

## **How to Read *Uncle \$crooge* After *How to Read Donald Duck***

Henry Jenkins

*University of Southern California, US*

### **Abstract**

Martin Barker's *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* offers a sustained critique of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck*, a work which helped to promote the 'cultural imperialism' thesis across Latin America and which Barker argues has a reductive theory of influence. Barker argues for greater attention to context and nuance, including those surrounding authorship, production, and the unstable nature of humour. This paper both reviews the debate around Uncle \$crooge comics and brings it up to date considering several more recent Disney projects, which challenge debates around historicity and the process of globalization of cultural production.

**Keywords:** Martin Barker, Cultural Imperialism, Walt Disney, Comics, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart

## Introduction

Mr. Disney, we are returning your Duck. Feathers plucked and well roasted. Look inside, you can see the handwriting on the wall and our hands still writing on the wall: Donald, go home! (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975.: Loc. 179-192<sup>1</sup>)

'Deconstructing Donald', Martin Barker's extended critique of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's 1971 *How to Read Donald Duck*, comes at the end of his field-building book, *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (1989). This book follows on from Barker's earlier book, *A Haunt of Fears* (1984), which dealt with moral panic around comic books in the United Kingdom, tracing media influence as a recurring theme shaping critical responses to the media. For the most part, Barker was focused on British critics writing about British comics, which made it somewhat challenging for me as an American critic to follow. I was aware of *Jackie* because of Angela McRobbie's famous critique of this popular magazine for teen girls (1991) and had sought out a copy on my first trip to London but Barker's book was full of other British comics which were unknown to me as a U.S. based graduate student – *Action*, *Bunty*, *Tracey*, and the like, not to mention a 'Dennis the Menace' comic which bore little to no resemblance to the American comic strip of the same name. But, finally, at the end of the book, Barker tests his 'dialogic' account of 'ideology' against North American comics – specifically, Walt Disney's Donald Duck and Uncle \$crooge – as read by Latin American critics, something I could really sink my teeth into, and so this chunk became a staple of my teaching for many years to come.

Being asked to contribute to this collection, my first thought was to revisit this chapter in light of more recent developments in Uncle \$crooge's comic book career. First, I will review Barker's original arguments and then consider two recent versions of the Uncle \$crooge franchise – Don Rosa's epic graphic novel, *The Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck*, which seeks to fully develop information about the rise of this 'self-made' duck suggested by Carl Barks' original series and IDW's relaunched *Uncle \$crooge* monthly which republishes comics about the world's richest duck (or second richest depending on which mallard you trust) from a range of mostly European publications. The first challenges the claims Dorfman and Mattelart make about history and historicity; the second complicate some assumptions they make about the nature of cultural flow. And both provoke us to think more about the role of humour, questions that the Chilean critics tend to dismiss with little interest.

---

<sup>1</sup> The current most readily available edition of the book is the Kindle version, which uses LOC (locator numbers designating specific lines) rather than page numbers. All subsequent citations to this book refer to LOC.

## Ideas with Feathers

From the first, Barker introduces the general debate about 'media violence' as an example of the assumptions often made by cultural critics about the ways that media ideologies shape everyday thought and action. Writing specifically about the research of Eysenck and Nias, he lays out his core critique:

My objection is not simply that I disagree with their confidence in laboratory studies, not just that they are too dismissive of counter-evidence (though both are true). My challenge is that they have already decided the issue by the way they decide to ask questions. Their 'scientific' theory is already political. It commits them to assumptions which not only precede their evidence, but shape it [...] Now suppose I want to ask if 'violence' could mean different things in a cartoon, say, as opposed to a police series, a documentary, or a soap opera; or if the way it is filmed might make a difference? I can't. The only questions of scientific interest are the amount of violence and the amount of effect that violence has. (Barker, 1989: 3)

A key issue for Barker here is the lack of differentiation: the content does not really matter; the context does not really matter; violence is a thing which can be easily identified and quantified, removed from its original consumption context, placed in a laboratory and tested objectively to see how it shapes those who encounter it. The child (or child-like) audience is assumed to be uniquely vulnerable to media's effects, because it is naive and passive, because the 'innocent' know little about the world beyond what the media has told them. Barker expands this initial conception of media influence, from debates about violence, to a broader range of effects critics have ascribed to popular culture, and thus, his focus in this book on romance comics and gender stereotypes, narrative identification, and later, in the case of *Donald Duck*, on the ways the 'developing world' perceives its own state of 'dependency' on the colonising powers.

Barker writes a few pages later: 'The history of comics is a history of controversies. And every controversy has involved claims about the meanings, messages, and potential influence of some comics' (Barker, 1989: 6). These two sentences, as much as any other, capture what drives Barker not only in this book but in many other writings across his career. By dissecting media controversies, Barker surfaces underlying assumptions about how media (and ideology) works. Barker becomes a master at close reading the writing of other critics, pulling out and testing their assumptions. Again and again, he finds that critics are dealing with undifferentiated media 'content' as if popular culture were a vast pond and any given drop examined under a microscope can tell us about the whole swamp, whereas Barker is interested in questions of production, genre, readership, and medium specificity which might differentiate one example from another. He sees popular culture as a diverse space where many ideas are circulated, not all of them intended to be taken seriously, and where different

readers make different meanings from what they encounter. Notions of identification and stereotyping, so often used by other critics, are not so much methodologies as they are 'sedimented social concerns' that get mapped onto texts that are far less simple than these critics propose (Barker, 1989: 277). Rather than the drop of water metaphor I suggest above, Barker says that 'We have to cut small pieces out of living tissues of history and society in order to analyze them' (Barker, 1989: 300). Barker sees a much more lively role for the critic, one which takes popular culture where she finds it and pushes back against too easy categorisations. As he stews and steams over Thatcherism, rightly so, the final sentences of the book proclaim: 'Perhaps this is the best analysts can do. They shouldn't prognosticate. But maybe they can rage, and denounce. And celebrate where they can' (Barker, 1989: 301). I love this formulation – 'rage and denounce' where you must but 'celebrate' where you can.

Curiously, Dorfman and Matelart see a somewhat similar role for the critic. In 'The Apology for Duckology', they write:

The kind of language we use here is intended to break with false solemnity which generally cloaks scientific investigation. In order to attain knowledge, which is a form of power, we cannot continue to endorse, with blinded vision and stilted jargon, the initiation rituals with which our spiritual high priests seek to legitimize and protect their exclusive privileges of thought and expression [...] We do not want to be like the scientist who takes his umbrella with him to go study the rain... What we hope to achieve is a more direct and practical means of communication and to reconcile pleasure with knowledge. (1971b: Loc. 549)

As always, the metaphors matter. They reject the isolation of the high priest from his followers or the abstracted and distanced perspective of the scientist who does not directly experience his object of study. They want to walk among the masses; they want to teach them how to read comics. In doing so, they hope to arm them against the influence these seemingly simple and innocent texts exert on the public's dreams, and they want to make the analysis itself a form of pleasure, knowledge, and power. They write elsewhere in the book about why dreams, especially those of the people, matter:

This is not to imply that people should be prevented from dreaming about their future. On the contrary, their real need to achieve a better future is a fundamental ethical motivation in their struggle for liberation. But Disney has appropriated this urge and diluted it with symbols uprooted from reality. It is the fun world of the Pepsi-generation: all fizz and bubbles. (Dorfman and Matelart, 1971a: Loc. 1870)

They are writing in the context of a bloody revolutionary struggle, seeking to advise Salvadore Allende's government on the best ways to displace American influences on Chile with new

forms of popular culture that might help the people develop more revolutionary and liberatory dreams. They are literally and figuratively in the trenches, seeking to foment social change. As Dorfman wrote decades later, 'Behind the writing, you can hear the chants of a pueblo on the march, you can surmise the enormous act of imagination that every true radical change demands, the belief that alternative worlds are possible' (Dorfman, 2018: Loc. 137). Disney, they warn, is 'the traveling salesman of the imagination' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971a: Loc. 2377), whereas they cast themselves as the policemen who sought to arrest his movements for the good of the people. They conclude, 'The U.S. dreams and redeems itself, and then imposes that dream upon others for its own salvation, which poses the danger for the dependent countries. It forces us Latin Americans to see ourselves as they see us' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971a: Loc. 2377).

In hacking away at Donald Duck, they are hacking away at the Disney corporation as a whole and in doing so, they are battling capitalism and the American nation-state, one of several sets of displacements upon which their manifesto rests. In this context, rather than seeking the contextual nuance Barker advocates, they see critique as a blunt instrument and they use language as a brute force to overcome a political enemy. Their writing is embodied and impassioned, but the blood has rushed to their heads and they may no longer be seeing clearly. Dorfman would write later and somewhat apologetically:

In my pursuit of purity and national autonomy, in my desire for a rebellious Chile that would totally expel the American part of me[...]I have exaggerated the villainy of the U.S. and the nobleness of Chile. I have not been true to the complexity of cultural interchange, the fact that not all mass media products absorbed from abroad are negative and not everything that we produce at home is inspiring. (Dorfman, 2018: Loc. 137)

This is not a debate about media violence, but rather its seeming opposite – one about childhood innocence, the oft-proclaimed innocence of the Disney texts, the innocence of 'pure entertainment', the innocence of the child viewer, and the innocence of the Chilean people who they describe as childlike in their fascination with these characters and their adventure. Much has been written about the dangers of such myths of childhood innocence by cultural studies researchers and historians (Jenkins, 1998), but for the moment, I want to look at the role that this myth plays in their account. Disney, they argue, constructs an aura of childlike wonder around his works which he uses as a shield ('magical antibodies') against criticism and as a means of seducing both children and adults:

Adults create for themselves a childhood embodying their angelic aspirations, which offer consolation, hope, and a guarantee of an unchanging future[...]Adult values are projected onto the child, as if childhood was a special domain where these values could be protected uncritically. In Disney the two strata – adult and child – are not to be considered antagonistic; they

fuse in a single embrace, and history becomes biology. (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971a: Loc. 683)

Dorfman and Mattelart tap Roland Barthes' concept of naturalisation (Barthes, 1972), suggesting the ideology may be most powerful when it can translate cultural variables into unwavering forces of nature. Here, they are describing childhood innocence as a myth constructed by American capitalism for its own ends, but not much further in the book, they construct their own myth, writing about the 'true qualities of children': 'their unbounded, open (and thus manipulable) trustfulness, their creative spontaneity (as Piaget has shown), their incredible capacity for unreserved, unconditional love, and their imagination which overflows around and through and within the objects that surround them' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971a: Loc. 792). These are the qualities they fear have been 'stripped aside' so that the Disney corporation can work its magic. But it is worth noting that this too is a mystification, which lays claim to children's 'true qualities' for its own interests. Disney, Dorfman and Mattelart warn us, 'use animals to trap children, not to liberate them', adding 'once the children are caught within the pages of the comic, the door closes behind them' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971a: Loc. 58).

And as the manifesto continues, Dorfman and Mattelart have mapped these qualities of the child onto the adults of their country, who consume the Disney texts with 'the innocence and helplessness of a child' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1870). Dorfman and Mattelart, thus, move from discussing children to discussing representations of 'noble savages' in Disney fictions, 'third worldlings', who are described as 'candid, foolish, irrational, disorganized, and gullible' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1096) to the people of Latin America who are described as functioning in a childlike state of subservience to the Americans. In a suggestive metaphor, they write, 'Reading Disney is like having one's own exploited condition rammed down one's throat with honey' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 2478). But describing Latin Americans as manipulated children justifies the often-paternalistic tone of *How to Read Donald Duck* (here-after, *HTRDD*). Childhood in this formulation is being exploited, robbed of its innocence, stripped of its natural qualities, and thus in desperate need for someone – a grown-up – to step up and protect it, often from its own interests and pleasures.

*HTRDD* is a widely cited example of the cultural imperialism thesis. Barker defines this concept as the idea that 'the process of imperialist control is aided and abetted by imposing supportive forms of culture', whether the framing of news and nonfiction, advertising campaigns, or the 'Disneyfication' of popular culture. *HTRDD* states the links between economic and cultural imperialism very directly: 'Our countries are exporters of raw materials, and importers of super-structural and cultural goods [...] Behind the Coca-Cola stands a whole structure of expectations and models of behavior, and with it, a particular kind of present and future society, and an interpretation of the past' (Dorfman and Matelart, 1971: Loc. 2454). Disneyfication and Coca-Cola, two great tastes together again. As they write, 'No matter how many bubbles they put into the soda-pop fantasy world, the taste is always

the same, unbeatable' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 2011). Here, we see the remnants of the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture – the idea that differences are only surface deep and at the end of the day, it is all always the same.

Barker signals that he shares many political goals with the Chilean writers and admires their analysis which he describes as 'of all the analysis of comics, perhaps the most important [...] a damning indictment of Disney....well-researched and well-argued...multifaceted' (1989: 279), and 'a brilliant polemic' (Barker, 1989: 283) but also that he considers it an oversimplification of a much more complicated phenomenon. Barker also describes *HTRDD* as advancing an 'unargued view of influence' (Barker, 1989: 289), trying to read cultural effects entirely through the lens of their own critical interpretation of the Disney texts.

Let's consider all that must get ignored for this to work. First, Disney comics must be read as though they stood in for the entire Disney cultural apparatus. A Disney comic is the same as a Disney film or a Disney amusement park. There is little interest in issues of medium specificity – what difference does it make that these are comics? And why should one bother with the distinction between Donald Duck and Uncle \$crooge comics? Mostly, for the record, they discuss the latter, even if Donald is in many of these stories.

There is little awareness in issues of authorship – everything is ascribed here to Walt Disney himself, systematically collapsing the differences between the man and the corporation. Disney in their account is omniscient, omnipresent, and nigh on omnipotent. Consider just a few things they ascribed to Walt Disney throughout their account: 'Disney exorcizes history [...]' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1551). 'Disney hopes that [...]' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: 2326). 'The way Disney conceives the relationship between base and superstructure [...]' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 2386) Now, Disney is a Marxist theorist! In this account, corporations are people, or at least capable of sentient thought, or we are simply ascribing to the individual my generation knew as 'Uncle Walt' the full power of a media conglomerate. Granted this is most likely sloppy writing but in many ways, the simplicity and thus the power of their analysis rests on collapsing such distinctions. They write, 'Mickey and Donald will help keep them in power, hold socialism at bay' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 247).

Subsequent scholars have shown that Carl Barks, the creator of much of the Duckberg mythology, had a great deal of creative freedom from corporate oversight during much of his career and that Walt Disney himself had little to no interest in the comics except as an ancillary product to generate additional income. Fans at the time would have distinguished Barks as the 'good duck artist' whose works stood out from the more anonymous corporate product. And Thomas Andrae ascribes to Barks a set of values at odds with those Dorfman and Mattelart read from the comic books:

Bark's work offers a sustained interrogation of the assumptions and conflicts within capitalist modernity. His stories examine the American dream and our preoccupation with wealth, power, and technological control. They reveal the ironies and contradictions of the myth of the self-made man and question the

fetishism of money and success on which this myth was based. (Andrae, 2006: 19)

Further, as Barker notes, *HTRDD* has little interest in locating these comics in any historical context, seeing little difference in comics written decades apart, at different moments in American political policy or Disney Corporate strategies: 'they lack a material production history which in this case requires a knowledge of the Disney empire, and Disney's part in the internal tensions between American capital and the State' (Barker, 1989: 298), some of which his chapter provides. Barker writes, 'We need to understand their distance from direct political processes. Their production history sets them apart and their content will not neatly dovetail with the perceived needs of cultural imperialism' (Barker, 1989: 295).

Beyond this, as Barker notes, *HTRDD* assumes a shared national interest, whether the collective interests of the Chilean people or those of the United States or perhaps capitalism as a whole. All readers engage with these comics in the same way, deriving the same meanings and pleasures. This desire to create more diverse and nuanced accounts of media audiences within and across national contexts would motivate many of Barker's subsequent audience research initiatives. Dorfman and Mattelart, Barker implies, fall back the concept of identification which

has no scientific validity as one for understanding the relationships between media and audiences [...] Historically it arose from a set of fears about working class behavior. However, it displaced those fears and misidentified them. Under a veil of paternalism, it coded working class resistance and rebellion as 'violence,' as an individual phenomenon, resulting from 'bad media' [...] Although it has on occasion been used in other contexts, it never sheds the assumptions which prompted its formation and original use....the common sense model of human behavior which sees us as devils constrained by a veneer of civilization. (Barker, 1989: 109)

For Barker, these relationships are knowing (not innocent), playful (not docile), stemming from familiarity with genre conventions, narrative formulas, cultural references, jokes, surprises, and contradictions evoked by the original texts and their authors. Characters like Uncle Scrooge are more than 'ideas with feathers' (Barker, 1989: 286), more than symbols for abstract concepts, but for their readers, they become living personalities who they come to know across a series of episodes.

David Kunzle proudly states in his introduction, 'The value of their work lies in the light it throws not so much upon a particular group of comics or even a particular cultural entrepreneur, but on the way in which capitalist and imperialist values are supported by its culture' (Kunzle, 1975: Loc. 202). Kunzle's claims for the value of moving from the 'particular' to a more totalising account is the exact opposite of what motivates Barker or myself, as we examine popular culture. Ever insistent on greater contextualisation, Barker ends his essay,



'The Disney comics are neither 'innocent' nor 'guilty'. They are too diverse and complicated for either. To say more than this would require a range of new kinds of research. Which is a good way to end any argument' (Barker, 1989: 299).

In the rest of my essay, I will offer some 'new kinds of research' testing Dorfman and Mattelart's claims against more recent versions of Uncle \$crooge and Donald Duck. My goal here is to raise questions rather than provide answers, since doing so would be hard to achieve in the time and space available. But, damn, these comics really do open up some fascinating new grounds for debate around these issues! I have no way of knowing whether these authors and the corporation which publishes the Uncle \$crooge comics have consciously rethought some of these assumptions in the wake of *HTRDD*'s publication but there can be no question that their book creates a frame through which and against which academics (and aca-fans in my case) might read subsequent texts in the Duckburg franchise.

## **Rosa's Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck**

In 1991, the American-born comics artist and writer Don Rosa created a 12-part series of stories, known collectively as *The Complete Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck* (Rosa, 2019a), which have become the gold standard of Duckburg stories in the Post-Barks era, winning an Eisner Award upon the series' completion in 1995. Rosa's trajectory to that point suggest something of the dispersed publication of Disney comics. In the American context, \$crooge McDuck has variously been published by Dell Comics (1952-1962), Gold Key Comics (1962-1984), Gladstone (1986-1990), Disney Comics (1990-1993), Gladstone again for two more runs (1993-1998, 2003-2008), Boom Kids! (2009-2011) and IDW (2015-2022 and beyond), altogether six different publishers in the U.S. market, not counting the various international publishers. Rosa entered comics with a 1986 story 'The Son of the Sun', published by Gladstone, wrote for *Duck Tails* magazine (which was based on the American cartoon series but published by the Dutch-based publisher Oberon), wrote *The Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck* for the Denmark-based Egmont (which at that time handled many different international regions), and later published a series of 'missing stories' for the French publisher Picsou. By all accounts, Disney issues broad guidelines but these various publishers had relative autonomy, reflecting the continued interest in these figures in Europe and their ebbing and flowing popularity in the North American market. If Dorfman and Mattelart read Uncle \$crooge as part of a larger process of Americanisation, we now might read him as a symptom of globalisation, though we also should note how significantly his stories are localised for different national markets.

Describing himself a 'life-long McDuck fan', Rosa explained his motives for writing his sprawling epic about the origins of \$crooge's fortune in terms that perhaps only another fan would fully understand; he was responding to the:

fan-boy challenge of taking into account every ‘fact’ concerning Scrooge McDuck’s early life that was ever revealed in one of Carl Bark’s classic stories, no matter how minute or obscurely buried the morsel of history might have been. If Scrooge made a comment about his youth in the third balloon of the fifth parent of the seventh page of the second story in some comic book in 1952 – as long as it was a story written by Barks – the fact is mentioned somewhere in the series. But the series was not intended to change the Duckberg universe or otherwise break with tradition. On the contrary, it was intended to affirm all of the elements of all the great Barks stories so many citizens of this planet grew up on. (Rosa, 2019a: n.p.)

Rosa cross-checked his details with ‘Noted Duck fans around the world, including one Carl Barks’ (Rosa, 2019a: n.p.). Rosa’s narrative assumes his readers possess a high degree of literacy with this source material, using author’s notes to document where he found information and resolve disputed claims. We might contrast Rosa’s respect for fan mastery with the ill-informed reader *HTRDD* imagined:

There is really no history in these comics, for gold forgotten from the preceding episode cannot be used for the following one. If it could, it would connote a past with influence over the present, and reveal capital and the whole process of accumulation of surplus value as the explanation of Uncle Scrooge’s fortune. In these circumstances, the reader could never empathize with him beyond the first episode. And what’s more, they are all the first and the last episode. They can be read in any order, and are ‘timeless,’ one written in 1950 could be published without any trouble in 1970. (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1933).

We may perhaps forgive Dorfman and Mattelart for not anticipating how the rise of comics speciality shops and shifts in comics distribution would result in more reliable access to each issue of a published series or how this would result in greater expectations of continuity and seriality, though these changes were already underway when *HTRDD* was published and would intensify across the following decades. Today, there is a whole industry built around supporting fan mastery and these readers surely know which story was published when. Again, we might contrast the readers who were constantly quibbling with Rosa over issues of continuity with Dorfman and Mattelart’s description: ‘The reader, who is attracted by the adventure, does not notice that beneath the novelty of the encounter, the characters are continually repeating themselves’ (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 2039).

I do not mean to be simply repeating the by now banal observation that mass culture critics underestimate the agency and activity of fans, though this is true. These claims about the loss of history are foundational for their claim that Disney mystifies and naturalises how capitalism works, offering us a vision of wealth without origins, an endless repetition where

the same people always end up on top no matter how many times the game is replayed. Rosa's stories are obsessed with history at every possible level: he reconstructs the timeline of Barks's original narrative so that he may faithfully reproduce it, treating an episodic narrative as though it were a serial, as many other fans have done before. He then constructs narratives around the key events in Scrooge's life from how he earned his first dime to how he built the iconic vault. Around those core pieces of Barks lore, Rosa adds his own rich details, producing original adventures which are rewarding in their own right. He provides Scrooge with a family tree and introduces us to an array of McDuck ancestors, some from Barks stories, others original. Rosa introduces actual historical figures, such as Teddy Roosevelt or situates Scrooge at the site of historical events, such as the eruption of Krakatoa or Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He explores how the character changes under shifting circumstances and gradually developed the personality traits we associate with him today. Far from being unaware of the repetition, he (and the other fans) take great pleasure in it but also seek to explain it. From the first page of the first story, Rosa writes:

Scrooge McDuck is the world's richest duck! He loves his money, all five multiplujillian, nine impossiblion, seven fantastatrillion dollars, and sixteen cents of it. He loves it so much because he worked so hard to earn it! He loves it so much because he worked just as hard to keep it! He knows exactly where he got every coin he so carefully hoards! Together they tell the story of his life beginning with his number one dime, the first coin he ever earned, which he has placed lovingly on a velvet pillow! But how did he earn that dime? How did he get so rich? (Rosa, 2019b: 1)

Dorfman and Mattelart miss how damn funny the Scrooge comics are, how much they spoof our stereotypes about the rich. Just look at the absurdity of how money is described above, both the fanciful names for amounts beyond normal comprehension but also the absurd over-specification of the 'sixteen cents' at the end of the string of pseudo-numbers. And we might add to that the playful images that accompany this narration, Scrooge tossing his coins in the air, diving into a pool of cash, and making random stacks, including one which is balanced precariously on his head. Scrooge may not be spending his money but he is certainly enjoying it! Though witty in their own prose, Dorfman and Mattelart were totally humourless and literal-minded in the ways they scoured at the McDuck comics like schoolmasters who see nothing funny in all of this silly nonsense. Dorfman and Mattelart notes, 'Disney does not invent these caricatures, he only exploits them to the utmost' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1304). We might push this further and say he exploits them to the utmost in order to spoof them, pushing our images of the filthy rich to their breaking point. One thing that goes unsaid is the ways that they build on the critiques of greed and social darwinism which surround Charles Dickens' original Ebenezer Scrooge character from which this Uncle Scrooge got his name, or the ways Barks must have been aware of another comic miser, Jack Benny,

and his own refusal to part with his first dime ('Your money or your life?' 'I'm thinking') and his own heavily guarded vault where he loved to spend time.

Barker claims that he could not find the right theoretical tools to explain why it matters that these comics are intended as comedy so let me propose one such frame. Mary Douglas (1975) tells us that jokes put into conversation ideas that are emergent, just beneath the surface, within common social understanding: they say what many believe needs to be said but are not quite ready to say. As such, they point towards tension points in the culture. A joke can be said 'too soon' or too directly and cause offense. It can be said too late and seem banal and commonplace. But those jokes that produce laughter have recognised and surfaced some hidden pattern in the culture. This explains why Thomas Andrae ascribes to the Barks stories the exact opposite meaning from Dorfman and Mattelart: they correctly identified the theme of the joke, but missed the valence, given the ideological instability and plausible deniability comics introduce into the equation. In their formulation of media influence, to represent something is to advocate for it, to advocate for it is to cause it to happen, another example of the collapse of meaningful distinctions that run through *HTRDD*. The book does briefly raise the prospect that the comics might contain some satire of dominant institutions but dismisses the idea as a form of incorporation and inoculation, as what Barker describes as a 'mask' to hide Disney's true intent, suggesting that what seem like 'silly antics' would be read without humour as pure exploitation. Yet, as Barker notes, this underestimates the instability humour introduces into such a context, the ways comedy makes intention hard to determine and opens the text to a range of different meanings for different audiences who operate in different relations to the discourses being deployed. As Barker writes:

Every story carries its readers through a process. Events unfold and the reader's relation to those events also unfolds. In creating an imaginary world, the story therefore also creates laws for that world, process of change, problems, attractions. To be comprehensible at all to a reader, they have to have a logic [...] And they have to have a logic to which particular groups of readers are capable of orienting themselves. (Barker, 1989: 274)

We might say the same about jokes, following Douglas, except that the joke pits two competing and contradictory logics against each other in order to show us the inconsistencies in the ways we understand the world.

Rosa introduces humour at the level of both text and images. Consider another panel from 'The Buckaroo of the Badlands' which operates more on the level of the image (Rosa, 2019c: 59). Rosa frames the image from a high angle looking down on a vista encapsulating all of the circumstances that led up to this moment: Scrooge is hanging for dear life to the tail of a runaway bull and all around him, other chaotic events play out involving, among other things, an angry bear, runaway horses, a dinosaur skull, all chasing each other through a maze of canyons in the wild, wild west as a future American president looks down and jokes about

politics as a 'three-ring circus'. The densely accumulated sight gags are punctuated with the image of a puzzled buzzard watching from above. The slapstick here suggests the frantic pursuit of wealth and where it leads.

Across the series, Rosa shows Scrooge make and lose multiple fortunes as a consequence of a series of literal misfortunes, with his success at least in part ascribed to blind luck. Here's what *HTRDD* says about the role of luck in the earlier Duckberg narratives, here in relation to what they perceive as the passivity of Donald Duck: 'All respite is conferred upon him from above and beyond, despite his efforts to master his destiny. Fate, in making Donald his plaything, becomes the sole dynamic factor, provoking catastrophes and bestowing joys' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1739). In Rosa's book, fate and luck both give and take away, intensifying Scrooge's struggles to seek (and protect) his fortune, amplifying the hard work he must perform to do so. Rosa's book spoofs the Horatio Alger stories about self-made men: his protagonist is from the start descending from the landed gentry which has been pushed off their land by some rogues and as of the early 20th century, seeks to reclaim their estate if they can find a way to pay back taxes. At the same time, the opening story, 'The Last of the Clan McDuck', shows how Scrooge as a young duck earns his first dime by polishing the mud-caked boots of a ditch digger, learning in the process the value of hard work. But Rosa undercuts this lesson in several ways, first by showing Scrooge's father giving the dime to the ditch digger in this first place and nudging him to hire the lad for the job and second, by using a coin which is nigh near valueless in the context (Scotland) where Scrooge receives it, preparing us for an ongoing narrative where capital is accrued but not expended. In a later 'missing story' that Rosa offers as apocrypha, 'Of Ducks, Dimes, and Destinies' (Rosa, 2006a) he shifts the dime's origin to incorporate elements of magical manipulation and time travel. Determined to acquire the coin which she believes is the magical amulet which will grant her the Midas touch, Magica De Spel travels back to early 20th century Scotland, tries to buy the coin from the suspicious ditchdigger, and ends up putting it back into Scrooge's hands, thus setting the wild chain of events into motion in the first place. So, across the book, Rosa flits between multiple competing and contradictory versions of how fortunes are made, creating more than enough instability to render the whole question a bit silly and suggesting why we should never take any one version of these events at face value. Is this another form of mystification, as Dorfman and Mattelart might suggest, or an incitement for reflection? As Barker suggests, 'how could we ever decide between these [...] interpretations? They each appeal to exactly the same evidence from the stories' (Barker, 1989: 287). For Dorfman and Mattelart, the meaning is straightforward, whereas much more ambiguity is present when read through Barker's 'dialogic' model.

Let's consider another example of humour in Rosa's stories, this time speaking to *HTRDD*'s core critique of how Disney comics depict the 'third' world. In 'The Sharpie of the Culebra Cut' (Rosa, 2006b) Scrooge and his associates are making their way through a tropical jungle and stumble upon a hidden temple of ancient origin. The dialogue calls out the ways that Disney often mashes up signs from multiple different cultures: 'How odd! That jaguar is of Aztec design, but the stonework is Incan and the Hieroglyphs are Mayan! This can't be real'

(Rosa, 2006b: 160). But Scrooge, tapping his endless body of knowledge and expertise, explains, 'this is a temple of offering to the gods for the success of trade between all the nations of Pre-Columbian America, North and South'. A moment of instability calls attention to the illogic of Disney's history of misrepresentations, but then, Rosa, always the tidy fanboy, pulls it all back into a larger narrative logic, which nevertheless links the incoherence of cultural codes back to 'commerce' and trade. Is this a spoof of or an embodiment of Disneyfication? It is hard to tell, since it wants to be both at the same time. For the most part, Rosa ignores the stereotypical representations of indigenous peoples that *HTRDD* critiques – drawing more on wild and non-anthropomorphised animals for the adventure while if present at all, the local populations are portrayed less as children who can be tricked out of their wealth and more as bemused adults making wry comments about the ignorance of their North American counterparts. In this example, Rosa imagines a different kind of relationship between North and South America, one that embraces the global exchange of culture and capital for sure, in a neoliberal way, but does not embrace neo-colonialism per se. Rosa rejects Dorfman and Mattelart's scorched duck tactics in favour of more incremental reforms and reformulations.

## **IDW's Uncle Scrooge**

In 2001, the book, *Dazzled by Disney?* (Wasko, Phillips and Meehan, 2001) reported the findings of the Global Disney Audiences Project, a mixed methods study that surveyed 1252 respondents from 53 distinct nationalities and offered ethnographic case studies on how Disney content was consumed in 14 countries. Its conceptual frame was political economy, its methodology audience research. Among other things, the team was seeking to test the cultural imperialism hypothesis that Dorfman and Mattelart had proposed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan conclude:

While Disney is not directly imposing its products and values on the rest of the world, its business practices make those products ubiquitous. This ubiquity, the incorporation of Disney products in family rituals, and the early contact with Disney products in childhood combine in complex and often contradictory ways to communicate Disney's core values and to set the terms within which audiences evaluate Disney [...] Because of its special links to childhood and family, Disney and its products take on a nearly sacred status. (Wasko, Phillips and Meehan, 2001: 334-335)

The Global Disney Project provides some interesting information about the status of Disney comics in the late 1990s:

Of the eighteen countries included in our survey only three reported less than 50 percent readership of comics: Canada (40 percent), USA (35 percent) and Japan, where just 12 percent of respondents had read a Disney comic book. Conversely, Greece (93 percent), India (91 percent) and the Scandinavian countries (Sweden – 91 percent, Norway – 90 percent, and Denmark – 88 percent) all reported exceedingly high rates of readership. (Wasko, Phillips and Meehan, 2001: 45-46)

Kirsten Drotner (2001: 104) found that the Donald Duck comics sold 95,00 copies per week, in Denmark representing 60 percent of all comics sold in the country. Ingunn Hagen (2001: 222) estimated that the comics reached 1.1 million readers in Norway, a country with a high literacy rate and long winters where print culture was the preferred way of engaging with Disney content. Most of the comics the European countries consumed were produced locally for local consumption.

A decade later, IDW began publishing *Uncle \$crooge* and *Donald Duck* comics which translated stories produced for various European markets, some going back to the 1960s, making them available for U.S. consumption for the first time, thus reversing the cultural flows, so that Americans were seeing these characters as reimagined, remixed, and reproduced by European writers and artists. Using issues of *Uncle \$crooge* 22-56 as my sample (basically, the stash I could get my hands on), I found that 42 of the comics published were Italian, 6 were Dutch, 5 Danish, 3 Swedish, 2 US, 2 Icelandic, 2 Czech, 1 German, and 1 Finnish. These numbers are somewhat distorted by the fact that many of the Italian stories are issue length whereas many of those from other countries are one or two pagers.

Few of these stories are classic adventure stories of the kinds Barks produced: the overwhelming majority were set in Duckburg itself, populated with a wealth of characters and social types intended to spoof contemporary culture, and some of them with a distinctly European cast (policemen with moustaches, artists, pastry chiefs). Most of the stories centred around protecting \$crooge's wealth from encroachments by the Beagle Boys or Magica de Spel, rather than exploration, discovery, conquest, and acquisition. Dorfman and Mattelart saw the Beagle Boys as embodying the place of the lumpen proletariat in the capitalist system: 'Their criminality is innate....Crime is the only work they know; otherwise, they are slothful into eternity [...] [Disney's] obsessive need to criminalize any person who infringes the laws of private property, invites us to look at these villains more closely' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1611, 1633). As they do so, the Chileans call out 'the darkness of their skin, their ugliness' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971: Loc. 1633) implying – but never directly stating – that they stand in for people of colour. Such representations, they argue, 'emasculate' any meaningful form of resistance and revolt, treating anyone who opposes capital's interest as 'naughty children' who must ultimately be 'spanked'. In these contemporary stories, \$crooge has already acquired his wealth (from whatever means), has banked it and wants to protect it from whatever nefarious scheme these proletarian pooches come up with next. In some ways, these stories represent the complete erasure of labour, the

disinterest in where wealth comes from, that worried Dorfman and Matellart, who saw 'adventure' as standing in for all meaningful labour and saw gold as another abstraction or evasion of history: 'The actual origin of the treasure is a mystery which is never mentioned [...] It turns into gold without the odor of fatherland or history. Uncle \$crooge can bathe, cavort, and plunge into his coins and banknotes [...] more comfortable than in spikey idols and jeweled crowns [...] History is melted down in the crucible of the dollar' (Dorfman and Matellart, 1971: Loc. 1476-1493). The Finnish story, 'The Hansa Hazard!' (Nærum and Løkling, 2017) has Uncle Scrooge and the usual suspects seeking to recover a fortune won and lost by Sir Peatbog McDuck, one of the many McDuck ancestors who populate these stories. Here, \$crooge discovers that an actual treasure map is plastered to the portrait that has hung in his family home for generations, and pursues the fortune first to Norway and Germany in a series of adventures designed as much to introduce readers to geography and cultural history as to explain how \$crooge added to his fortune. The goal is not to take someone else's wealth but to reclaim what once was lost, and rather than erase history, our pleasure (and knowledge) rests on it.

Where struggles to acquire wealth are concerned, the protagonists (\$crooge, Donald, and the nephews) are cast against wild animals and other forces of nature or against historical figures (pirates and other sea captains, ancient Egyptians, the Hansa) who have no contemporary counterparts, thanks to various science fiction and magic devices such as time travel, alien visitation, or simple sorcery. Wealth is naturalised – gold rocks covered over with moss in 'The Bodacious Butterfly Trail' (Scarpa, 2017) – laying around, there for the taking, by anyone resourceful and knowledgeable enough to do so. Just as often, though, wealth in these stories, is produced by technological innovation and entrepreneurship, the contemporary counterpart of adventure or discovery being the ability to capitalise on one's ideas, though this can be more complicated given current legal culture. In an Italian story, 'The World of Ideas' (Marinato, 2019) \$crooge taps into Gyro Gearloose's latest invention, the 'ideavideo', a headset that allows its users to 'see ideas', generating a wealth of new devices from which McDuck can profit. But when \$crooge opens an 'ideamarket' promising 'ideas by the millions', all ends badly as an army of lawyers camps outside, demanding compensation to those who had laid prior claim to many of those concepts.

In the stories examined, there were none of the racial stereotypes associated with indigenous peoples or 'third worlders', a central focus of HTRDD. We can decide if this erasure is a good thing (avoiding stereotypes) or a bad one (denying representation), whether it reflects a Disney corporation policy designed for more culturally sensitive times or the local tastes and interests of their European producers. Most likely, it is all of the above, but these stereotypes are so often associated with the adventure genre formulas that giving up one may have resulted in sacrificing the other. One Italian story, 'Treasure Above the Clouds' (Fallberg, 2018) does bring the ducks to Peru, having spotted what they think may be a marker for a lost Incan treasure while watching a nature documentary on television, journeying to this remote area in the Andes. The nephews reconnect with their old friends, the Junior Woodchucks of Peru, who repeatedly assist them in their perilous trek by lama, burro and



finally by condor. When they return with the loot, they are greeted by representatives of the Peruvian government who reclaim the treasure for their national museum: 'the law says anything from the ancient empires belongs to Peru, though the finders shall receive proper historical recognition'. The humour relies on this contrast between western avarice, the hospitality of the global south, and national sovereignty, a much more complex situation than depicted in the earlier adventure strips.

The Italian story, 'Uncle Scrooge and the Third Nile' (Corteggiani, 2017) encapsulates many of these themes. The yarn finds the usual heroes (plus Professor Ludwig Von Drake) retracing the path of the British explorer, Jonathan Livingduck, in search of the source of the Gold Nile, where those who bathe in its water emerge coated in gold. As they battle the Beagle Boys who also have their eyes on the treasure, they encounter the stuff that dreams are made of – golden Mammoth tusks, a gold brick road, and finally, a golden city. 'Mine, mine, mine', Uncle Scrooge proclaims. But first, they have to battle against the locals, which include half-naked 'cave ducks' and a Pharaoh and his followers. Rather than mask the labour producing the wealth, the story uncovers a struggle between the river people who mined the gold and the city people who profit from it. Newly enlightened, by the Beagle boys no less, the River people are now demanding their freedom to leave for the outside world. But when they learn about the contemporary reality via a laptop transmission, they reject modernity: 'Pollution! World hunger! Climate change! Ozone layer holes! Politics! Crime! Riots! Jaywalking!' The pharaoh turns out to be an American aviator who crashed in the jungles in the 1930s and the ducks, working hand in hand with the Beagle boys, reconstruct his flying machine in order to escape with their lives but a magic potion has erased their memories of what they saw and almost possessed. This story is highly aware of the struggles between the haves and have nots, the natives and the potential colonisers; wealth is produced here by the enslaved labour of the river people and extracted by the ruling class; the Beagle Boys promise liberation, and Uncle Scrooge makes nothing from the entire venture.

More systematic work needs to be done to compare the different forms of localisation occurring in these stories. One may want to ask whether writers from the various Nordic countries have the same scepticism about the workings of political, legal, and economic systems as the Italians have or whether the desire to incorporate education and entertainment runs across the Finnish publication. Is one country more likely to focus on the criminality of the Beagle Boys or the sorcery of *Magica* than another? Is it the case, as several examples here suggest, that some Nordic countries are drawn towards stories which emphasise the natural wonders of the woodlands as their own rewards, even if Scrooge is only tempted to venture there in search of other kinds of wealth? We would need to go beyond the limited examples reprinted and translated for IDW's U.S. readers to look at the larger library of stories produced for local consumption in the various European countries, given how under-represented these other countries are in what has been translated so far. Strikingly, these contemporary stories, through their use of comedy in various forms, surface some of the core tensions around wealth, power, knowledge, and resources, that *HTRDD* asserted had been obscured in the earlier stories. Debates about cultural imperialism and

economic exploitation have become so mainstream in the years since Dorfman and Mattelart first framed these arguments that they are assumed to be familiar and thus the basis of comedy for the readers of a Disney comic. A more nuanced theory of hegemony is needed to fully understand what's taking place here – one does not assume an easy mapping of corporate and national interest onto the entertainment produced and consumed, one anticipating a literate and active readership rather than a docile audience. Dorfman and Mattelart offer us a totalising reading of the *Scrooge* comics of their time, smoothing over all of the rough edges. Barker offers us a more complicated and contradictory way of reading comics, one where details matter, contradictions surface, we do not know all of the answers, and people often disagree about what things mean. Looking at more contemporary examples of Uncle *Scrooge* comics gives us a chance to consider the role of historical change as old genre formulas are worked through for contemporary audiences, the role of comedy as a source of semiotic instability, and the dynamic of globalisation and localisation which has long shaped the production and reception of Disney comics. Barker may have deconstructed Donald; these new stories reconstruct him.

## Biographical Note

Henry Jenkins is the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, Education, and East Asia Studies at the University of Southern California. He is the author or editor of 21 books from *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* to *Comics and Stuff* and the forthcoming *Where the Wild Things Were: American Boyhood and the Permissive Imagination*. He blogs at *Pop Junctions* and podcasts on *How Do You Like It So Far?*  
Contact: [hjenkins@usc.edu](mailto:hjenkins@usc.edu)

## References

- Andrae, Thomas. 2006. *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson.
- Barker, Martin. 1984. *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign*. Pluto Press, London.
- Barker, Martin. 1989. *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics*. Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. Paladin Books, London.
- Corteggiani, François. 2017. 'Uncle *Scrooge* and the Third Nile, Part Two' in *Uncle Scrooge*. No.24. IDW Publishing.
- Dorfman, Ariel. 2018. 'Introduction to the Fourth Edition' in Dorfman, Ariel & Mattelart, Armand (eds.) *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, pp.v-xii. OR Books, New York.

- Dorfman, Ariel & Mattelart, Armand. 1975. 'Preface to the English Edition' in Dorfman, Ariel & Mattelart, Armand (eds.) *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, pp.ix-xi. OR Books, New York.
- Dorfman, Ariel & Mattelart, Armand. 1971a. *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. OR Books, New York.
- Dorfman, Ariel & Mattelart, Armand. 1971b. 'Apology for Duckology' in Dorfman, Ariel & Mattelart, Armand (eds.) *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, pp.23–24. OR Books, New York.
- Douglas, Mary. 1975. 'Jokes' in Douglas, Mary (ed.) *Implicit Meanings*, pp.\_\_\_\_. Routledge, London.
- Drotner, Kristen. 2001. 'Denmark: 'Donald Seems So Danish': Disney and the Formation of Cultural Identity' in Wasko, Janet, Phillips, Mark & Meehan, Eileen R. (eds.) *Dazzled by Disney?: The Global Disney Audiences Project*, pp.102–120. Leicester University Press, London.
- Fallberg, Carl. 2018. 'Treasure Above the Clouds' in *Uncle Scrooge*. No.36. IDW Publishing.
- Hagen, Ingunn. 2001. 'Norway: Norwegian Memories of the Disney Universe' in Wasko, Janet, Phillips, Mark & Meehan, Eileen R. (eds.) *Dazzled by Disney?: The Global Disney Audiences Project*, pp.222–256. Leicester University Press, London.
- Jenkins, Henry. 1998. *The Children's Culture Reader*. New York University Press, New York.
- Kunzle, David. 1975. 'Introduction to the English Edition' in Dorfman, Ariel & Mattelart, Armand (eds.) *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, pp.1–22. OR Books, New York.
- Marinato, Manuela. 2019. 'The World of Ideas' in *Uncle Scrooge*. No.42. IDW Publishing.
- McRobbie, Angela. 1991. *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. Red Globe Press, London.
- Nærum, Knut & Løkling, Tormod. 2017. 'The Hansa Hazard!' in *Uncle Scrooge*. No.25. IDW Publishing.
- Rosa, Don. 2006a. 'Of Ducks, Dimes and Destinies' in Rosa, Don (ed.) *The Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck Companion*. Gemstone, Timonium.
- Rosa, Don. 2006b. 'The Sharpie of the Culebra Cut' in Rosa, Don (ed.) *The Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck Companion*. Gemstone, Timonium.
- Rosa, Don. 2019a. *The Complete Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck*. Fantagraphics, Seattle.
- Rosa, Don. 2019b. 'The Last of the Clan McDuck' in Rosa, Don (ed.) *The Complete Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck*. Fantagraphics, Seattle.
- Rosa, Don. 2019c. 'The Buckaroo of the Badlands' in Rosa, Don (ed.) *The Complete Life and Times of \$crooge McDuck*. Fantagraphics, Seattle.
- Scarpa, Romano. 2017. 'The Bodacious Butterfly Trail' in *Uncle Scrooge*. No.28. IDW Publishing.
- Wasko, Janet, Phillips, Mark & Meehan, Eileen R. 2001. *Dazzled by Disney?: The Global Disney Audiences Project*. Leicester University Press, London.