. The difference between them is that disease and accidents are negative events (adventure adversaries), whereas those to do with life-style serve mainly to define the characters and partly to keep the story going. The creators of the so-called Franco-Belgian school of strip cartoons, who are often from a religious background, have created positive heroes, who are good in every way: "Thanks, I don't smoke", says Tintin in *King Ottokar's sceptre*, from 1938; "Thank you, Lieutenant, I never drink alcohol", he says in *The crab with the golden claws*, 1941; "No alcohol, no tobacco! My father and brother and I work more than anyone! ... And I might add that, even at my age, if I were to speak at home the way you have just done, my father would kill me on the spot", says Michel Vaillant in *Route de nuit* (Nightroad), 1960; "Ah! That's right, I'd forgotten! You don't drink, you don't smoke, you never tell lies, you don't gamble and you cheat even less; in a word, you are perfect!" says Axel Borg, the enemy of the hero, Lefranc, in *Le mystère Borg* (The Borg mystery), 1964. True to his treacherous

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industrial society, "incarnation of the need of power which ordinary people feel and cannot satisfy"(12), a modern adaptation of ancestor myths.

Semiotic analysis and changing moral standards have put paid to criticism of the



Lucky Luke in *Le pied tendre* by Morris and Goscinny, 1968. © Dargaud Suisse S.A., 1986. English edition published by Hodder-Dargaud.

nature, Borg the baddie strikes at one of the four truths of all popular literature: "Say, it must be terrible to be perfect!"

In order to enliven their world and keep the reader's attention, the positive heroes need stooges laden with the sins of the world. The heroes themselves sometimes need graphic attributes that suit their role.

For a long time, Lucky Luke was criticized for his cigarette. Morris answered his critics: "the cigarette is part of the character's profile, just like the pipe of Popeye or Maigret"<sup>(14)</sup>. Our lone hero is not the only one identified with the use of tobacco: sailors (Popeye, Captain Haddock, Vieux Nick) and detectives (Inspector Wade, Bruce Wayne alias Batman, Rip Kirby, Blake and Mortimer, Commissioner Bourdon) smoke a pipe, symbol of activity (seafaring, investigation) or a quality (endurance, wisdom). The cigar, however, is often a symbol of power, wealth, and arrogance (Rastapopoulos smokes a cigar, as do the shady businessmen in the *Adventures of Buck Danny*); cigarette-holders are always used to signify megalomania and perversity (Karl Hellfern alias Dr Death, the first great enemy of Batman; Captain Judas and General Klang in *Terry and the pirates*; Derek Bluger, adversary of Jungle Jim, a pipe-smoker; Olrik, who is opposed by Blake

and Mortimer; Mr Choc, the implacable adversary of Tif and Tondu; Von Kartoffeln, master spy in *Clifton and the spies*; the pretentious and pitiful Victor Sebastopol drawn by Hubuc; the machiavellian Lady X in *Buck Danny*). The smoker's paraphernalia is thus an extension of the body, and the choice of smoking materials shows, or even defines, a character trait.

In addition to providing structural identification of characters, the act of smoking can be used to narrative effect. Lucky Luke's famous cigarette not only identifies a profile but allows the tempo to be modified and extended, expressing a feeling: in *Le pied tendre* (Tenderfoot), Morris shows Lucky Luke's feelings at the death of a friend in a series of three frames in which the hero rolls and spills a cigarette. In the *20<sup>e</sup> de cavalerie* (Twentieth Cavalry), a similar scene evokes a cool and quiet character, who conforms to the stereotype of the Western hero. The same meaning attaches to the cigarillo of Corto Maltese, the famous hero created by Hugo Pratt (Italy, from 1967). Pratt, who effected a renewal of the strip cartoon by introducing a distancing discourse — separating the author from his character and the character from his own adventures — has given his creations unusual density through this culturally eccentric narrative mood. In the stories of Corto

Maltese, the studied combination of silence, commentary-off, and gesture produces a truly sensual atmosphere: "He lit one of those fine cigars that is only smoked slowly, in Brazil or New Orleans. He was playing to an invisible audience" (*The secret of Tristram Bantam*, 1970).

Repose or nervousness can therefore be expressed in gestures related to tobacco as an element of daily life. It might be said that alcohol plays a similar role in a different way. Like tobacco, it can be used to interrupt the flow of a story, and to express situations or an atmosphere in a sign. With rare exceptions—such as *Camille-le-camié contre mon beauf* (Camille the junkie versus my brother-in-law) by Cabu, which savagely attacks the vices of French society by paralleling a punk drug addict and a drunken idiot—alcohol is not regarded as a drug in France; but the narcotics—hashish, opium, heroin, and cocaine—have always been an absolute evil at the centre of detective stories, from *The cigars of the Pharaoh*, the first really structured adventure of Tintin in 1932, to *L'étreinte d'Howrah* (Howrah's embrace), a horrific album by the Swiss author Ceppi (1983) that describes the drug scene in Calcutta with sordid realism.

Nevertheless, whereas tobacco until recently was seen as a quite normal social

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phenomenon, alcohol has always been regarded as a potential vice. For this reason, positive heroes are never habitual drinkers, although the list of smokers is very long. To the classics already mentioned we might



Captain Haddock in *The crab with the golden claws* by Hergé, 1941. © Hergé/Casterman. English edition published by Methuen, London.

add, among the most famous, Dick Tracy, Mandrake, Secret Agent X9, Valhardi, Cisco Kid, Tex Willer, Buck Danny, Dan Cooper, Max Fridman, and Adèle Blanc-Sec. Heroes drink only in special circumstances: to celebrate the happy outcome of an adventure—with champagne, as in *Alerte à Hollywood* (Hollywood alarm), an adventure of Pom and Teddy, or in *Jari dans la tourmente* (Jari in the storm) by Raymond Reding, or to warm up after a long period in the cold as in *La patrouille des castors* (Beaver patrol), which, however, involves children. The depiction of alcohol in an ordinary context is exceptional because, as we have said, there is little space for the ordinary in the condensed time of the strip cartoon. Ordinary events are shown only to put the characters in their setting (a meal with a drink, as in the investigations of Gil Jourdan, a series very close in its conception to the novels of Georges Simenon or Léo Malet).

The new strip cartoon for a more adult readership has given rise to a number of heroes—private detectives working in a

sordid environment who have to use alcohol for the credibility of the character and the realism of the story. In the transition from one domain to another, alcohol remains a stereotype, although here it is a stereotype of the *roman noir* (tough detective story) adapted to the strip cartoon. Such cartoons are to be found in *Alack Sinner* by Muñoz and Sampayo, Argentina; in *Sam Pezzo* by Giardino, Italy; and in parody form in *Canardo* by Sokal, France.

In traditional strip cartoons, alcohol has negative connotations and dangerous associations. That is why habitual drinkers are usually secondary characters, props to the hero (generally pleasant) or to his enemies (unpleasant), who range from the picturesque to the detestable. Drinkers and drunks people this world — big-hearted alcoholics, the hero's faithful companions whose chronic weakness for the bottle is an inexhaustible source of gags and incidents (from Captain Haddock to Jimmy McClure, Blueberry's companion). There are also the violent and vicious drinkers and an entirely different kind — the anti-heroes created for the purpose of social criticism like the popular Andy Capp, caricature of the English proletarian, who has been entertaining readers of the *Daily Mirror* since 1957.

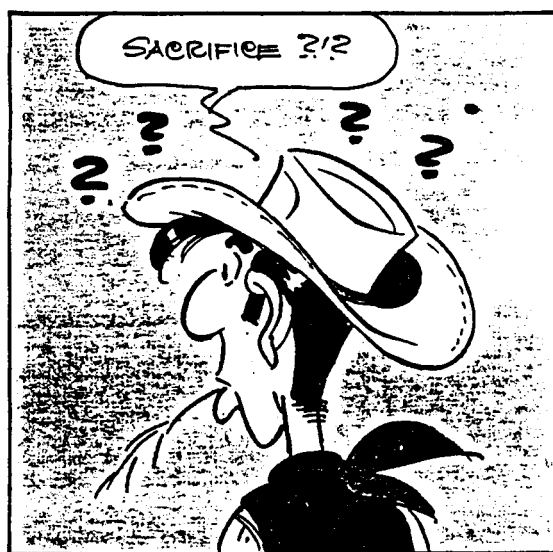
Even when exploited for comic effect, alcohol abuse is presented as a negative trait. Laughter does, of course, take the drama out of the situation, but the point is made as clearly and as surely as in moralizing or sentimental treatments; it may be even more likely to stimulate awareness of the reality of the affliction.

### The influence of the cultural environment

Tobacco, in recent years, seems to have developed in a similar way. Addiction is

now regarded as a problem, no longer because of any moral attitude but because of evidence of an adverse effect on health.

In the early years of this century, tobacco played an important role in the development of strip cartoons in Mexico. After several successes in graphic advertising, the Mexican Tobacco Company sponsored a cartoon by Juan Bautista Urrutia that soon became famous: *Ranilla*, featuring a caballero whose exploits were due to a high consumption of Caprichos, "a cigar of cigars" that "cooled the throat" and rested it from the burning air of Vera Cruz! If there is any intention to persuade today, it runs in the opposite direction. On "World No-Tobacco Day" in 1989, the magazine *Spirou*, that gave rise to Lucky Luke and Gaston Lagaffe, published a militantly anti-tobacco issue. Smoking heroes are increasingly rare. Gaston lost his cigarette butt fairly early in the 1960s. In 1983, Lucky Luke gave up his cigarette for a wisp of straw, apparently to gain access to the American market. Be that as it may, an



1983: Lucky Luke replaces his cigarette with a wisp of straw. *Fingers* by Morris and Lo Hartog Van Banda. © Dargaud Suisse S.A., 1986.

anti-cigarette poster today proclaims “Even Lucky Luke can’t stand them!” and shows the happy cowboy in a radical reversal of his image. If even Lucky Luke can’t stand cigarettes, tobacco is in a bad way!

Breaking the socially accepted rules for healthy life-style leads to all manner of consequences in the strip cartoon. Apart

**Not so long ago, comics were the object of smear campaigns in educational circles because of their supposedly disastrous effects on the moral health of young people.**

from influencing the narrative, it can even become part of the plot. Excess in itself always leads to events and therefore to stories, whether it is an excess of alcohol or tobacco (the neurotic smoker in *Gang Mazda* (The Mazda gang), which opened the special anti-tobacco issue of *Spirou*), an excess of food, or an unbalanced diet.

The glutton is another strip cartoon stereotype. Examples are Averell in *Lucky Luke* and Tapir in *La patrouille des castors*, and they were to be found in the early years of the century in *Hungry Henrietta* and *Dreams of the rarebit fiend* by Winsor McCay. The craving, the sickly state of dependence, which are attributed at least as much to weakness of character as to physical causes, become sources of amusement. In a 1907 interview, Winsor McCay explained (with an interesting analogy) the origin of his rarebit fiend: “You know what happens when an inveterate smoker gets up in the morning and he cannot find a cigarette? Well, I did a story about one of these addicts who finds himself at the North Pole without a

cigarette and thinks he is going to die. I also added a few characters, who, by chance, had some paper, some tobacco and a match, but the match went out before the cigarette could be lit. I had to think of an ending then, so I turned it into a dream. My publisher wanted a series and he suggested the nightmares of a rarebit eater” (15). That strip, which was very well drawn, related the fantastic misadventures of a New Yorker, always ending with the poor unfortunate waking up and saying: “What an awful dream! I swear I’ll eat no more rarebit”.

A story cannot succeed unless it has some basis in reality. The comic principle can work only if there is clear collusion between author and reader resulting from a degree of correspondence between the scenario and a generally accepted truth. Thus, there would have been no sense in the story of the nightmares of a mineral-water drinker, since it is cooked cheese (or similar food) that is associated with possible indigestion and disturbed sleep. Jokes about mineral water would have to be based on its supposedly curative properties: Tintin drinks Vichy water for his hangover on his return from the Land of the Soviets (even Tintin used to drink!); Perrier sponsored Bibi Fricotin in the 1950s; “Odd, isn’t it! One person has bad digestion, another can’t drink his gin without being sick, and the champion can’t get his strength back after the contest. Strange! Very strange! Ah, I know, I know why... They don’t drink the water that goes pschitt!...”, says Bibi Fricotin, styled the king of advertising—clandestine advertising we might add, since this particular brand was regularly mentioned in the stories.

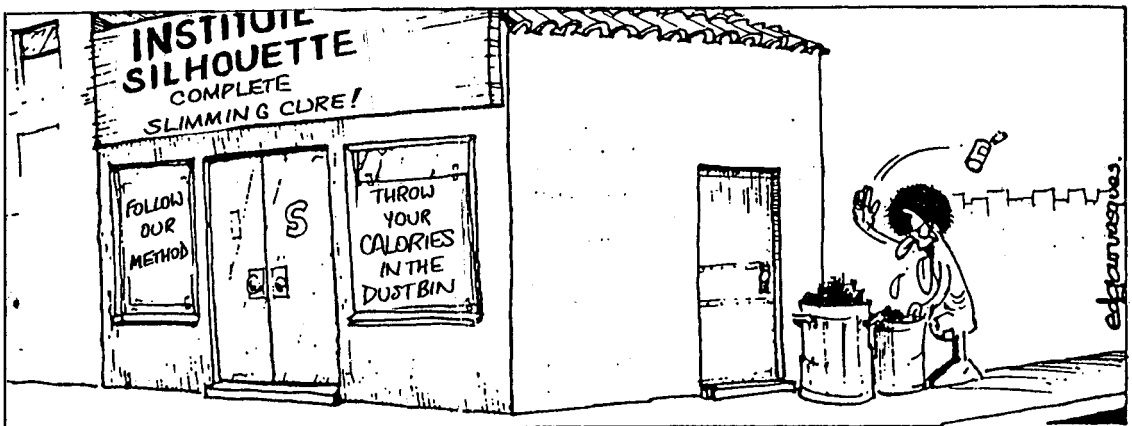
Although the spinach-growers of Cristal (Texas) have erected a statue in his honour, it seems there was no educational intention in having Popeye eat spinach. Rather, spinach was like the magic potion that

provides a solution to all predicaments, the repeated use of which builds up the image of the hero. Yet the choice of spinach was not fortuitous, since it contains iron and is therefore associated with strength. Unlike Wimpy, who stuffs himself with hamburgers, Popeye (called *Braccio di Ferro* in Italy) gives the idea of a link between healthy food and strength. We cannot imagine a reversal of roles whereby Popeye grew strong by eating hamburgers.

The attribution of roles comes from the depths of society. The success of a series depends on collusion between the characters and the public within this more or less rigid framework. What Bertolt Brecht wrote of the detective story is true of all popular literature: "You know what you are looking for... You don't want surprises. You want know-how (that of the characters and your own) and powers of deduction (the hero's, the author's and yours)" (16). For 30 years now, the character of Obelix the Gaul, "just well-padded" (he hates it when people say he is "fat"), has entertained an increasing number of readers of all ages and nationalities in the adventures of Asterix: indeed, Obelix is the real star of the strip. His faults (obsession with food, gullibility, and naivety) and his qualities (a big heart

and the strength of his great size) merge in a new quality: personality. The personality of the cat Garfield, another character happily obsessed with food, consists only of faults: he is lazy, crafty, fairly nasty to those around him, and quite at peace with his insatiable appetite. "You are disgustingly fat! Sloppy and flabby...", his master tells him. "Poor Jon", thinks the cat, "he clearly confuses disgusting, sloppy, flabby, and fat with *well-built*"; "Garfield, you are getting too fat" / "I am *not* getting too fat, I am just ready for a bigger basket, that's all". As with Obelix, the comic effect is produced by the combination of excess and lack of self-awareness, which is an implicit discourse on health (excess nourishment is unhealthy), though the hunger that drives them never raises any questions of cholesterol or blood circulation.

In a *Médecins sans Frontières* story, Guy Vidal gives the following dialogue to a Sahelian family: "Nothing to eat, never anything to eat..." / "That's true little one, but we are walking towards a place where there is food. Further still, I tell you, there are countries where people throw away food." / "Oh!" / "Bou Thaadi, that can't be true. No one anywhere would throw away food!"



Rango by Edgar Vasques, Brazil, 1978, published by L & PM Editors.

Although read throughout the world with the same enjoyment, Garfield, like Obelix and Donald Duck's nephews (who are fond of ice cream and cream cakes), is the product of a sated world whose main health problem is that of coping with abundance.

But just as Bretécher and Binet take different views of hospitals, setting their characters at opposite ends of a developed society, there are other approaches to nutrition than variations on the theme of too much. In 1978, when Jim Davis launched Garfield in the USA, the Brazilian Edgar Vasques showed the scandalous reality of hunger through his character Rango, one of the poor who lives off the refuse of another world. The humour is grim and truly subversive, since the problem is not so much a health policy as its social preconditions, a right to health which is still to be won, and all this is more upsetting than the anthropomorphic adventures of a big greedy cat.

### How do you tell about disease?

Hergé had replied to Raoul Follereau that he did not think it possible to make a strip cartoon on something as serious as disease.

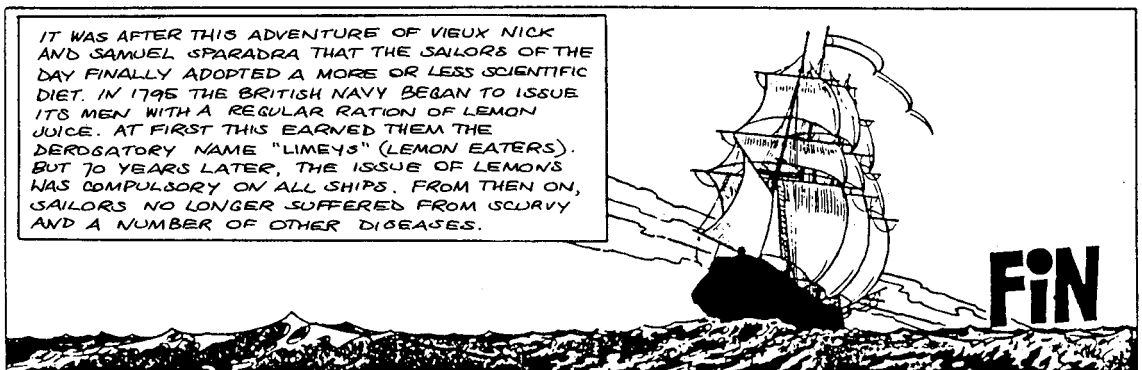
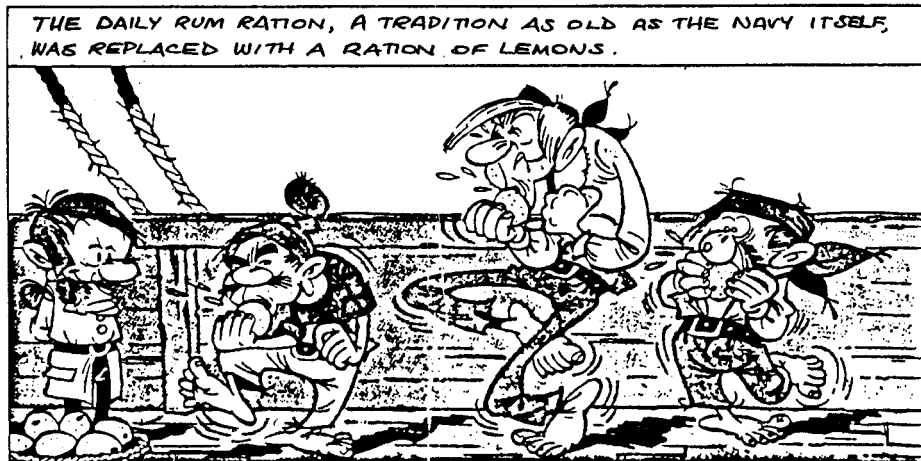
**There are basically two themes in strip cartoons—humour and adventure, although they are not mutually exclusive.**

Certain commissioned works published here and there might lead us to agree—for example, *Le Père Damien et le journal de lutte contre la lèpre* (Father Damien and the journal of the fight against leprosy) published by

Univers-Media in 1981, and, in the same series in 1986, the biography of... Raoul Follereau! These ersatz strip cartoons, a series of hagiographic scenes that are moralistic, banal, and devoid of graphic and narrative originality, at times repulsive in their flat realism, are very unlikely to reach a wide audience. Outside their own militant network they have no existence, because they have no soul. The ability to draw and the ability to tell a story are not enough to give it one, since talent also is required and a degree of alchemy. It is only rarely that a health education message is successfully joined to a story that works. A good example is *Les mangeurs de citron* (The lemon eaters) by Marcel Remacle, which concerns scurvy and not only tells a good story while respecting the rules of the genre but creates a classic of the Belgian school.

Disease, as a possible form of adversity in conditions defined by the general framework of a story, can only be treated archetypally, like other themes: the more it harmonizes with the genre of the story, the more it strikes the imagination. Comic strips therefore contain a number of great afflictions: leprosy and plague in medieval stories, malaria in exotic stories, scurvy in sea stories, and so on.

Scurvy, like storms and pirates, is one of the sailor's enemies. It alternates with cholera in sea stories as an element of adventure, as a sign of authenticity and, perhaps, as a didactic touch appreciated by parents and publishers of children's illustrated magazines. Often, in fact, there is a more or less explicitly educational intent bound up with the entertainment side of children's magazines, in which ongoing episodes of the big adventure stories with the main heroes are interspersed with complete stories of four or five pages that are more directly didactic such as the *Belles histoires de l'Oncle Paul* (The tales of Uncle Paul) in *Spirou*, the





*Histoires vraies* (True stories) that opened the weekly *Tintin*, and an educational column like *Le fureteur* (The ferreter) in *Spirou*. Correspondence is established within this set-up: the perils of the jungle include head-hunting Indians, poisonous

**In France, a survey of borrowers in libraries in 1989 revealed that the chagrin of librarians that the most-read author was René Goscinny, the creator of Asterix and Lucky Luke.**

spiders, and malaria transmitted by mosquitos; the sailor must face not only pirate attacks and storms, but scurvy caused by lack of vitamin C. "Because they consumed no vitamin C", *Le fureteur* tells us, "explorers in the past... died of a terrible disease, scurvy (after haemorrhages, gum ulcers, and infection of old wounds). It was only in 1795 that the British navy, realizing that consumption of fruit and vegetables kept the disease at bay, ordered a daily ration of fresh lemon juice for its men" (*Spirou*, 22 March 1979). Scurvy is a "character" that appears in many picture stories. It is usually accompanied by a few words of explanation for those who have not heard of it. In *Barbe-Rouge, le démon des Caraïbes* (Redbeard, the demon of the Caribbean), a well-known strip in the weekly *Pilote*, Eric, the hero, after various adventures ends up on a ship adrift: the officers have died of food poisoning and the crew of scurvy. "Hmm! If my basic medicine serves me right", he thinks, "this must be some kind of scurvy due to lack of vegetables and fresh fruit". In *Opération Jonas* (Operation Jonah), an adventure by Tony Stark (1980) in which a Soviet submarine has run aground, is the comment: "Your

men have died of hunger, you say? Hunger and scurvy. Complete lack of vitamins and proteins for two months."

An imaginative story entirely devoted to health education, *Les mangeurs de citron*, the third adventure of Vieux Nick, shows a social and medical confrontation with the greedy and backward naval captains. Our hero, Vieux Nick, a strong, clever, and good little character, helps the surgeon, Samuel Sparadra, to prove the importance of diet in sailors' health.

The lemon ration is something of a miracle cure in the story because of the dramatic improvement it brings about in the poor sailors, who had been brutalized with rum, deplorable living conditions, and ill-treatment. The frequent opposition of text to image is used by Remacle for both comic effect and added realism: it shows that life is not simple and that the sailors themselves were indifferent to their own exploitation and physical degradation. Against wind and tide, pirates and ship owners, Vieux Nick and Sparadra succeed in proving the superiority of their dietary principles. In the last frame of the story, an indication of the historical truth, they are credited with the victory over scurvy.

\* \* \*

Neither good nor bad in themselves, strip cartoons, like any other form of art or literature, are as varied as their authors and readers. This popular medium has never ceased to attract young people, and it is, like any other medium with its own discipline, a vehicle of culture. With the emblematic figures of doctors, the archetypal scenes of hospital or accident, and the everyday scenes depicting living conditions, the strip cartoon tackles the vital theme of health in society and transmits the values of that period. □

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## The cartoon age

*The strip cartoon is, first of all, an image. Along with cinema and television, it is one of the most pertinent information media in mass culture. It consists of a narrative type of visual process which the twentieth century has fashioned into a positive instrument for social and cultural transformation with undreamt-of esthetic qualities. It has become a permanent feature of our society.*

— Francisco de la Fuente, speaking at WHO Headquarters, Geneva, on 25 April 1979