

From 18 March until 24 August 2014
At the Belgian Comic Strip Center

CANICULE,
Autopsy of a graphic novel
Vautrin by Baru



Baru is one of the most remarkable authors on the European comic strip scene. With major albums as "Les années Spoutnik", "L'Autoroute du soleil" and "L'Enragé" he has complemented his art with some of his most representative works of the past twenty years. It was only natural that the Belgian Comic Strip Center should look to him to be the driving force for a new type of exhibition.

Wishing to express the artist's creative journey, the BCSC came up with the idea of asking a great comic strip artist to carefully preserve all the preparatory documentation for his next album. It had to be a complete author, in other words someone who writes the scenario and the dialogue himself and also undertakes the storyboard, the drawing and the colouring himself. Therefore, the Belgian Comic Strip Center chose Baru.

Baru's works are very personal, both in his drawing style and in his narration. He is a resolutely expressionist artist. There are no high or low angle views in his work, no travelling views or deliberate fuzziness. His camera is frontal: the action unfolds at eye level, it smacks you in the face! Unsurprisingly, two of his major stories are set in the boxing sport.

Around this time, Baru was getting ready to start work on an adaptation of a famous novel by Jean Vautrin, "Canicule", the story of an American gangster on the run after a robbery who ends up in an isolated farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, with the police and his accomplices hot on his trail. Finding himself trapped between a tight-lipped woman who hates her drunken husband, her lecherous brother-in-law, a mad nymphomaniac with crudely applied lipstick and an ill-treated youngster who knows where the loot is hidden, Cobb seeks refuge in a blaze of hatred intensified by the relentless heat...

JC De la Royère,
Exhibition curator.

With the support of the Brussels-Capital region and the assistance of the publisher Casterman.



Belgian Comic Strip Center
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**CANICULE,
Autopsy of a graphic novel
Vautrin by Baru**

An exhibition by the Belgian Comic Strip Center

Curator: JC De la Royère

Scenography: Jean Serneels

Texts: JC De la Royère (and Baru)

Translations: Bureau Philotrans

Corrections: Tine Anthoni

Graphic design: Pierre Saysouk

Printing: Sadocolor

Production of the film « Génération Baru » : Jean-Luc Muller (Oxygène Production)

Video screens: Manuel Fernandez

Management of original artwork: Nathalie Geirnaert and Dimitri Bogaert

Framing: AP Frame et Marie Van Eetvelde

Production: Jean Serneels and the team of the Belgian Comicscenter

Communication: Valérie Constant, Willem De Graeve

Under the Patronage of His Excellency Mr Bernard Valero,

Ambassador of France in Belgium.

In collaboration with Casterman Publishers.

With the support of the Brussels Capital Region.

The Belgian Comic Strip Center wishes to thank Anne Broodcoorens, Erik Deneyer, Pierre Guillemet, Thierry Lagnau, Cécile Mabilotte, Béatrice Salmon and all those who have contributed to the success of this exhibition.



The story

This is a journey to hell. It is the story of a man, a gangster, who thinks of himself as evil – and who, through circumstances, finds himself confronted by people who are even more violent than he is, people of a brutality he cannot understand.

Jimmy Cobb is a gangster. He has just committed a robbery and then killed all his accomplices; now he is fleeing from the police. Having stolen a car, he finds himself deep in the countryside among endless fields of wheat. He is in the Beauce region of France, a place completely devoid of trees, devoid of anything: there is nothing here but wheat fields and big, square farmhouses built around inner courtyards. With the police hot on his trail, he buries the loot and goes to seek refuge in one of the farms. And that is when his troubles begin.

Here he encounters an absolutely terrifying family. They are reasonably well-off peasants – growing wheat in Beauce is a lucrative occupation – and they are people who love money. And because there is money at stake here, they go completely mad, and their natural propensities come to the fore: greed, wickedness and cruelty. And so Cobb finds himself confronted by something completely unexpected, the very worst of human nature, and things go badly for him.

In the way that I have steered the story, Cobb is the person who brings out the deepest, darkest nature of these people who reluctantly take him in.



The setting

The robbery takes place in a town which could be Chartres, on the edge of Beauce.

We know that such places exist where you find nothing but great expanses of wheat or maize. Vautrin constructed his story in such a way that there is no escape. This is the essence of the roman noir: the inexorability of what must happen, of fate. The author has to create the right conditions to make the protagonists' fate inexorable. And I believe that these fields of wheat which are virtually desert, reinforced by the omnipresent, relentless sun, I find this really excellent from the point of view of the idea, the concept. I immediately took up this situation for the setting.



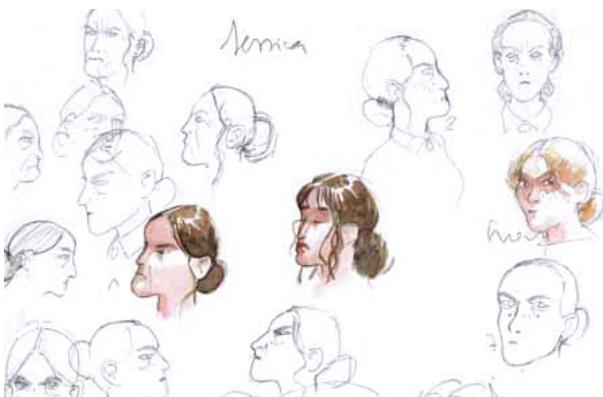
Jimmy Cobb

To settle the question, I haven't seen Boisset's film of "Canicule" (Dog Day). On the other hand I did know that Lee Marvin was in it. I think Lee Marvin is a towering actor, and consequently he influenced me. My problem with Cobb was to distance myself, not to fall into Lee Marvin's character. It was almost through necessity that I made him practically transparent, with white hair... The Cobb in the story is not young, he is getting on in years. What is more, if an American has come to lead a life of crime in France, it's because he's past it.



Horace and Socrates

Horace is a great bull of a man, an animal. But a cunning animal, an animal with the wily intelligence of those who are always cheating the people around them. His brother Socrates is from the same mould. So they both had to have imposing posture, and this business of taking away their hair was to reinforce that side of them so they didn't look smooth. They needed to have a potential dangerousness which I absolutely had to bring out.



Jessie

I had to give her this hard side. She has withdrawn completely into herself but she will open up at some point. So I had to keep this possibility open in my treatment of her, in the way I characterised her. And I had a few slight concerns. She is the character who caused me the greatest difficulty.



Snake

I found it amusing to mess up his face a bit and give him a rather "scabby" side, and above all to dress him in a slightly ridiculous manner – after all these are the 70s, with their fringed jackets and flared trousers...

I don't much like gangsters, especially when they kill other people. So I don't feel inclined to be nice to them.



Little Joachim

(Aniello della Crocce)

I was trying to give Joachim that roundness of early adolescence, with a big nose and a pleasant face which is almost good-looking. In normal circumstances he would be a good kid except that here, he is probably the worst of them all. He is the one who is already wicked, cynical, badly brought up; he has inherited all his stepfather's brutality. We generally think of childhood as a time when one is naturally good, pure, but no, Joachim comes with all the wickedness of humanity already instilled in him, with evil flowing in his veins. I suddenly had the idea of pulling back his hair. Because he thinks he is a king pin, he thinks he is tough, whereas really he is just a poor fool who does a lot of damage.

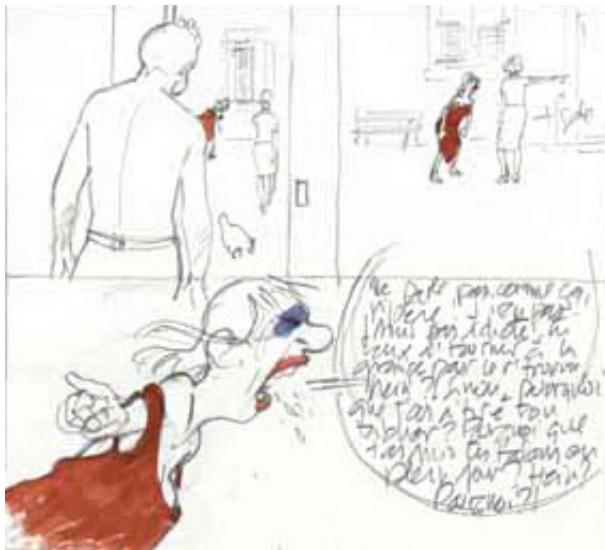


The heat

There are a few tricks such as the beads of sweat. At first I balked at putting them in but all the same, they add something, even if afterwards I can redden the faces or things like that. I find that now and then, a trickle of sweat running down the face does the job. But the challenge, the real question for me was to convey the heat and the humidity of the nights, in the scenes set in darkness: that was quite testing in terms of colouring. When yellow is dominant, that is fine, but in the dark, you have to quench all the colour while retaining this heat haze. It wasn't easy.

The adaptation

First of all the story has to lure you in. As soon as you start reading, images are conjured up. And the mechanism starts to turn, you read it and then you reread it and you become completely immersed in the narrative. For myself, I then put the book down and, thinking about it from time to time, I see the continuity of the main movements in the story. Then I come back to the book and I strip it to the bone. Still with the main phrasings of the narrative in my head. I have to strip it right down to the spinal column so that if I so much as touch one of the vertebra, the whole lot will collapse. I then consider it again from the point of view of comic strip imperatives (book format, number of pages, number of vignettes etc.). At this point I write a scenario and if necessary, I reinvent the story.



Rough drafts

This is definitely the most important stage in my work, these little pages, because this is where the story is made. Generally I become quite attached to what I have done here, and I am almost sorry to redo these drawings because I find them very pleasing as they are. Anyway, they are efficient enough to contribute to the general narration. To me this is the most important moment, and it is the moment that gives me the most pleasure. Sadly it is also the shortest phase, a phase which lasts barely two weeks, and one that is followed by a year of hard graft.

Realisation

Sometimes you set about the task with enthusiasm because you are in a good phase, at an important point in the story and you are excited about it. Then there are times where you have to draw the necessary transition sequences. Personally I pay great attention to my transition images, which are far from banal. Because if ever you find yourself drawing only banal images, you are creating a story of no interest. Your transition images must serve to enhance the dynamism of the narrative. It is generally through these that I contrive to give pace to my stories.



Viewpoint

When I started drawing I used high and low angle views a lot, and then gradually I realized that it was much more interesting to remain at eye level, in other words at the height of the reader's gaze. Because a narrative is an invitation to the reader either to place himself next to the author and to watch events as they happen from outside the action, or to place himself in the midst of the characters who are in action all around him. So here, all is seen through his eyes. I am saying to him: stand here and watch what is happening. And automatically I favour character-centred views.



Frontality

For this story, I had to systematically avoid all loopholes. The loophole is a perspective, in other words somewhere through which a person could possibly slip away. Here there could not be any, I had to close everything in. And for closing everything in, there is nothing better than frontality. So practically all the views, all the settings are like that: flat. There is no depth, there is no possibility of escaping this place, this story. Anyway, I came to realize that I was using frontal views more and more: this enhances the theatricality of the action.



Fixed images

Fixed images create an almost hypnotic relationship between the reader and the image. Each image must be an invitation to enter into it. One has a connection with a fixed image which has nothing to do with a moving image. As the reader, you are forced to enter into it, and at this moment, it ceases to be immobile and becomes simply an emotional experience. The fixed image has a power that the animated image does not. And paradoxically, its use is criticised, as if it were a handicap to be fixed rather than cinematographic. Yet it has far greater richness and depth than a cinematographic image.

Style

In my view the question of “style” is a wrong question. The problem is not that of having a style, the problem is managing to depict things with the greatest possible efficiency and narrative power. And you do this with the means at your disposal. Me, I spend my life as a comic strip author finding ways around the difficulties to achieve this optimum. And I believe that at the end of this process there is finally a style or a footprint. To me, style is the sum of all the hesitations, the mistakes and the workaround solutions you go through to arrive at representing things the way you do.

Text blocks

People have this whole comic strip culture - even the philistines, even people who hardly ever read comic strips. This allows us to avoid this sort of thing. And this interests me because it purifies the images and means that I don't have to put in lots of boring text. I believe this type of pulp harms the image and the effectiveness of the comic strip. It means that you don't trust the image to say what has to be said. Nowadays I find that onomatopoeia and recitatives are used as crutches.



Sound

The notion that I have of the comic strip makes me strive to ensure that the images say everything, and also convey sound. This is based on connivance with the reader. I regard the reader as someone very familiar with comic strip tradition. He is someone well accustomed to onomatopoeia, and he knows that when there is a gun with a flame there is also sound. But he supplies the sound himself. And me, I simply modulate the power and impact of this sound. Today's reader, when he reads a comic strip, he doesn't see "Bang !" but he hears the gun fire. There is no need to say there is a gunshot.



A little "crack"

I did not want to make things too explicit. I could have reversed the images, could have first shown the cop with his gun, but I could also not have shown anything at all because of the spurt of blood I used. But I thought it was more interesting, because I never use any sound, this sudden little "crack" – it is a very quiet crack, it is not very large – it is very powerful. Because I wanted my reader to understand what has happened, and understand immediately. Then when the reader turns his head, he sees the cop at the far end of the field.

Is man good?

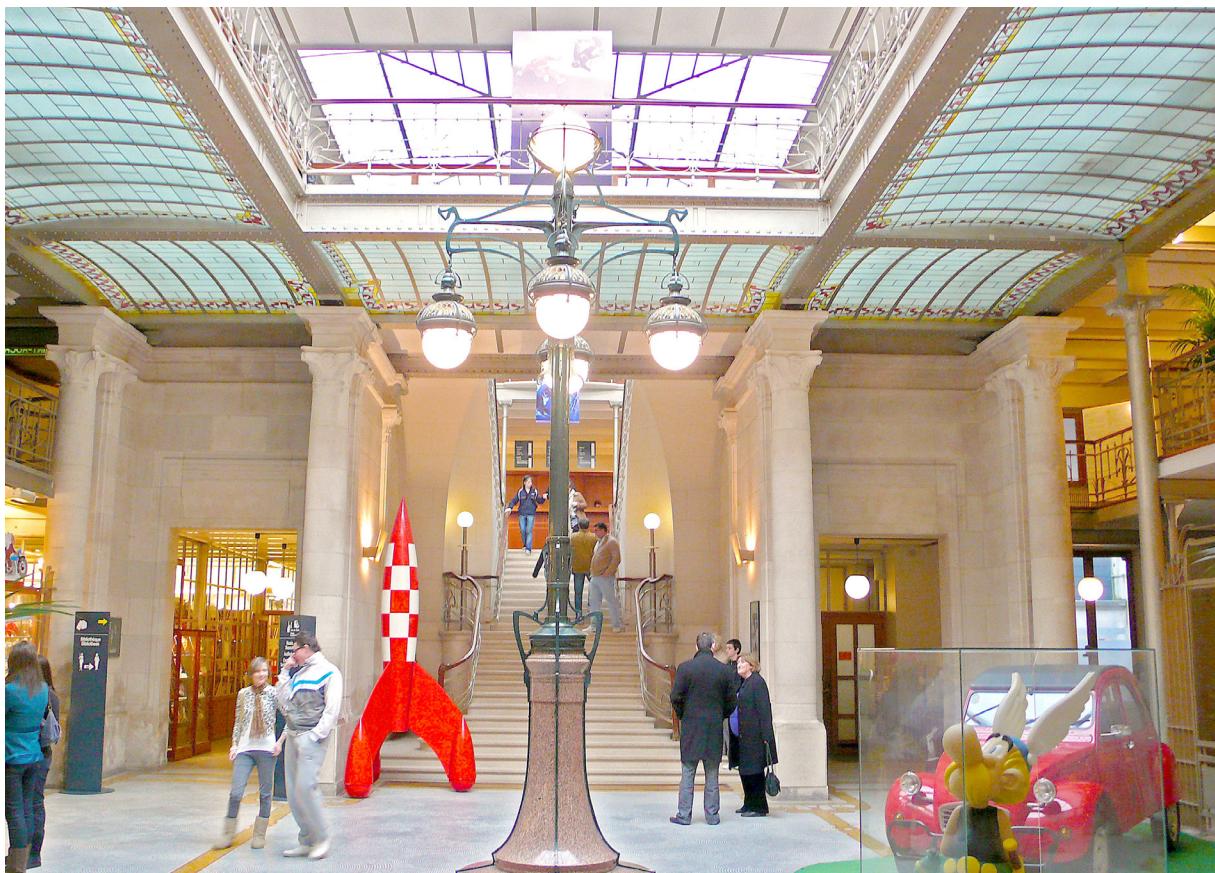
Man is not good, man is evil, man is a brutish lout. This is what Vautrin is trying to say through reduction to absurdity when he questions human nature. He says a very simple thing, which is that we are always capable of the very worst. All of his work is an invitation to react against this worst side of ourselves, simply by being a bit more civilised. These people locked up in their closed, stupid worlds lack “civility” in the sense of “civilisation”, in other words respect for others. Once there is no morality, there are no restraints and people spiral downwards to reveal the very worst in their nature.



THE BELGIAN COMIC STRIP CENTER

The Belgian Comic Strip Center? In the land of Smurfs and Tintin, visitors can discover a range of permanent exhibitions, illustrated with original comic strip drawings and unique objects. Simultaneously, there are also several temporary exhibitions on display.

The Belgian Comic Strip Center is also the former Waucquez Warehouse, a gem of Art Nouveau by grand master Victor Horta (1906).



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