

be found willing to moderate positions and to accept positions they had previously rejected. Misunderstandings will be cleared up and information gaps closed by the disclosure and exchange of information, so that participants become aware of the intent and meanings of misperceived or unseen acts. Men will quickly be disabused of any notions that their opponents have malicious or evil intent.

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## Socialist

Dave Wagner. Donald Duck:  
an interview.

The following interview was originally planned to be collected with a number of other documents prepared by members of the Southern California Oral History Project (SCOHP) into a booklet examining various aspects of that region's labor struggles in the 1930s and '40s. Each group of project workers had its own area of concentration: some were interested primarily in the organizations of the unemployed in which displaced farmers had participated during the Depression; others taped interviews with women who had worked in government-operated day-care centers in defense plants during WWII, while still others—the smallest group—focused their attention on discussions with members of the Screen Actors Guild who had been active in studio strikes of the '30s or who had experienced first-hand the blacklistings and red scares of the McCarthy period.

For reasons more personal than political I was drawn to the work of the last named group in SCOHP. Although there was already a surfeit of literature on the studio purges, little actual field work had been done among the lesser publicized victims or among those actors, directors, and writers who had managed to avoid outright expulsion to remain in the industry—often at the cost of a diminished quality in their work. Here was an opportunity, I felt, to correct an imbalance in the record and, not incidentally, to develop information from primary sources for the history of American film, an area which had long interested me.

Originally we had made no plans to interview Donald Duck, whom we frankly considered to be representative of the worst petit bourgeois tendencies in American popular culture. We were aware of rumors from a number of sources that Duck was the only Disney actor whom HUAC had planned to call to its hearings,

and that in order to avoid embarrassment he agreed secretly to reveal the names of leaders in the Disney studio strike of 1939. Only on the urging of a fellow actor, who claimed to be one of Duck's few political intimates during those harried years and who insisted that the rumors were false (that in fact Duck had played an important role in the political debates of the period), did we decide to break in on the elusive actor's semi-retirement.

We met by appointment at his spacious split-level house near the Santa Barbara suburbs in Goleta, next to a freeway and separating two all-night shopping centers. Greeting me at the door was the famous thin-billed, large-eyed duck, standing exactly two feet high in a cutaway blue middy blouse. He gave me a confident smile, shook hands, guided me without a word into a large den where he indicated that I was to sit in an overstuffed chair opposite his smaller one, and after offering me a drink, asked that the interview begin at once. I switched on the tape recorder:

Q. I guess that voice you used in the cartoons wasn't real after all?

A. Of course not. That was ordered by one of Disney's men after he overheard me doing my imitation of Mel Blanc. There was never any question that it was a silly device, but my director felt it went along with the kind of character I was playing at the time. You know, the hairtrigger temper, the tantrums, and so forth. I never felt entirely comfortable with that business in the cartoons. The moment I got into the comics with Carl Barks we got rid of all that, the garbled voice and everything. It just got in the way of the story.

Q. Apparently you were glad, then, to go from cartoons to comics. Was it the greater freedom that attracted you?

A. Well, at first it was the money. Disney had decided initially that he would go into the comic-book business to get another cycle of profits from the daily newspaper strips by reprinting each month-long serial by the Mouse. The rest of our strips were reprinted in there too, in a kind of magazine, really. Disney saw it as a

children's magazine more than a real comic book, and he mainly wanted to use it—the back covers, that is—to advertise his feature-length animated films.

It wasn't until later, the early '40s, that the supply of reprintable strips began to run out. Some of the strips had been reprinted several times, but they still didn't have enough to fill the magazine. And the number of pages that were turned over to the strips had increased to the point where they realized they had to find a new supply of material.

Q. So Disney sort of backed into the comics field?

A. Yes, but you have to remember that no one in the '30s—not until the last minute, anyway—understood that this was a new medium. Everyone thought it was a scrap heap for second-hand animation. The comic book lacked the cinematic advantages of sound and movement and had nowhere near the circulation the strips got in the dailies. It was just another pulp souvenir.

Q. Another example of why Disney could be called the Henry Ford of media production, the mass saturation principle

A. Exactly. By the time we started to understand that we had a whole new medium here, one with unique qualities that still haven't been fully developed, the superhero artists had established a beachhead on the idea that the stories could be unified far more subtly, with a more complex series of visual rhythms, than a daily adventure strip could. The great naive innovators Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster with their high-school daydream, "Superman"; C. C. Beck's jocose "Captain Marvel"; Bob Kane's gothic "Batman"; and the brilliant Dick Cole's "Plastic Man" all opened up the medium and laid the foundations for nearly everything that was to happen until the rise of the "Mad" artists over at Educational Comics. The Superman and Batman styles were based on the naturalistic adventure strips of the '30s, while Captain Marvel and Plastic Man depended more on the older tradition of satire

and caricature. But between them they worked out the most effective ways to tighten up continuity, explore spatial effects over a wider area, and so forth. They invented the formulae, in other words, of depicting action in the larger format. The size change is the obvious advantage of comic books over the daily strips, but there was also in the '40s the growing use of that marvelous engine, the photo-offset press, whose chemical process not only printed rich and steamy colors, but also etched in the background details far more faithfully than the comparatively clumsy lead plates of the newspaper presses.

Q. How much of an influence did the super-hero artists have on your and Barks's work?

A. Not so much, really; they just suggested possibilities. We found that the representation of comic action has a whole different set of problems. Even Plastic Man, for example, was devoted to a dynamic effect on the page, a general feeling of energy and motion. Our action, on the other hand, was more deeply rooted in the narrative; in comedy everything depends on the context and above all on the timing of the movement. So as stories we had little to learn from them. Oh, they have that edge that adventure gives even the most realistic narrative, but they continue to insist on going into fantasy from fantasy—a basic narrative ineptness, Barks used to call it. In other words, if you wake up on Krypton and your whole comic-book day is spent there, no matter what happens it'll just be another day on Krypton. There's no expansion of the ordinary in that, no opening up from the everyday, the concrete, the sometimes banal here-and-now we all share. You have to start from right here and now and then rip a hole right through reality to really get the comic working.

Q. I'm not sure I understand.

A. Well, look at it this way. Nobody cares about raw fantasy. It's cheap. What we're really interested in is what fantasy has to do with what's going on every day right under our noses. Our opening

scenes usually introduced the characters in Burbankish Duckburg while I was working on my stamp collection or Uncle Scrooge had a business problem or the kids were playing with a hose in the backyard. Our environment was wholly human, which merely meant that we shared the readers' premises, as the pun ran at the time. We found that a story, if it starts with the details of all these daily bump-and-grind situations, makes the lift-off into fantasy much more illuminating because it shows just how circumscribed a thing ordinary life is when it's stacked next to (or taken over by) the imagination.

Q. I see. And that's what you and Barks did?

A. Yes, in a way. Sometimes.

Q. When did this general approach start to become clear?

A. Actually it took quite a while. When the Disney people saw that more fodder was needed for the comic books, they picked in-betweeners out of the film-animation shops and put them to work on the books.

Q. In-betweeners were . . . ?

A. The artists who drew the hundreds of cells, or separate frames, that filled out the movement "between" the main parts of a cartoon scene. Barks was one of the studio in-betweeners, and he went over to the comics in 1942. For awhile he just illustrated the stories someone else had written, but then he got permission to make changes in the scripts he thought were particularly sloppy. Eventually they gave him writing assignments, and he wound up being the only guy in the studio who both wrote and drew his own stories. With that kind of freedom, we could begin to move.

Q. When did Barks go to work for Disney, do you know, or how old was he at the time?

A. I guess he must have been in his 30s. He came from a rather poor family in rural Oregon, and is credited in legend to have tried his hand at and quit a variety of jobs before joining up with Disney.

He's supposed to have been a sailor at one time, or a cowhand. All I know is that sometime during the Depression he was working on a railroad riveting gang when he decided to take up cartooning as an "easier" way to make a living. Mike Barrier at *Funnyworld* is the only real authority on all of this.

Our real work together began when Barks took over the duties of doing the lead, 10-page story in each issue of "Walt Disney's Comics and Stories". There was a steady flow of those stories from month to month from 1943 to 1964—almost 300 of them. But the most ambitious work was done in Uncle Scrooge's comic and in my book-length adventures that were called "one-shots" because they were designed as complete novellas with no continuous numbering system.

Q. I wonder if we can be more specific about your idea of what all of you were doing in those stories. I mean, what sort of character were you playing? Sometimes you seemed weak-willed and ordinary, and at other times you were capable of courage and insight. It was rather complicated.

A. It was complicated, naturally. We were trying to do something difficult. In some ways I think we succeeded, but there are times when it seems like we never accomplished much of anything. Barks got dispirited fairly often in the late 50s and didn't take as many risks. I guess the rest of us, without his leadership—which was always decisive, by the way, very strong in the background—the rest of us just drifted when he did.

But in the early days, and especially between '48 and '53, we took care of a lot of important matters.

Now in regard to the character I was developing, it was supposed to rise realistically to the level of complexity of the ordinary guy on the street. Old "unca" Donald was able to move through the whole keyboard of emotions: sometimes he was pessimistic and hard-headed, sometimes a naive dullard. In the long stories he could even be heroic, and in

those moments he was Everyman—cast in the form of a duck to show that he, like the rest of us, even in the midst of heroism, was only a step from the comic, from the absurd continuity of contemporary life. He showed what supposedly ordinary people are capable of when they are freed from the banal process of reproducing everyday life at work, at home, in the roller-skating rink, wherever.

On the other hand, Barks sometimes just used us as vehicles in the service of a didactic plot. In those stories we just played along, reacting in predictable ways to formulaic fantasy situations. All we did in one of the 10-pagers in 1957, for example, was register a range of "gee whiz" expressions. I was sitting in Gyro's imagination machine and took the kids (Huey, Dewey and Louie—DW) to planets and stars that looked exactly like earth but were geometrically vast in scale. That was just Barks showing kids how huge the macrocosm really is, and how small our place in it.

Maybe one of the best examples I can give you of how all this worked is one of Uncle Scrooge's classics, "Land Beneath the Ground", the March-May issue for 1956. In that one, Scrooge is worried about earthquakes cracking a hole in his money bin and swallowing all of his cash. At that time, and if you look it up you can check this, Scrooge had "five billion quintuplatillion umtuplatillion multuplatillion impossibidillion fantasticatrillion dollars", and to satisfy his worries he sank a spiral shaft into the ground to see if there were any fissures in the bedrock.

Four miles down the workmen cut into the roof of a cavern 30 miles deep, and through an odd turn of events Scrooge and the kids and I were the only ones to actually descend into the cavern. We discovered down there a weird nation of living rubber balls divided into two camps, the terries and the firmies. They made earthquakes for fun by rolling in herds of millions against natural pillars and by cramming under ledges and lifting up all at once.

In that story I got to play the hero, but Barks kept me in character in a useful way. Scrooge decides that a jousting contest between me and a champion terry (one of the rollers) would save Duckburg and his money—if I won, that is. Scrooge tries to convince me to do it by appealing to my patriotism.

"You can't chicken out, Donald," he says; "YOU HAVE TO TRY TO SAVE DUCKBURG! You must out-bump this terry to save your house, and Daisy's house, and—"

"And your money bin!" I shout back.

The terries, meanwhile, vote unanimously to accept Scrooge's challenge. And I finally agree to go along with it, stalking angrily toward the contest ramp with the line, "Well, all right. I'll do it to save my house!"

The point, you see, was that I saw right through Scrooge's manipulations. You wouldn't have caught him bumping against that fat terry. (I lost, by the way—he knocked me two miles.) I only agreed to do it because saving my own house made sense. And Barks included in the script another characteristic gesture. Just before I get knocked on my pinfeathers I crack a joke, something like: "I'd feel more sure of winning if this were a foot race." The terry firmians didn't have any feet, see.

But there I was, the ordinary hero, like Donald O'Connor, comic champion in a ridiculous and dangerous situation, willing to risk my neck but able to crack a joke because I knew the whole thing was crazy.

Q. Are you saying that Barks was attacking a ruling elite or the munitions manufacturers who sponsor wars for their own profit, the way Right-wing populists often argue? Or is it a vague pacifist polemic, something like: "Well, the rich folks engineer national wars and then refuse to fight in them"?

A. There may appear to be some of that in the story, but I think if you examine it more closely you'll find something else. The real point comes in a later scene, and I think it sums up the sense of what Barks

was getting at in these stories, especially the ones built around Scrooge's wealth.

The terry firmians, you see, had learned their English (in a country drawl, by the way) from these "geranium slabs" that picked up Duckburg's country-and-western radio station, C-O-R-N. They also got feedback on their earthquake efforts that way.

As it turned out, Scrooge and the kids and I got out of the cavern and escaped up the tunnel to warn the Duckburgians to evacuate before the city toppled and fell apart. Scrooge had stolen the trophy that was to be awarded either the terry or the firmy faction, depending on who made the biggest quake. They were so mad when they found it missing that both factions joined forces and blasted hell out of Duckburg's underpinnings, right below Scrooge's money bin. All those cubic acres of cash were dumped down the hole by the force of the galloping earth crust, and the terry firmians understood it as a sign that Scrooge was sending it down to pacify them.

The climax comes when the terry firmians pick up handfuls of the coins. "What is THIS stuff that came pouring down the shaft?" one of them asks. "Maybe it's something that old McDuck sent down in exchange for our trophy."

"If it is," another firmy says, "it must be money! I've heard broadcasts saying he has tons of the stuff."

"Money, huh? That old trophy snatcher has his nerve. We all know how much money is worth. They try to GIVE it away on their radio programs! We've been insulted!"

They go on to call it trash, and figure out a way to get "that messy money" back up the shaft, and they finally get rid of it. But the important thing is the way Barks handles one of his favorite themes with verve and a grand sense of the ridiculous. The introduction of money as an instrument of capital accumulation distorts everyone's lives, totally abstracting everyone from their senses. In this and in dozens

of other stories money is shown to be worthless in itself and socially worthless in its accumulated form. The terry firmians reject it out of hand. They see right through the manipulations of an artificial economy on the earth over their heads just as Donald saw through Scrooge's manipulations.

There is a larger unity, though, that has to do with the continuity of our characters from comic to comic. The rubber balls didn't need cash because all they wanted to do was bounce around. Scrooge, as Barks consistently cast him, was actually the same way with his money. All he wanted to do was swim around in it; it was no more an abstraction for him than bouncing was for the terries, though for the moment in this story he is the butt of the lesson. Barks's characterization of Scrooge, for that matter, was one of his finest accomplishments. Where I was supposed to play a typically American figure (too individualistic to hold a job for long—which gave us a certain narrative flexibility; always caught in the moral conflict between get-rich-quick schemes and my social responsibilities—which pointedly win out in the end), Scrooge was more delicately balanced as a deeply ambivalent character.

Above all, he represented a biting parody of the bourgeois entrepreneur in the competitive stage of capitalism. That proved useful for the sheer technical requirements of our narrative form by enabling us to focus an ongoing political theme on an individual character. But we were keenly aware that that historical type had been extinguished with the advent of the monopolistic and imperial stage of the political economy. For that reason Barks developed two contradictory impulses in Scrooge which satirized the division in the bourgeois personality and prefigured its complete collapse as a cultural and ideological force. All this as comedy, you see.

Q. It would be clearer if you describe this balance, or division in the personality, as you call it.

A. Well, basically this is Barks's comic version of Ahab, the man whose personali-

ty is torn between the logic of capital itself—that is, the limitless accumulation of surplus capital through expanding production—and the obsession it created in the capitalist of the era to submit everything else in the world to that logic, including joy and spontaneity, just as those qualities in himself had submitted long before. Ahab was broken because he tried, in the end, to turn all his resources to the submission of the white whale, and in that act he turned against the very forces that had created his obsession in the first place. Another way to say it is that at some point Ahab's obsession lost its cost-effectiveness, or more grandly, that the hubris of the capitalist hero is that he thinks he can defy the necromantic spirits that made him.

Scrooge's personality is also torn—between the logic of capital and the ridiculous fetish it creates in him for money itself. If he keeps his capital in the money form, he won't be able to expand, and all will be lost. But if he invests it he will be deprived of his only source of delight, which is to swim and bathe in piles of the stuff. It's a nicely preposterous contradiction, the source of all of Scrooge's endless anxieties. Needless to say, Scrooge is not broken by this state of affairs, or the comedy would be lost. He is always seen sitting there on his money piles, his arms wrapped in ecstasy around his cash, and in this embrace he and Barks expose with a grand flourish the essence of bourgeois utopian sexuality—coprophilia.

Q. That, if you don't mind my saying so, is a terrible weight of analysis for a comic book to carry around.

A. I suppose so. But what the hell? Those are the things that emerged from the work as we pushed it to its limits. I don't think it's impossible to understand why Melville, in his time, in that period of bourgeois culture, would develop his themes tragically. But for bourgeois culture in this period, pregnant with death and swollen with emptiness since its last vigorous type disappeared (when all that remains is a reified shell, a skeleton strung with wire), comedy is all that's left.

In another Scrooge story, "Tralla La" (May-June 1954—DW), he unleashed a devastating attack on Western imperialism by showing that the gold standard (ironically symbolized as the bottle-cap standard) is an utter insanity in an economy devoted strictly to use-value mediated only through agricultural barter. The society Scrooge disrupts with his bottle caps, by the way, is located in Indochina. A prescient touch on his part, I think.

In all of this Barks remained one of only a handful of comics artists who did honest and thoughtful work in the trash medium, as most people still think of it. He could've been a hack, working as he did in complete obscurity. Disney studios never even allowed him to sign his work.

Q. Where is Barks now?

A. He's been living right here in Goleta since his retirement in 1964. He still keeps his hand in by scripting the "Huey, Dewey, and Louie Junior Woodchucks" book.

Q. Let me ask you a question about your film career. I'm particularly interested in knowing your reaction to a critique of your cartoon work contained in a study by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno of the devaluation of Western culture.

A. Yes?

Q. I don't know if you're familiar with it, but the book is entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and it takes you to task for, basically, teaching your audiences how to accept the daily pain that is inflicted on them in this society. It suggests that the character you played in the films of the late '30s and afterward, in which you were nearly always portrayed as the victim of general violence, was designed to prepare people to "take their own punishment", I think the phrase ran.

A. Oh yes, that piece. Well, I have to admit that of all my critics, Adorno had the sharpest eye. When the book was originally published—back in 1947, I think it was—I was still searching for a way to clarify theoretically in my own mind the direction in which Barks and I were ai-

ready pushing our work. I was handicapped because I couldn't read German, and had to wait until recently to examine the whole thing in translation. In fact, I never would have known about Adorno if my cousin Ludwig von Drake had not brought it to my attention and translated a few snatches of it for me . . . .

You've never seen Ludwig? Sunday nights, perhaps? Well, the kids would know. He broke into the business in the '60s, mostly as a narrator for Disney cartoon documentaries. It was thought that his thick Austrian accent would be useful for their "scientific" pieces and so forth, but he originally arrived here in the '30s—a "Fluchtling", he called himself. He kept abreast of these matters because he had studied at the institute for Social Research at Frankfurt for a short period, and with that background he was invaluable in those late-night discussions with Bugs, Daffy, Heckle, Jeckle, and the rest of the circle that had some sense of the importance of the task at hand.

Now as for Adorno's specific critique, I think it's clear by now that it has limitations that—but let's look at the passage you referred to.

You apparently don't have the quote with you? Just a moment. (Leaves the room.) All right, here it is—page 138. Read it into the machine—the passage I've marked.

Q. Here? OK, it says:

Cartoons were once exponents of fantasy as opposed to rationalism. They ensured that justice was done to the creatures and objects they electrified, by giving the maimed specimens a second life . . . . Now, however, time relations have shifted. In the very first sequence a motive is stated so that in the course of the action destruction can get to work on it: with the audience in pursuit, the protagonist becomes the worthless object of general violence. The quantity of organized amusement changes into the quality of organized cruelty . . . . Fun replaces the pleasure which the sight of an embrace would allegedly afford, and postpones satisfaction until the day of the pogrom. Insofar as cartoons do any more than accustom the senses to the new tempo,

they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment."

A. All right, now let me say first that the value of Adorno's thinking derives from his ability to actually look at the details of mass culture, at the particulars of the environment it creates. Marcuse may share the general sweep of that critique, but his *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* shows no similar acquaintance with the culture's tissue and cell-structure, as it were, that Adorno painstakingly acquired during his exile here. (I keep referring to Adorno, by the way, because I doubt that Horkheimer had much of a hand, except philosophically, in writing the section of the book we're dealing with, namely the essay called "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception".)

But now what of the accuracy of his attack on my films? He is of course quite correct in observing that we had speeded up the pace of the action, which was decided early on when we saw the breakthroughs made by the Marx brothers, especially in "Horsefeathers". I remember sessions at which Moe, Curly, and Larry resisted our arguments about the necessity for reflecting in a new tempo the urgency of the social situation in that period, but we were adamant.

Eventually, though, it became the basis of the whole Three Stooges style.

Q. Could we digress just a moment on the Three Stooges? Frankly, I have never seen anything in their stuff but a kind of lumpenized theater of cruelty. As for the pace, they remind me of those lines from Pound, "The age demanded an image/Of its accelerated grimace."

A. Well, that's just re-stating Adorno's case. Pound—though God knows he stood way at the other end of the high-culture tradition—nonetheless shared that feeling of horror and disgust at the *debasement* of the Western tradition. It's a pre-

cise position to take, but it's also a limitation. What are the next few lines in that poem? What else did the age demand?

Q. "Something more for the modern stage,

Not, at any rate, an attic grace."

A. I leave it to you to weigh the value of depicting the attic graces during the Depression. Moe and Curly were bent on creating a style based on American slapstick that would show Depression audiences how their violence, when it was directed against each other, was absurd in that it was self-defeating. When they locked arms in their excellent madness, though, they disrupted and demolished the organization of ruling-class board meetings, music salons and dinner parties, movie studios, and so on. Of course, once the war started, like everyone else in the popular-culture front they were drawn into the anti-facist struggle and never recovered their original sharpness afterward.

That, by the way, was one reason I stuck pretty much to the comics after the war; there was little elbow room for critical work anywhere else until the '60s. Nobody was looking over our shoulders but the kids. In the face of total integration, the artist dives for cover into invisibility, into whatever pockets of free activity remain.

One more thing on the Stooges, and then we must get back to Adorno. In one of their pre-war pieces, the three of them were operating a business called the K-9 Laundry, an assembly-line dog-washing operation for socialites. This story was one of their best. The assembly line—this elaborate assortment of levers that operates sprays, mechanical hands, scrubbers, and towels—is driven by a chain connected to a bicycle, operated in this case by Curly. At one point Curly calls Moe, the foreman, from a phone near his bike. "Hey Boss," he squeaks, "I'm quittin'! I'm not gettin' anywhere."

And Moe starts to seethe, "Why you . . .", and pulls a lever in his office wall that springs two mechanical hands out of the assembly line machinery to smack



Curly smartly on the ass. And the harder he pedals to show how productive he is, the faster the hands swat him because he's supplying the motive power for his own punishment. Nothing lumpen, as you call it, about that analysis. At the end, of course, one of the socialites is sent through the assembly line to be scrubbed down. And bear in mind that in the great majority of their short films they appear as workers who wind up in a violent confrontation with bourgeois characters.

Q. I think I see your point, Mr. Duck, though it strikes me as a bit literary. If we could I'd like to move on to the question Adorno raises at the end of the passage where he says: "Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn . . ."

A. ". . . to take their own punishment." Ah, let me be succinct this time, if I can. Adorno moves from the first statement, "Cartoons were once exponents of fantasy as opposed to rationalism," to the position that we were helping to prepare people for, in effect, Dachau. My contention is that we were, under the impress of the times, moving consistently closer to the real situation of daily life.

Q. I'm not sure that helps me understand your point exactly. Do you mean to say that fantasy had become critically inoperable—lost its negative punch, so to speak—and that the social crisis demanded a kind of realism?

A. Not at all. As I indicated earlier, it's the distance between fantasy and everyday life that's important. Fantasy speaks for other possibilities, and in that respect it is a critical exercise. But the best fantasy, in my opinion, consciously approaches the real social experience of people, presenting it from a position outside it—as it were, in relief. What we were trying to isolate in laughter was that element of recognition that told us our audiences saw something of their own experience in the violence inflicted on us. It's a technique that's been drawn out to its last implication in R. Crumb's recent *Funny Animals* book in which chickenoid cartoon

characters are horribly brutalized and remain brutalized. If he were to "dispense justice" to these figures, as Adorno prefers, he'd be serving the interests of illusion, not fantasy. The relation between fantasy and real life is inverted in Crumb, whose irony, as it is in the best of this tradition, is relentless and nearly fanatic. It is the distinction between personal and social fantasy we are dealing with here, and the lesson is this: One may as well accept the society of ducks and chickens as suffer these enormities.

Q. What you are suggesting, it seems to me, is not only that Adorno has missed the point here, but that he has read the entire physiognomy of mass culture somehow backwards.

A. Certainly in the sense that he is observing my own acting, for example, and the mask of mass culture at large through the eyes of a man who refuses to abandon the best of the bourgeois tradition. Where he watches what the masses watch, I see the masses themselves, albeit only as an audience. Nonetheless it is a critical distinction. He says in the preface of the book that "It is a critique of philosophy, and therefore refuses to abandon philosophy." He could as easily have written, It is a critique of culture, and therefore refuses to abandon Culture in the upper-case sense of the word.

I'm afraid, however, that it is Adorno who is abandoned, in no small part because he systematically pushed his categories forward to the point where his critique of mass fetishized relations can now be turned upside-down. In attempting that, we discover for the first time the possibility of seeing those relations inverted, stripped of their fetishism as they are overturned by mass revolutionary action. We are all bound to the task of discovering the submerged movement of mass revolutionary activity which has not stopped since the first crude appearance of industrial capital, and as an indispensable first step we attempt to break away from Adorno's pessimism.

One tries to take a philosophical step that parallels and prefigures the direct ac-

tion of the masses. In saying this, I am aware that we are only at the beginning of a specific philosophical task, and not, like Adorno, at the end of one.

What is best in Adorno and the critical school generally is their description of the "total integration", in Adorno's phrase, of modern society—"the false identity of the general and particular". It is the identity of the masses' concrete daily activity and their aspirations for the universality of total freedom which, under bourgeois ideology, can find expression only in the arena of the commodity, as buyer or seller. And since that is the case, it must be clear that mass activity toward self-liberation has no choice but to find its expression in alienated forms. That's what we have to look for. What new forms would mass activity take if it were unleashed from its alienation? It's a matter of seeing the signs through the veil of barbarism, of seeing both tendencies in the same phenomena.

There is an admonition from Lukacs to the effect that the proletariat must "substitute its own positive contents" for the bursting forms of bourgeois culture and beware of the imitation of its "emptiest and most decadent forms". It is a caution toned on the hour by the critical school. Yet where are these substitutions? That is more difficult, almost impossible, for them to speak of, and it is a vagueness that undermines the utopian commitment.

But it is not incomprehensible why an impasse of this sort would conclude the work of intellectuals who represent the best, last strain of critical Enlightenment thought in its European dress. What we're after, however, are the uses of this body of thought, among others, for American mass workers.

Q. The inference here is that you and your animators have none of the vagueness you just described. Your utopian claims are no doubt far-reaching and exhaustive?

A. I see I must shrive myself of any show of excitement. But since you press the matter—yes, there are a few last comments in order.

The first is that, of course, the revolutionary pessimism of these thinkers may in the end be absolutely justified. There may emerge a barbarism so integrated and so perfectly welded at its tiniest points of stress that the end of human history is in sight. I agree that it is a question increasingly posed in absolute terms as a race to the death: socialism (in the classic slogan) or barbarism.

What has to be kept in mind, however, is that in this period like every other it is the masses of workers who create the conditions both of their oppression and of their liberation. When we enter the period of monopoly capital, there may be very few signs of free activity on the part of the masses; they may not even be visible if they are there. But it is still necessary to understand how the process of self-liberation is continued as much in the culture of the masses (which it creates for and against itself) as it is in production.

There is the same urge for universality displayed negatively on every hand—in comic books, in the mass organization of food distribution in supermarkets (that name alone has mystified its possibilities as an unleashed choff dump dedicated to pleasure), in Coney Island as erotic architecture, in the Brooklyn Bridge as promenade into imaginary space, in bathrooms and movies as invitations to pre-historical laziness . . .

I am merely suggesting that human beings concretize their ongoing demands for universal freedom in their own daily activity, even when it is consistently turned against them. One searches for the focal points of the coming reversal, the nodes in which the invading socialist society is half-disguised with the veil of a barbarism which may just as easily cover over the last hope of an awesomely patient humanity.

Q. Would you conclude this interview with an observation on the counter-culture of the '60s? I assume that it is less than a node, as you call it, of the coming reversal.

A. No, it's simply part of the larger process, the most recent burst of energy in the continuing struggle to create a real revolutionary culture. In its demise as a movement, it too makes the contribution of its insights to the battle at large, and

indeed some aspects of it (like this joint I am about to light) I admire very much. But it just can't last into the dying light of capitalism.

It takes more of us than that, and more different kinds of us.