

FORMATS 2

The ballad of Corto Maltese. An approach to the character

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This article contains some thoughts about Corto Maltese, the comic book character created by Hugo Pratt, arising from the course "The Male Archetype in the History of Cinema Genres", given by Dr Núria Bou, on the Doctorate in Audiovisual Communication programme directed by Dr Josep M. Baget i Herms.

The story begins when a sailor from Cornwall disembarks in Gibraltar and meets a beautiful gypsy girl from Seville. And continues in the cove of Valeta. A house with an arcaded courtyard and wrought-iron grilles between St John Street and Kingsway, is the setting for the birth of their son on the morning of 10 July 1887. His father is said to have disappeared off the coast of Chile near Iquique, to have turned up in Adelaide after a shady brawl, or even to have been murdered on the Pearl River. His mother, however, took a house in the Juderia in Cordoba to bring up the little boy. He played on the banks of the Guadalquivir and was taught by Rabbi Ezra Toledano. One day, near the Mezquita, a friend of his mother's walked up to him -by then he was in his early teens- to read his palm. Imagine his surprise when he found out that he had no fate line. The boy must have run to his house to look for the cut-throat razor that had belonged to his father. With it, he drew a line on the palm of his right hand. Shortly afterwards, Toledano took him to the Jewish school in Valeta. Corto Maltese -as he was known- surfaced five years later, in 1904, at the height of the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria, accompanied by a young reporter called Jack London; at 26 he was rescued in the Pacific after being tied to a plank and thrown into the sea by a mutinous crew. After that, for the first quarter of this century, he wandered through more ports than any other adventurer.

The death of Hugo Pratt in August 1996 deprived his character, Corto Maltese, of an end that might have been lying in wait for him in an Aragon ravaged by the Civil War, in the ranks of the International Brigades. The Venetian's last journey also left a library of over 35,000 volumes in Lausanne. We have all those pages, his tireless journeys and the chats with friends, including Dizzy Gillespie, Arlt, Octavio Paz or, incidentally, Borges and Lugones, to thank for Maltese's adventures. Pratt said he was "a novelist, someone who makes books, a teller of tales who writes with drawings." His pared down handling of images was first complemented by Hector Oesterheld's scripts, but most of all by his own stories, fed by an insatiable reading of Stevenson, Conrad, Hawthorne, Zane Grey, Fenimore Cooper, Jack London, Rider Haggard, Dumas, François Villon, Henry de Vere Stacpoole or Somerset Maugham.

Corto Maltese crystallises Hugo Pratt's exploration in drawing of characters from Ernie Pike to Cato Zulu by way of Tipperary O'Hara, Simon Girty, Jesuit Joe or Saint-Exupéry himself. Saint-Exupéry, the hero of his last album, is one of the first of many reflections on the adventure genre. Its literary roots should be sought between permeable borders marked out on the basis of a testimonial or documentary criterion. The seed of the travel chronicles of Marco Polo or González de Clavijo is far from the spirit that moves *Erec and Enid* from the *Matière de la Bretagne* or the tales of London or Stevenson. The adventures of the Maltese sailor drink from many springs, not least the parity between adventure and geography so dear to 19th century imperialist expansion, which had its effect on Pratt's childhood in Ethiopia and on his press-ganging, first into Mussolini's colonial police and, in the Second World War, into the ranks of the German army, which he deserted to join the Allies.

Neither any controversial elucidation of the travel chronicle or the adventure genre nor the stormy paths of Hugo Pratt's biography are the proper subject matter of these pages. Nevertheless, to consider the fruitfulness of an *archetypological* approach to his work involves weighing up both aspects. The profusion of cultures, languages and geographies with which the Venetian narrator lived, as well as his instruction in the Kabbala, the Tarot and many other esoteric disciplines linked to the use of archetypal images bring a special interest to a reading of his work based on the grammar of the figurative structures which underlie the *Imaginaire Symbolique* proposed by Gilbert Durand. A grossly simplifying approach to the stories of Corto Maltese reveals the striking modernity of the tension between the impermanence of what is represented and the permanence of a latent meaning linked to the use of those archetypes and resolved in a flow of narrative and graphic resources.

Corto's origins are a combination of circumstances such as the absence of his father, the paltry legacy of a copy of Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, or his mother's genealogy, which relates Maltese to *La Belle Zélie* portrayed by Ingres. But it is the determined cutting of the fate line that provides the initiation which, according to Jung, is essential for any hero. Corto corrects his unusual defect with a blade that brings the blood bubbling out as it cleaves the palm of his hand. With that gesture, he not only takes the reins of his fortune; he also wins acceptance by Cronos. He does so by assimilating the cycles of time, linked to what Durand calls the night-time regime and, at the same time, a constellation of representations which are more night-time and female than diaeretic. In other words, Maltese's adventures review countless stories constructed around the deep-rooted representation of masculinity, similar to ascensional, verticalising, uranian and purifying structures emerging from a mould which is antithetical to the night-time structure of the *Imaginaire Symbolique* and Durand's *faces of time*. However, a reformulation of them all observes the dominance of the night-time, euphemising structure of those *faces*. The search turns to enjoyment along the way; the specific spatial locations in emphasised temporality. Pratt's elegant lines and the suspension of the story in favour of silences and exchanges of glances recall the reconciliation of sensuality and abstraction in the treatment of time by masters of visual writing such as the director Yasuhiro Ozu. Nevertheless, that sensual delay does not damage the story.

On the contrary, it submerges it in a kind of dialectic of models of representation which enriches it and creates new pathways in an aesthetic which blossomed from the ink of Milton Caniff.

But there are two initiations in Corto Maltese's itinerary. The first opens up to fortune by carving out a gash which, according to Durand, converges with the images of the *vaginal furrow*; the blood which bubbles up adds a cluster of signifiers which would require a more extensive analysis. And that cut is made by a cut-throat razor, the antithesis of the feminised and isomorphic sword wound, one of the three basic archetypes according to which Durand establishes his dialectic of systems: the sceptre-stick, the sword, the cup and the wheel-denarius, according to the classification of suits in packs of cards, and especially the Tarot. The second initiation is the real appearance of the character in the vignettes of *The Ballad of the Salt Sea*, more the child of the sensibility of Conrad and Stevenson than of Defoe. The line drawn lights him up in a sea by sheer chance, burnt by the sun and tied to planks of wood in the shape of a cross. And we should not forget how Pratt begins his *Ballad*: "I am the Pacific Ocean and I am the largest ..." And it is not Ishmael but the waters that speak. And so, if underlying the first initiation was the synthesis of daytime, male and separating -the razor- with the female structure of the wound, the second reconciles the archetype of the cross with the supreme ichthyomorphic swallower, the antiphrasis of fatal femaleness. The dominant is never diaeretic in the relation of the waters with the moon -the *dramatic epiphany of time* for Durand- in the Corto Maltese stories. Hence the curious confusion of the female star at the beginning of *The Golden House of Samarkand*, the two talking moons in *Tango...All in the Half-light*, or their surprising absence in the sailor's most decidedly dreamlike story, *The Helvetians*, the catamorphic and Carrollian opposite side of a quest for the grail begun in the dwelling of Herman Hesse and in the company of a strange avatar of the knight Klingsor.

Acceptance of the cycles and the sensuality of deferment go with an adventurer whose behaviour adjusts to a peculiar assimilation of the code of military honour in which Pratt was educated. Meditative, with his sharp profile smoking a Tre Stelle cheroot and his apparent feminine passivity, Corto Maltese goes to Siberia to steal a shipment of gold, to Ireland to avenge his dead friend and member of the IRA Pat Finnucan and to blow up an English army barracks, to Kafiristan to usurp the Great Gold, the mythical sun hidden in a mountain and protected by the Persian god Ariman, or to Buenos Aires to avenge at any cost the murder of Louise Brookszowyc - *Tango...-*. According to the isomorphism pointed out by Mircea Eliade and Gilbert Durand, Maltese takes on the role of the *binding hero*, who is also capable of resorting to the weapons of the daytime imagery to openly confront the dangers that beset him. He therefore justifies his erratic determination to pursue and pillage treasures that he never achieves or to take revenge and he is accompanied only by Rasputin, a compulsive killer without the slightest scruple and a murky sense of humour. That search, which Corto knows is fruitless, reconciles the sublimation of the motivating object with the euphemistic cynicism of a horizontal and not ascensional awareness of the journey.

If Denis de Rougemont says that there are no stories about happy love, the sailor's

history is packed with events. When his friend Esmeralda, a prostitute, asks him if he has ever been in love, he answers in a forced twilight tone that that was all too long ago. A myriad of female characters -Pandora Groovesnore, Lady Rowena Welch or Banshee- who are no less worthy of study than Corto Maltese himself cross his path, but Pratt shuns the happy end which the classical cinema would have guaranteed, as would the stories of the Golden Age by Caniff, Noel Sickles, Coulton Waugh or Frank Robbins. A diffuse eroticism emanates from that passivity of Corto's; he always disappears after changing the course of events. Pratt uses taciturn male models from the thriller genre and redraws the character of Pat from *Terry and the Pirates* or *Johnny Hazard* to construct a disillusioned, anarchic and romantic -in the least degraded sense of the word- character, but not as sour as Lieutenant Koinsky in *The Scorpions of the Desert*, a series that Pratt developed alongside the Corto Maltese albums.

Space does not allow for any further discussion of isomorphism and the application of Durand's *grammar* to Hugo Pratt's stories, which is all the more fruitful the more it rests on the relevant graphic references. Nevertheless, we must insist on the need to study the constitution of the character in relation to the gender codes involved and on the appropriateness of Durand's idea of taking an anthropological perspective to which "nothing human should be alien" from a Bachelardian pluralism of rationalities. Durand himself masterfully sums up his idea when he points out that "In short, the *Imaginaire* is no more than that journey in which representation of the object allows itself to be assimilated and moulded by the subject's drive imperatives, and in which, reciprocally, as Piaget has so masterfully shown, subjective representations are explained by means of the subject's previous accommodations to the objective medium." The representations related to that sailor with his stolen romances, a stranger to mirrors, require a search, at the end of which is Hugo Pratt. And with him his knowledge as an avid reader, his concise lines and, most of all, his life and his face, the one he gave the Maltese sailor, begun in Cordoba and lit up once again in the Pacific.

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