# Ridiculous Empire: Satire and European Colonialism in the Comics of Olivier Schrauwen

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# Ridiculous Empire: Satire and European Colonialism in the Comics of Olivier Schrauwen

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**Abstract**

This essay analyses the works of Olivier Schrauwen with a particular focus on his fantasied adventure book *Arsène Schrauwen* that plays out in the colonial context of the Congo. The argument advanced is that Schrauwen's comics relies on the formal qualities of the colonial adventure genre that is frequent in traditional European comics as a way to subvert and satirise the content. Through a constant reliance on meta-reference to other works and tropes recognisable from adventure tales, in combination with adopting a strict colonialist worldview, this essay argues that Schrauwen humoursly ridicules the asymmetrical binaries between coloniser and colonised.

Keywords: schrauwen; satire; postcolonialism; colonialiasm; empire; humour

IMPERIALISTS. All honest, polite, peaceable, charming people.
- Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*

The reader who opens the first page to Olivier Schrauwen's three instalments comic *Arsène Schrauwen* – published as a full-length comic book in 2014 – finds a two-chimney steaming boat out on the open sea with a caption that gives away the itinerary: 'from the frosty beaches of the Scheldt to the sweltering beaches of the colony.' The next page shows the same boat before leaving harbour, anchored at the mouth of the river with passengers boarding. Among them is a young man, the narrator's grandfather, ready to embark and about to finish a last cigarette on familiar soil. 'Pretty soon he would be stepping into the unknown,' the captions read, 'into a void'. The story has begun.

Loyal to the ground rules of the adventure novel that Schrauwen uses as a backbone to his storyline, the narrative begins with a journey from Europe to a colony, from the centre to the periphery, from the home of civilisation to where the wild things roam. If the Scheldt is replaced with the Thames, and the steaming boat exchanged for a two-mast pleasure ship,

this *mise-en-scène* could equally have been from Joseph Conrad's renowned 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. Similar to the ways in which Conrad's work is about his own experiences in the Congo blended with fantasy, Schrauwen's comic imaginatively explores his grandfather's time in colonial Africa after World War II.

Although roughly a century separates the two works from each other, the link between them is unavoidable. After all, as Michela Wrong contends, any westerner who travels to the Congo – fictionally or otherwise – unescapably follow 'in the footsteps of Mr Kurtz'.[1] And not only Kurtz. In between Conrad and Schrauwen came André Gide, Ryszard Kapuściński, and V. S. Naipaul but also, albeit without a critical lens, André Franquin, Hergé, and Jijé, to mention but a few. All of them testify to the Congo's sustained duration as fertile terrain for western artists and writers. Yet Schrauwen's errand differs significantly from previous mentioned authorships. Although his collected oeuvre reveals a stern anticolonial impulse in their targeting of Belgium's visceral imperial history, his comics, in contrast to the likes of Conrad or Kapuściński, hardly ever mention or depict any form of imperial violence. Nor is there, as in politically committed travelogues, no apparent ambition to leap into didacticism in order to foster greater recognition of the African continent and knowledge about its past history of exploitation.[2] Moreover, his plots, even when set in the Congo, are almost completely empty of signs and references to anything non-western.

In *Arsène Schrauwen*, to zoom in on the most concrete example while also being his most ambitious work, Schrauwen takes this one step further as the album is almost completely deprived of any non-white characters. They are only present in their absence, reduced to only being talked *about* – not talked *to* or having any conversations *among* themselves – in exchanges among the main characters in the book. And that is in the few instances that they are granted any attention at all. At face value such manoeuvre risks repeating the pitfalls of stereotypical representations of Africa that, most notably, Chinua Achebe criticised Conrad for. According to Achebe, '*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation.'[3] Achebe sees Conrad taunting both the African landscape and the Congolese population who are allowed merely two

[1] Michela Wrong, *In the footsteps of Mr Kurtz: living on the brink of disaster in the Congo* (Fourth Estate, London, 2000).
[2] e.g. Raoul Granqvist, Travelling: Chinua Achebe in Scandinavia: Swedish writers in Africa (Umeå: Umeå University, 1990).
[3] Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays, 1965-1983* (London: Hienemann, 1988), 338.

sentences in broken English in the whole book. Against this background, Schrauwen's decision to render the Other partly invisible may seem even more strange.

True is that Schrauwen's work, albeit with a different agenda, taps into a long history of transforming Africa into a stage on which the heroic European protagonist acts out his personal adventure narrative in the presence of alien people, wild animals and exotic scenery. During the nineteenth century, the African explorer became a praised celebratory icon in Europe similar to today's sports heroes or movie stars. Long before the scramble of Africa, the 'discovery' of a new corner in Africa was a prelude to the sentiment that the whole continent belonged to them.[4] As Martin Green asserts, travelogues and adventure literature energised the European myth of colonialism; they were, collectively, the bedtime stories the colonial powers told itself before going to sleep at night.[5] What they also have in common is that they play part in perpetuating a discourse of Africa as a *terra nullius*, an empty void, a place of nothingness, before the advent of western eyes. This fantasy of Africa being without history was politically effective in legitimising colonialism.[6] Not limited to adventure novels, ideas of African inferiority found its expression in the highest echelons of Western thought, and took on the contours of truth. From Hegel's verdict that African cultures were living in a state of timelessness in need of being woken up and Immanuel Kant's views on the rationality differentials between whites and blacks, to John Locke's assumptions on the incapacity of primitive minds.[7]

In his landmark study on colonial discourse, *The Invention of Africa*, V. Y. Mudimbe uncovers the ways in which the West effectively fabricated knowledge about Africa, thereby determining the understanding of it, as well as providing the foundation for its subsequent imperialist rule.[8] In Mudimbe's view, Africa – or, rather, 'Africa' – is a creation of an intricate network of writing that stretches from literary, historical, scholarly accounts to political, military, and imperial administrative mechanisms. The former produced Africa for the ensuing acquisition by the latter. European culture, Mudimbe contends, gained its

[4] e.g. Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Mansmyter: James Bond, Don Juan, Tarzan och andra grabbar* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 1999); Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: a story of greed, terror, and heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1998); Edward W. Said, *Culture & Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).
[5] Martin Green, *Dreams of adventure, deeds of empire* (London: Routledge, 1980).
[6] Robert Aman, *Decolonising Intercultural Education: Colonial Difference, the Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Inter-Epistemic Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2017).
[7] Charles Mills, *The racial contract* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1997).
[8] Valentin Yves Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa: gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

strength and identity by positioning itself as the contrasting image of other regions and cultures around the world. In more clear-cut terms, the colonial populations provided the mirror in which Europe could perceive itself as civilised, enlightened and superior in contrast to an uncivilised, primitive and inferior Other. In the case of Africa, explorers – anthropologists, writers, and missionaries – brought back new proof which could explicate 'African inferiority.'[9]

Comics are no exception. The decades following on from the late 1930s saw a flood of comic books on heroes that made the jump to Africa.[10] Not least in the case of the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, which, as Mark McKinney has meticulously demonstrated, has a long history – a history that runs parallel to the countries' own imperial projects – of colonialist and white supremacist representations in comics.[11] A case in point is Hergé's *Tintin au Congo* – first published as an album in 1931 and written when the Congo was under Belgian rule from 1876 to 1960 – which sings the praise of colonial presence in central Africa. The pages are filled with explicit colonial propaganda, including the colonialist focus on black bodies as material excess with its emphasis on fat lips, large eyes and prominent teeth, unable to formulate a grammatically correct sentence in French even if their lives depended on it. In an overtly didactic scene from a classroom, Tintin, assuming the role of a teacher, tells the children while pointing to a map: 'Today I'm going to talk to you about your country: Belgium!'[12] As Pascal Lefèvre has demonstrated, Hergé may have been the most renowned, but he was far from alone in reproducing dehumanising racist stereotypes and reassuring European supremacy in order to justify Belgium's overseas presence.[13] In short, conquest by the pen and ink in Brussels so often confirmed the conquest by rifle and guns in the Congo.

This historical backdrop of the role of adventure literature and comics in legitimising colonialism does not go unnoticed in the works of Schrauwen. On the contrary, what this essay argues is that Schrauwen relies on the formal qualities of the colonial adventure genre

[9] Mudimbe, *The invention of Africa.*
[10] Robert Aman, 'When The Phantom Became an Anticolonialist: Socialist Ideology, Swedish Exceptionalism, and the Embodiment of Foreign Policy', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 9, no. 4 (2018), 391-408; Mila Bongco, *Reading comics: language, culture, and the concept of the superhero in comic books* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000); William H. Young, 'The Serious Funnies: Adventure Comics During the Depression, 1929-38', *Journal of Popular Culture* 3, no. 3 (1969), 404-427.
[11] Mark McKinney, *The Colonial Heritage of French Comics* (Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 2011).
[12] This scene was replaced with a lesson in mathematics in the French coloured version from 1946.
[13] Pascal Lefèvre, 'The Congo Drawn in Belgium', *History and Politics in French-Language Comics and Graphic Novels*, ed. Mark McKinney (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 166–185.

as a way to satirise and subvert the content.[14] Several theorists have catalogued the common techniques, motifs and stances of satiric writing. According to Milan Kundera, satire is a politically informed form of humour, often relying on pastiche and parody. 'If I had made their talk ridiculous, by exaggerating its excesses, I would have produced what is called satire,' Kundera writes, '[s]atire is a thesis art; sure of its own truth, it ridicules what it determines to combat.'[15] Furthermore, Kundera's definition encompasses three basic elements that George Test argues are key for identifying satire: attack, play, and judgement.[16] For Test, 'attack' is symbolic, focusing on the fictional characters and actions that 'come to stand for what the satirist is attacking';[17] 'play' is a general term that includes specific indirections such as allegory, fantasy, and caricature; 'judgement,' Test explains, connects the other elements with an evaluation whose 'truth may be not only moral but also ethical, political, aesthetic, common sense, or shared prejudices'.[18]

This essay sets out to show how these three elements of satire are present in Schrauwen's work as a mode of critiquing colonial discourse. This is done in a specific way. Under his pen, themes and tropes from classic European texts associated with colonialism – including Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or the abovementioned *Tintin au Congo* by Hergé – are consciously weaved into a web of surreal events that are precisely calculated for its effects of satirising what it targets. The familiarity of these works to readers provide context to the anticolonial politics of Schrauwen's comics. In concentrating on the satirical strategies of Schrauwen's work in connection to colonialism, the aim is to add another layer of understanding to his comics in general, and *Arsène Schrauwen* in particular, by contributing to a scholarly discussion already initiated by others on other aspects of his oeuvre. [19] Part of this includes Schrauwen's conscious exclusion from

[14] e.g. Robert Aman, Swedish Colonialism, Exotic Africans and Romantic Anti-Capitalism: Notes on the Comic Series *Johan Vilde*', *Third Text* 30, no. 1-2 (2016), 60-75; Robert Aman, *The Phantom Comics and the New Left: A Socialist Superhero* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Nicolas Labarre, *Understanding Genres in Comics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); McKinney, *The Colonial Heritage of French Comics*; Ann Miller, *Reading bande dessinée: critical approaches to French-language comic strip* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).
[15] Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: an essay in nine parts* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 202.
[16] George Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1986).
[17] Test, *Satire*, 16.
[18] Ibid., 29.
[19] Benoît Crucifix and Gert Meesters, 'The Medium is the Message: Olivier Schrauwen's *Arsène Schrauwen* beyond Expectations of Autobiography, Colonial History and the Graphic Novel', *European Comic Art* 9, no. 1 (2016), 24-62; Mara Gonzalez de Ozaeta, 'Instinto queer y escenas camp en Arsène Schrauwen de Olivier Schrauwen', Cuadernos de cómic, no. 3 (2019), 7-26; Pepo Perez, 'El idioma analítico de Arsène Schrauwen, Cuadernos de comic, no 2 (2014), 198-225.

the panels of hardly anyone and anything except the colonialists themselves to reveal the absurdity of a colonial worldview. Also the recurrent failure of the colonialists - and Arsène Schruawen more than anyone else - to live up to the colonial keywords of progress, modernity, and masculinity. Through such satirical representation, Schrauwen goes on to show colonialist authority as ambivalent by destabilising the asymmetrical binaries between those who take it upon themselves to civilise and those deemed in need of civilising despotism.[20] In sum, humorous satire becomes Schrauwen's primary tool to communicate his anticolonial message.

**Next stop: the Congo**

The story of *Arsène Schrauwen* first begins as a half-believable memoir based on the experiences of the narrator's grandpa in the Congo. In line with the autobiographical genre's approximation of an illustrated diary, the caption informs that it is the 7th of December 1947. In his mid-twenties and smartly dressed in a suit, Arsène looks every inch the male middle-class explorer that has dominated the travelogues. That they are all men is not unimportant. Several academic commentators have discussed the ways in which a certain form of masculinity is constructed in travelogues, often in terms of the explorer's physical efforts, their ability to overcome hardship, and fearless penetration of spaces previously unvisited (by westerners).[21] Succinctly put, the *raison d'etre* of the adventure novel is to 'celebrate manliness'.[22] Yet the reader quickly rests assured that the chain-smoking Arsène carries little resemblance to perceived real life heroic explorers such as Henry Morton Stanley or David Livingstone or even fictional ones such as Tintin or Marlow that have made the trip before him. If the explorer was typically depicted as a solitary individual, fully in control of himself and others and equipped with almost extraordinary psychological, moral and intellectual strength, Arsène is their antithesis.[23] The only thing they have in common is the itinerary; present on a ship on its way to the colony. Faintheartedly, he decides to stay in his cabin the whole trip out of fear for the other passengers ('Arsène had been told that the boat would

[20] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
[21] Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the national, and the postcolonial, 1890-1920: resistance in interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Blanka Grzegorczyk, *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2015).
[22] Green, *Dreams of adventure, deeds of empire*, 3.
[23] Johannes Fabian, *Out of our minds: reasons and madness in the exploration of Central Africa* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000).

likely be swarming with pickpockets and bullshit artists'), passing the time smoking in his underwear.

However, the above comes with one notable exception. When finally making an appearance on deck, Arsène is immediately drawn into a colonial discourse as a fellow passenger accounts for the essence of the Other. 'He declared his deep love for the natives,' the caption reads across images of faceless bodies in European clothes with the word 'Natives' printed on them, 'They were wonderful and in fact, not all that different from Europeans.' The panels, dripping of irony, shows a group of faceless Congolese joyfully group dancing. Homi Bhabha refers to this phenomenon as 'mimicry', which he defines as 'one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge'.[24] If the central trope of colonialist discourse is the Manichean allegory that converts racial differences into ineradicable moral and even metaphysical difference, mimicry denotes in Bhabha's scheme the dynamics between coloniser and colonised. The colonial power needs the Other to be similar to its own perceived identity without ever being the same in order to legitimise their authority. The slight imperfection of the Other, that they are, to quote the grandpa's fellow passenger, 'not all that different from Europeans' – 'almost the same, but not quite' to borrow Bhabha's own summarising words – normalises European dominance, always predicted on the superior outside evaluator diagnosing the shortcomings of the subordinate Other.[25] As the nameless stranger adds in the next panel – in line with the official policy of the *mission civilisatrice* – 'one only needed to discipline them now and then' as the image shows the fellow passenger in a chair with a cue of people awaiting to be spanked like insubordinate children.

**Figure 1: Arséne is informed about how to discipline the natives. © Olivier Schrauwen and Fantagraphics, 2014**

The sequence alludes to a common metaphor at the time, where the non-Europeans personify a sort of childhood of humanity, pre-historic version of the human being who is latent in them and whom it is the task of the colonial policy to release.[26] Seen in this light, colonialism presents itself as an educational movement, a form of evolutionary assistance, where it is the

[24] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.
[25] Ibid., 122.
[26] Michael Azar, *Den koloniala bumerangen: från schibbolet till körkort i svenskhet* (Eslöv: Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 2006).

sacred duty of Europe to release the less fortunate populations from the shackles of primitivism and underdevelopment.[27] This is also the language employed by the Belgian regime in order to justify their overseas presence.[28] Furthermore, the scene that Schrauwen depicts is far from uncommon in travelogues from European colonies, in general, and from Africa, in particular. The diary of Edvard Vilhelm Sjöblom, a Swedish Baptist missionary that arrived to the Congo in 1892, is filled with similar experiences. Already on the first day on board the steamer transporting him along the Congo river, as Sjöblom seeks a spot to build his missionary station, he witnesses a flogging with a sjambok – or *imbo* as the instrument was called in the Belgian Congo – a leather whip made from the hide of a hippopotamus. All the other white passengers on board were of the same opinion: 'Only the whip can civilise the black'.[29] Or as the nameless stranger in *Arsène Schrauwen* justifies his sadistic actions: 'Who spares the rod hates his child.' What the reader is unaware of at this point is that the stranger is also the father of the woman Arsène will fall head over heals in love with later in the story. The subversive irony invested in the portrayal of Africans becomes obvious later on as Arsène both behaves like one and is depicted as a toddler. In short, the only one in need of parental nurturing is grandpa himself.

**Red spots on the map**

Upon arrival to the colony, the colour schema of the panels switches from cold blue to warm red. Since Schrauwen is limited in his detailing of the backgrounds, preferring a simple composition focusing predominately on the characters in view, the change of colour automatically becomes a signal of geopolitical and climatic change as the heat hits Arsène hard ('The heat hit him like a piano dropped from a five-story building') as if entered a feverish dream. Schrauwen himself explains the limited colour palette as a direct consequence of the printing options on his risograph while also adding that red and blue was the dominant scheme in 1940s Flemish newspaper comics.[30] Given the mimicking of European adventure novels, it needs to be pointed out that a red palette carries a heavy symbolic meaning in *Heart of Darkness*. After having arrived to the Congo, Marlow surveys a map of the African continent. Red denotes areas under colonial rule as Marlow is filled with

[27] Robert Aman, 'In the name of interculturality: on colonial legacies in intercultural education' *British Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 3 (2015), 520-534.
[28] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost.*
[29] Sven Lindqvist, *Utrota varenda jävel* (Stockholm: Månpocket, 2011), 42.
[30] Robert Aman, 'Olivier Schrauwen om bloddrypande kolonialism och kärleken till en lynnig risograf', *Bild & Bubbla* 225 (2020), 52-59.

a sense of delight as his eyes are drawn to the coloured areas ('good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there').[31]

Maps will go on to play a key role in the storyline, not least as an artefact that reveals the contradictions of colonial discourse. Anne McClintock sees the map as a technology of knowledge and possession, a symbol of modernity, that promises to capture the truth about a place in a scientific form.[32] The map legitimises colonialism insofar that those who have the capacity to make such accurate representation must have the right to territorial control; a sentiment expressed through a map of Africa coloured according to the greedy claims of European intruders. This is not specific to *Heart of Darkness*, rather the colonial adventure novel is in many ways preoccupied with mapping, surveying and securing geographical knowledge about the continent.[33] At the same time, the edges of the maps, all the blank spaces, mark the limits of European knowledge.

Despite holding a map in his hand, everything is a blank space for Arsène. As the reader soon will find out, this is merely a first taste of Arsène's inability to read maps which again serves a reminder of the distance between him and the explorers in whose footsteps he follows. The map Arsène fails to decode was sent to him by his cousin and host, Roger Desmet, to whose house grandpa seeks to navigate. When Arsène finally finds his way to the extravagant mansion, his life will change dramatically. Firstly, he is introduced to Roger's wife, Marieke, with whom Arsène becomes complete smitten. Secondly, cousin Roger involves grandpa in his megalomaniac plan of constructing a new town in the midst of the jungle, a project that evokes a trope from Werner Herzog's film, *Fitzcarraldo*, where the main character dreams about building an opera house in the Amazonian jungle. Arsène's lust for his cousin's spouse and the realisation of building a new city in the threatening jungle are the two main themes that carries the storyline forward. Yet these tropes are complemented with recurrent plot twists such as the fear of scary parasites, the threat of sexual violence by leopard people, and generous intakes of Belgian beer.

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[31] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1989), 55.
[32] Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (London: Routledge, 1995).
[33] Florian Krobb, 'Imaginary Conquest and Epistemology in Nineteenth-Century Adventure Literature: Africa in Jules Verne, Burmann, May, and Twain', *Children's Literature: Annual of the Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature and the Children's Literature Association* 44 (2016), 1–20.

What becomes Arsène's world in the colony is the bungalow down the road from his cousin. The words from Roger that he will see Arsène 'very soon' takes over his life. He spends the days awaiting a visit from Roger, or at least a message from him. In the meantime, Arsène stays put; he never once attempts to explore anything outside the enclosed space of the bungalow. Like the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's novel, the bungalow transforms itself to a deserted island he cannot leave. Nevertheless, where Robinson Crouse is a tale about self-control of order and rationality by the individual's mastery of time, body and nature – Robinson constructs a calendar, divides the day into work shifts, food breaks and leisure – Arsène is completely at loss.[34] Nevertheless, he begins ambitiously by following Robinson's lead insofar that he takes care of his personal hygiene, starts documenting his 'colonial adventure' in a diary, cooks and reads pulp fiction. Yet his emotions and lust soon take the upper hand. Grandpa is unable to concentrate on anything than the love he feels for Marieke and frequently drifts off into sexual fantasies about her.

The extensive panels of Arsène caught in a love-struck haze, filled by an inability to control his carnal desires, serves a particular function when read in the light of colonial literature. It is a satirical take on a standard trope in colonial discourse that establish a connection between the moral standing of a people and its climatic environment.[35] In this logic, the heat of the African sun produces populations that are lazy, indulgent and easy sexuality, which stands in contrast to the classic colonial standards of western civility, which includes hard work, discipline and sexual continence. In this satirical portrayal the binaries collapse, the unbridgeable gulf between savage and civilised disappears as Arsène does not resemble Robinson and his ilk but rather the non-whites the heroic masculine explorers in adventure novels encounter as part of their journeys in far-away lands. Those very people whose main function in the storylines is to enhance the bravery and superiority of the protagonist. As such, Arsène fulfils all the reductionist stereotypes about non-Europeans in colonial discourse as passive, childish and unable to control their sexual desires.[36]

To ensure that the ironic twist comes across to the reader, Schrauwen makes the rare leap into didacticism as he has grandpa putting on a colonial pith helmet and playing around with a shotgun that he finds stuffed away in a closet. In an atypical state of soberness, even Arsène

[34] Ambjörnsson, *Mansmyter.*
[35] David Spurr, *The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993).
[36] e.g., Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

realises how ridiculous he looks. As he takes off the hat, he simultaneously strips himself from any final illusions of sharing traits with European explorers in Africa before him. Contrary to colonialist heroes that proved their virility and heroics by a command of nature, a fearless penetration of the unknown regions outside the map, Arsène never dares to explore the undefined and unclear world outside his doorstep. His crazy frenzy, sparked by a diet of ostrich eggs and – due to fear of germs in the water – heavy consumption of Belgian trappist beer, only increases. The lone time grandpa attempts to leave the bungalow in order to introduce himself to his helper, the garden transforms itself to a labyrinth before his eyes. Consequently, Arsène panics, is unable to find his way back and eventually faints. When he wakes up again he is back in the bungalow with no recollection of how he ended up there. Logically, Arsène suspects that his servant must have carried him back.

**Figure 2: Arsène dresses up as a colonial explorer. © Olivier Schrauwen and Fantagraphics, 2014**

A local servant is another bond that Arsène shares with Robinson Crusoe: both have black men at their constant service. Another trait they share is that neither of them learns the real name of their non-European helper. Where Robinson pragmatically baptises Friday after the weekday they first meet, grandpa never once meets his helper. Yet the hierarchies between them are clear. After having moved into the bungalow, Arsène speculates about the boy's physical appearance – first envisioning him as literally a boy before thinking of him as a grown up merely named 'Boy' – and how to deal with him. In line with the colonial context that he now inhabits, he pictures himself having to occasionally cane the boy with him laying across his lap. Eventually, grandpa fends off the idea as ridiculous to instead focus on how to introduce himself to the boy when they actually meet. They never do. Despite stocking up groceries, doing the dishes and other domestic chores in grandpa's bungalow, the boy always remains out of sight along with all other non-white characters in the book. Besides poking bitter fun of his fictional grandfather, Schrauwen plays with the trope of relegates and the non-European to the background, to a secondary racial, cultural and ontological status, by rendering them completely invisible.[37] By the same token, the failure to catch even a glimpse of the servant transforms him into a ghost in Arsène's mind that only enhances his paranoia and breaks him down psychologically. He starts to scream, infuriated that the boy defies his

[37] Said, *Culture & Imperialism.*

strict orders by not revealing himself. Arsène may be laughingstock, but he does not accept being disobeyed by someone with a darker complexion.

The sequence is pregnant with explicit references to the ways in which white supremacy operates in the colony. After all, grandpa is quick to embrace an imperial identity as he demands that the boy to show himself. To *command* the Other in a colonial context, Achille Mbembe stresses, is inductive of colonialism itself: it blurs the distinction between animal and human; it is an expression of authority over an animal (colonised or slave).[38] This is accompanied by panels that reveal Arsène's inner desires: again disciplining the boy by spanking him. The repetition of pictures depicting acts of punishment enforced on the Congolese is not surprising. Instant punishment is the method employed by Europeans in Africa. The black population, like dogs, are seen as not able to grasp what they have done wrong otherwise – if the distance between crime and punishment is too long that is.[39]

**Animal Kingdom**

Even before the publication of *Arsène Schrauwen*, Belgian colonialism was the most pressing theme in Schrauwen's oeuvre. Although a particular storyline may not have an apparent interest in colonialism itself, legacies of a colonial past are constantly brought to the surface. This emerges with particular salience already in Schrauwen's first full album, *My boy*, which consciously contains background depictions of splendid architecture and monuments funded by colonial money. The main protagonist is a jovial bourgeoise father who tries to bond with his physically underdeveloped son. The final scenes play out at the Antwerp Zoo where the pint-sized son, depicted as roughly 30 centimetres tall, accidently falls into the mouth of an alligator. Inside the animal, the son encounters parts of the alligator's previous provender: a pygmy. Together the two of them, using their diminutive statue to their advantage, manages to escape the same way they entered and make use of a tiny hole in a brick wall to return to the enclosed space were the rest of the pygmies are kept. Similar to the animals at the zoo, the pygmies are stage caged for public display tapping directly into a colonial discourse that blurs the distinction between human and animal, between Europe and its others. The opt-repeated association of Africans with animals has a long and persistent history in European

[38] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
[39] Olof Lagercrantz, *Färd med Mörkrets hjärta: en bok om Joseph Conrads roman* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1987).

imaginary and is possibly the most concrete example of the distinction that Johannes Fabian famously dubbed 'denial of coevalness'.[40] To place non-whites in a zoological park is an instant disavowal of the humanity of the Other, or at least a way to say that *they* are not as human as *us*. Human zoos, a potent symbol of colonialism, was a major social event around Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth century as curious visitors came to zoos or colonial exhibitions in order to get a first glimpse of exotic 'savages'. Particularly in Belgium where the world fair of 1897 held on the outskirts of Brussels included 267 black men, women and children transported from the Congo, including a pygmy village with an equivalent of the zoo's don't-feed-the-animals sign. Here the placard read: 'the blacks are fed by the organising committee.'[41]

**Figure 3: A human zoo. © Olivier Schrauwen and No Comprendo Press, 2014**

In Schrauwen's satirical take, this dimension is reinforced in panels displaying an animal keeper with a hoop informing spectators that he is 'looking for a small black man!' as if he was hunting an escaped animal on the loose. When a spectator discovers that the young boy is in the cage with the pygmies, panics erupts among the shocked visitors. The keeper has to physically restrain the boy's father from entering the cage, informing him that the pygmies must be approached with 'extreme carefulness' as if they were dealing with a poisonous reptile. Armed with a rifle, the keeper finally enters the cage and stars firing the same type of tranquiliser darts usually reserved for animals. What the keeper could not anticipate is that one of his darts hitting its target sparks a revolution at the zoo. In scenes reminiscent from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's travels*, the pygmies, armed only with miniature spears, manages to overpower the keepers who one after one fall to the ground in defeat. Faithful to the anticolonial politics of the comic, this final scene plays out as an allegory for independence movements in the former colonies staging a revolt. The rebellious atmosphere inspires various animals who also decide to partake in the events in order to finally break free from their shackles.

**Figure 4: Revolt at the zoo.** © Olivier Schrauwen and No Comprendo Press, 2014

[40] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on black: images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press; 1983), 31.
[41] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 176.

Animals staging a revolt, or at least retaliating, is the lead motif also of Schrauwen's wordless story, *Congo Chromo*, from *L'homme qui se laissait pousser la barbe* with a deformed portrait of the Belgian king Leopold II – the man responsible for the brutal administration in the Congo – on the cover. Set in the African colony, the three main protagonists, all dressed in the preferred sartorial choice of a coloniser – white pants, shirt, jacket and the mandatory pith helmet – spend the days performing their masculinity by crudely hitting each other on the shoulder and bursting out laughing. If it was not for the tropical sun and presence of wild animals, the scene could equally have played out at a school yard. The storyline inevitably draws parallels between so-called heroic explorers and a regular schoolyard bully. The reader soon grasps that the white men partake in the construction of railway in Congo. Depicted in the background are both a train and an ocean steamer; two strong symbols of European modernity as these technological advancements infused explorers – while also facilitating their travels – with the confidence that they were rightful bearers of civilisation as they surveyed the blank spaces of the map.

Schrauwen continuous to play with the European imagery of an Africa characterised difficult terrain, unfamiliarity and dangers (savage beasts, ferocious animals and starving cannibals).[42] The three men are attacked by a starving hippo, and one of them has his tent invaded by large ants. Though the latter may have himself to blame. The insects were drawn into the tent by a tasty bar of chocolate laying on the ground. The chocolate, Belgian by manufacturing, was part of a package that also contains a photo of a house onto which the protagonist, sitting on his bed, stares gloomy and nostalgically as if the image itself allows him to cure his homesickness by momentarily transport himself back to Europe. At the same time the chocolate and the photo serve as physical reminders of the mission that have brought them to the Congo basin, scouting avenues for 'civilisation, commerce, and Christianity,' as David Livingstone put it.[43]

As the protagonists continue their journey by train into the dense jungle, the habitat does its uttermost to complicate matters for the unwanted strangers. In line with Africa's role of continually providing western writers with material of a special nature – the exotic, the grotesque, and the bizarre – roots suddenly come alive to take control of the sledgehammer

[42] Dyer, *White.*
[43] Quoted in Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch* (Croydon, William Collins, 2017), 170.

and hit back at the intruders in white as they try to secure the tent pegs into the ground; apes continuously lurk in the shadows ready to sneak attack when opportunity strikes.[44]

Yet the reader is always kept in the dark regarding if they actually are monkeys. This is trope that Schrauwen recycles in *Arsène Schrauwen* with the introduction of the 'leopard people'; a firm colonial symbol in Belgian society.[45] A plaster statue of a hooded Leopard Man, the Anioto, has been exhibited at the Royal Museum of Central Africa outside Brussels since 1913. According to the appended text, the creature uses the disguise of an animal costume (lethal iron claws and leopard skin) to commit murder.[46] Franco-Belgian *bandes dessinées* has played an integral part in popularising the leopard men. Fascinated by the Anioto display, Hergé adapted the figure as a character in *Tintin au Congo* but they also turn up later in Daniel Deshorger and Stephen Desberg's Jimmy Tousseul album, *Le royaume de léopard*, and more recently, albeit as female, in Olivier Schwartz and Yann's Spirou adventure *La femme léopard*.[47] Schrauwen, however, provides the Aniotos with a different backstory where they are the result of a sexual relationship between a monk and a leopard. This unholy union between a servant of Christianity and an animal of the African wilderness, Frankenstein's monster in the context of colonialism, testify to the devastating effects on Catholic faith and civility in the realm of soulless savagery. In short, the binary opposition between man and animal – and in extension, between civilisation and barbarism – are undone in Africa's burning climate. Naturally, the fear that the monster instil in grandpa and his ilk is unparalleled ('No carnival mask could possibly replicate those grotesque features').

Yet the apes in *Congo Chromo* can also be read as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism; a satirical take on scientific claims of racial differences developed under an era of colonial expansion. In descriptions of physical differences under the nineteenth century, African faces, Robert Young notes, were contrived to resemble apes.[48] In colonial discourse Africans did not only behave like animals, they looked like them too. This received its fictional outlet also in adventure literature as the protagonists in, for example, Jules Verne's *Cinq semaines en ballon* (*Five Weeks in a Balloon*) mistake an attack by

[44] Spurr, *The rhetoric of empire.*
[45] Crucifix and Meesters, 'The Medium is the Message'; Vicky van Bockhaven, 'Anioto: Leopard-Men Killings and Institutional Dynamism in Northeast Congo, c. 1890-1940', *The Journal of African History* 59, no. 1 (2018), 21-44.
[46] Debora Silverman, 'Art Nouveau, art of darkness: African lineages of Belgian modernism, Part III', *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 20, no.1 (2013), 3–61.
[47] Crucifix and Meesters, 'The Medium is the Message'.
[48] Robert Young, *Colonial desire: hybridity in theory, culture, and race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

monkeys for an assault by hostile inhabitants. Without wanting to overinterpret Schrauwen, or transplant ideas onto his panels that he may not have intended, the panels carry a clear resemblance to a specific page in *Tintin au Congo*. The major difference being that in the latter, Tintin, dresses up in a monkey costume which fools a young Congolese boy to think that the talking ape had eaten Tintin. The only purpose of the event is to reveal the superstition and backwardness of the local population. In Schrauwen's satirical take on the scene, the apes discover that the colonialists are barbecuing over open fire a monkey that they shot to death earlier in the day and retaliate. Given the unclarity surrounding the true nature of the apes, the scene opens for a reading of the white Europeans committing those bestial acts of cannibalism often associated with the black inhabitants of the jungle in colonial discourse.[49] Again *Heart of Darkness* serves as a reference point. On board his steamer, Marlow views the native passengers as cannibals, as practitioner of savage customs; a prejudice he inflicts on their culture never borne out of behaviour.

**Figure 5: The colonialists shooting a monkey in *Congo Chromo.*** © Olivier Schrauwen and Actes Sud, 2010.

**Figure 6: Tintin shooting a monkey *Tintin au Congo.*** © Hergé and Casterman, 2010.

In response to the barbeque, the enraged apes attack the camp and the three men are forced to make their escape. When finally arriving to a river – the River Congo the reader presumes – only two of them have made it out alive. They throw themselves into the water and grab a floating log of wood that the stream leads downriver. That the two men float in the opposite direction to Marlow's travel upstream the river which plays out satirically in Schrauwen's story. If the voyage for Conrad's protagonist is not only geographical but also temporal as the movement inland is equally a journey back in time to a primordial past, the river downstream leads Schrauwen's surviving protagonists to a brickhouse tavern on the river basin. The tavern closely resembles the one from the photograph in one of the colonialist's luggage. Awaiting them there, in the middle of nowhere, is a white waiter who serves the exhausted colonialists cold beer and Belgian sausages. The bar is a post of civilisation in the wild Congolese jungle, a slice of Brussels in Africa, operating as an ironic symbol for the colonialist rhetoric of marrying a raw and natural landscape with civilisation.

[49] e.g. Pieterse, *White on black.*

**Figure 7: A Belgian brickhouse tavern on the river basin.** © Olivier Schrauwen and Actes Sud, 2010.

Noteworthy is also how Schrauwen uses a different method from South African Anton Kannemeyer (nom de plume, Joe Dog) who regularly satirises *Tintin au Congo* in his on-going zine *Bitterkomix*. Nevertheless, where Kannemeyer attacks the racist illustrations in Hergé's work by pushing them nearly to their breaking point, Schrauwen employs the technique that he would later perfect in *Arsène Schrauwen*. He purposefully presents a colonialist point of view in which the Other is pushed to the margins. This is a comic book example of what Eric Wolf ironically refers to as 'people without history'; people who are profitable but never fully present.[50] Coincidently, the same people that the economy and politics of the empire depend but whose reality has not required historical or cultural attention.[51] In *Congo Chromo*, the Congolese are only visible at one occasion in a panel depicting the exhibition on foot through the jungle. In contrast to the detailed representation of the three colonialists in white at the centre of the image, faceless men, almost shadowlike, recognisable only from contours, are shown both in the frontline with their machetes in order to open the terrain for the rest and in the back carrying all the cargo. The black men tote the white man's burden in the heart of Africa. The construction of a railway could morally be motivated with the black carriers being liberated from their load. Yet the railway line in the Congo was a moderate engineering success and a human disaster as cemeteries dotted the tracks.[52] One in five workers had died of sickness and exhaustion in the first two years.[53] What Schrauwen shows in the panels, equally familiar from early literary depictions of Africa, is the price of progress.

**(Un)freedom**

The brickhouse tavern on the river basin in the midst of the jungle is the fulfilment of a colonialist desire that connects the story above to cousin Roger's project in *Arsène Schrauwen*. Both of them, in turn, taps into celebrity explorer Henry Morton Stanley's accounts from his travels of today's Congo and Tanzania. As he gazes out over Lake Tanganyika, the wild landscape immediately transforms itself into a familiar terrain in

[50] Eric Wolf, *Europe and the people without history* (Berkley: Univ. of California Press, 1982).
[51] Said, *Culture & Imperialism.*
[52] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost.*
[53] Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*.

Stanley's imagination while illustrating the doctrine of the coloniser's natural inheritance to their new surroundings. Similar to the ways in which Hernán Cortés regards the land of the Aztecs, or as David Livingstone viewed Sigunga, as Western civilizations traditionally view 'primitive' land and cultures – as treasure troves, as the observers' rightful possession,[54] Stanley sees the terrain as his:

> What a settlement one could have in this valley! See, it is broad enough to support a large population! Fancy a church spire rising where that tamarind rears its dark crown of foliage, and think how well a score or so of pretty cottages would look instead of those thorn clumps and gum trees! […] How much better would such a state become this valley, rather than its present wild and deserted aspect![55]

Stanley may not have envisioned a brickhouse tavern, but he does visualise a quaint British country village – a church, cottages and cattle – built in the natural landscape before his eyes. The tone is both nostalgic and utopian as he projects experiences from a European past and present onto an African future.[56] A similar scene of preparing the wild terrain for the marriage with civilisation looms large in the final chapter of *Arsène Schrauwen.* After Roger has a mental breakdown and burns his house to the ground, Arsène is given the keys to the project as his cousin undergoes treatment at a closed mental institution. Arsène neither accepts nor declines the offer. Destiny seems never to be in grandpa's own hands; he drifts into one situation after another as some kind of passive bystander in his own life. The decision to promote Arsène is Marieke's, who convinces him that he is the right man for the job. Everyone knows, from Roger's associates to the reader, that he evidently is not. For him to accomplish the task, Marieke needs to transform him into her mouthpiece, dictating his every word and decision. Without her he is completely lost. In a telling scene, Arsène's constant reliance on Marieke to the play the role is depicted by Schrauwen as a toddler running towards his mother.

Despite his apparent incompetence, Arsène never questions the role given to him. Nor does he contemplate on the fact that he leads a major exhibition. Furthermore, not a single one of the men he leads inquire about a possible architectural degree or previous management positions. Instead the workers loyally follow suit on foot as grandpa, in the passenger seat of

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[54] Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone primitive: savage intellects, modern lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
[55] Henry Morton Stanley, *Despatches to the New York Herald, 1871-1872, 1874-1877* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1970), 75-76.
[56] Spurr, *The rhetoric of empire.*

the car driven by Marieke, seemingly leads the way like a general commanding his army. In Arsène's own mind, the exhibition has 'the air of a royal parade' to which he readily reacts with 'a measured wave' to the cheering crowds. If images of a solitary European leading a caravan in the colony was not created by adventure fiction and travelogues, Fabian writes, these genres have nonetheless successfully popularised the stereotype.[57]

**Figure 8: Arsène waves readily to the crowds.** © Olivier Schrauwen and Fantagraphics, 2014

Arsène's sudden elevated status is not a consequence of extraordinary circumstances or divine luck. The colony is a realm of possibility for Europe's bourgeoise youth, Edward Said notes, and an enduring motif in contemporary western literary culture.[58] For example, the plot to many esteemed works, including Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, or the previously mentioned Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, would be unthinkable without an ideology of overseas expansion that enables the European protagonist to build an oasis of civilisation in the middle of wilderness, regardless if it is in Africa, Australia, Latin America or elsewhere.[59] The same can be said about Arsène. In the colony he *becomes* someone, his status elevates. In the colonial context, he is resurrected as a new man, a distinctive man – a different man. Whatever his social status may have been in Brussels or Antwerp, in the colony he is a gentleman, a man of admiration and power on his way to lead an exhibition in order to tame the wild African jungle.

Marieke is at the same time consciously aware of the fact that a European male like Arsène, despite his obvious incompetence and general lack of experience, is awarded further credibility than herself in the social context they inhabit. The social mask of femininity becomes necessary in order to fulfil her mission to carry out her husband's grand project. When Marieke during the exhibition momentarily leaves Arsène in charge to lead and read the map as she – another role she has to adopt as part of being the only woman present – nurtures a sick worker, the whole exhibition almost fails. Under grandpa's eyes the map is constantly being redrawn by insects, forcing him to rely on his inexistent intuition which leads them to a dead end as 'if he'd find the end of the jungle at the vanishing point'. At this

[57] Fabian, *Out of our minds.*
[58] Said, *Culture & Imperialism.*
[59] Ibid.

gate to the lost world, the spot of nothingness, perpetuated by colonial novels, the men in the exhibition are attacked and sexually abused by the leopard people. The scene is equally as absurd as it serves a particular narrative purpose. The more surreal the situation, the more the reader rests assured that what is going on is likely limited to grandpa's own imagination. And Arsène is the embodiment of all the colonial fear projected onto the Congo.

However, the most determining factor as part of Arsène's social elevation in the colony is his whiteness. At least according to Toni Morrison who, in her seminal *Playing in the Dark*, argues that the journey from Europe to the colony can transform the protagonist into a distinctively new man with 'a sense of authority and autonomy'.[60] Upon Arsène's arrival to the Congo, Roger and his associate – and secret lover – Louis, takes him out to drinks about town. As they quench their thirst with Belgian beer, Louis asks what he hopes to find in the colony. After contemplating the question for five full minutes grandpa finally responds: 'freedom'. With his answer, Arsène places himself in good company with many other explorers in the pursuit of liberty and freedom in the colony. In her reading of eighteenth-century Scottish explorer William Dunbar's settling in America, Morrison notes that Dunbar's authority and autonomy emerge from his absolute mastery over his slaves and how his enlightened and 'civilised' identity can only be fully defined in relation to the rawness and savagery of the Other. In short, a sense of freedom is dependent on the presence of enslaved blacks against which white men can measure their privileged differences.[61]

Nowhere is this more apparent in *Arsène Schrauwen* than in the name given to the city they plan to build in the jungle: 'Freedom Town'. The name, another testimony to Schrauwen's satirical sensibility, is overtly ironic as it taps into a history of colonial domination. In a system reliant on a devil's pact that delivers economic privilege in exchange for the denial of the humanity of the Other, freedom is not extended to everyone.[62] Instead the whole modernistic project of building, to quote cousin Roger, 'the city of the future', can be carried out without consideration for anyone or anything else than themselves and their desires. After all, it is no coincidence that the city is planned in a colony rather than in the heart of Europe. Important to remember is also that merely a few pages before Arsène's expresses his desire

[60] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: whiteness and the literary imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 43.
[61] Ibid.
[62] cf. Robert Aman, 'The Phantom fights Apartheid: New Left Ideology, Solidarity Movements and the Politics of Race', *Inks: Journal of the Comics Studies Society* 2, no. 3 (2018), 288-311.

for freedom, he is asked about 'how world war II had been,' referring to how Belgium merely two years earlier had liberated itself from Nazi Germany. The closeness in time between Arsène's colonial journey to the deathcamps of the Nazi regime is as ironic as symbolic; the crimes against humanity committed by the Third Reich echoes those acts of genocide what other European powerhouses had performed in their colonies.[63] The colonies were, in Zygmunt Bauman's view, laboratories of modern society.[64] And modernity, as several postcolonial scholars both before and after him have argued, is inseparable from Europe's colonial projects and thereby intertwined with a history of grotesque violence.[65] Throughout the book, none of the protagonists make one single direct comment about colonialism nor do they ever contemplate about having to justify their presence there. Instead of the sober declaration from Conrad's stand in Marlow – 'the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.' – none of the Europeans in *Arsène Schruawen* are able to look outside their colonial bubble.[66] By depicting the world through their eyes, Schrauwen satirically implicates the reader in the colonial mindset.

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In the epilogue to the book, colouring switches to a traditional tone with black outlines and richly textured background colours. Several panels reveal the end result of the construction project by showing the new city in all its urban splendour. Moreover, the caption informs that 'Freedom Town' is now called 'Lippensville,' a sly dig at the prominent Belgian family Lippens whose most famous member, the politician Maurice Lippens, served as Governor-General of the Belgian Congo between 1921-1923.

**Figure 9: Lippensville.** © Olivier Schrauwen and Fantagraphics, 2014

The effect of moving away from the previously monochronic palette is powerful, as if Arsène is finally able to see the world soberly or merely waking up from a long dream. To enhance this dimension, the panels follow grandpa at the local market where he confuses leopard skin

[63] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).
[64] Ibid.
[65] e.g., Enrique Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)', *boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (1993), 65-76; Walter Mignolo, *The idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Ánibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Neplanta: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000), 533-580.
[66] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 31-32.

with that of a cat; an event alluding to Arsène's sudden clear mind as he no longer recognises the skin of the creatures that previously instilled so much fear in him. This is also the first and only time non-white characters appear. As part of contrasting the previous parts of the storyline with a more realistic set up, the seller is black and the conversation held in French. Before the end, the colours once again return to the blue and red that has dominated the story. A steamer is seen heading in the opposite direction. Grandpa arrives to Antwerp on the 20th of November 1949, almost on the date two years after he left. Continuously faithful to the trope of the colonies as a well of wealth, the caption informs that Arsène's valise is 'filled to the brim with cash money.' As a metaphor for the imperial relation between Belgium and the Congo, grandpa has become rich at the colony's expense.[67] Back on Belgian soil, as if he was never gone, Arsène's bike is still there waiting for him where he left it. Unsurprised he gets on it and rides off to a salute ('Bye, grandpa!'), never to look back, and entering what has been referred to as 'the great forgetting' in Belgian official culture and education; a collective amnesia regarding the wealth with which the colony supplied the metropole.[68] Whatever happened in the colony stays in the colony.

[67] cf., Walter Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972).
[68] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost;* Silverman, 'Art Nouveau, art of darkness'.