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Barbera, Alessandro. *Camerata Topolino. L'ideologia di Walt Disney*. Stampa Alternativa. Roma, 2001.

A few months ago, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of novelist Dino Buzzati's death, some of his judgments on Walt Disney resurfaced. Buzzati considered Disney's characters as "one of the greatest narrative inventions of modern times", unhesitatingly comparing their author with Dickens and Balzac. Indeed, it seems that Disney's mouse keeps on inspiring comments and exegesis of all kinds. What goes on, really, between Mickey Mouse's two big black round ears? And what goes on between the ears of the critics when they have to deal with the huge and varied production signed Walt Disney? These are two of the questions answered in this short and stimulating book, that provides an original and well-argued contribution to the study of ideology in mass fiction.

Barbera's work is divided into two roughly equal sections. The first presents a history of the Italian critics' reaction to Disney's opus, from all sides of the political spectrum. Their views on his work are summarized in a witty and pleasant manner. The second part traces Disney's political orientations and offers a new interpretation of the ideological content of his works. Feature-length movies in particular are dealt with, as the author considers them especially representative of Disney's vision.

The first section is interesting for two separate reasons. The non-Italian reader will undoubtedly be surprised by the large number of debates centered on the figure of Mickey Mouse. This is proof of the astonishing penetration of the Disney machine in Europe and in Italy in particular. A North-American reader will also be amazed by the huge popularity of Disney comics and the extent of the critical discourse about them, particularly when Mickey Mouse comics are practically unknown in the States or Canada and the Mouse himself has become basically only a trademark. Quite apart from this effect of estrangement (which is a clear sign of mass cultural productions' great capacity for adaptation in the age of globalization) the main interest of the first section resides in the discussion of topics typical of "industrial" narrative viewed through one particular case.

Barbera evokes the hostility shown by critics, be they of the left or of the right, towards Disney's characters through a review of debates, colloquia and congresses, as well as the press. This antagonism towards the mouse, often seen as the chief propagandist for the American Way of Life, harks back to the well-known work by Chilean writers Dorfman and Mattelart. Two distinct periods are identified in Mickey Mouse's development. The first is under the influence of Roosevelt's New Deal, featuring a fundamentally liberal Mickey with something of a social conscience. The second one follows the Second World War, when Mickey had fought the Nazis in his strips, and shows him involved in an ideological fight with the Soviet Union as well as becoming the supporter of a McCarthy-style police state mentality. Once in a while the personal likes and dislikes of a critic offer a way out to some characters. Thus, it is much debated whether Donald Duck's proverbial bad temper and his

periodic bouts of rebellion make him into some kind of an anarchist... The curious, and at times involuntarily humorous side of these debates, should not hide the fact that once again critical reaction to mass narrative leads to a blanket condemnation based on interchangeable criteria, independently from the ideological underpinnings of the individual critics. It is indeed easy to recognize in the disputes of the Italian critics the same arguments used during the heyday of the serialized novels in nineteenth-century France. Then also, critics from both sides of the political spectrum used similar language to denounce the nefarious influence of these types of writing on the poor, innocent public. The subject of the argument changes, but the arguments themselves, apparently, remain constantly the same.

A second interesting resemblance between the reactions to Disney's works and those to the novels of the first popular writers of the 19th century, concerns the quarrels on who should be considered the actual creator of certain works. Barbera presents the various positions on the importance of Ub Iwerks, Carl Barks, Floyd Gottfredson and Al Taliaferro as Disney's collaborators, and concludes by reasserting Disney's decisive importance in ensuring the fundamental unity of the whole: "It is quite clear that none of Disney's characters could have existed without him. This is demonstrated by what happened to Ub Iwerks who, in spite of his talent, proved unable to obtain success for any of his characters once he left Disney. The same goes for Carl Barks." (52-53) This statement echoes identical arguments used to defend "industrial" novelists like Alexandre Dumas, who also could count on a team of collaborators.

The second part of the book presents the as yet ignored ideological currents Barbera considers essential for a complete understanding of Disney's work. He mentions the fascination Fascist and Nazi leaders and intellectuals alike felt for Mickey Mouse. He talks of Disney's two visits to Mussolini, of the private screenings of Disney movies organized by Goebbels and Hitler, and of the favourable comments expressed by authors such as Brasillach and Ezra Pound. This allows him to pinpoint Disney's attraction for Nordic mythology, on the basis of an initial sympathy between parts of the Italian and American opinion in the 1930s, due to "the dynamic, youthful and adventurous image of the two societies, quite apart from ideological considerations." (66) Barbera's interpretation is based on this fascination. To prove his point he analyzes the full-length movies produced from 1934 on, starting with *Snow White*. He leaves aside the comics, also because Disney himself considered them secondary. In these movies, Barbera identifies a mythological and esoteric intention, a magical and arcane ambiance he likens to Nazi esthetics. The critic thus distances himself from the generally accepted opposition between a New Deal and a conservative Mickey Mouse, or between Mickey's and Donald's universes. To that, he opposes the image of a Disney who may apparently have been a member of theosophical societies, who even attended some meetings of the American Nazi party before turning FBI informer in the McCarthy era, and who would have been able to recreate in his 1930s creations an esoteric vision close to that of the European extreme right. According to Barbera, however, this transition from conservatism to traditionalism did not push Disney into simply adhering to the Nazi worldview. He likens him to other Anglo-Saxon conservatives of an esoteric bent, adversaries of liberal democracy but nonetheless independent from German Nazism or Italian Fascism. That's the kind of Disney that appears under Barbera's magnifying glass: a right-wing opponent of the American Way who was able to adapt for his country a traditional aesthetics redolent of a

kind of "magical Nazism".

The book is well constructed, divided in brief chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect of the chosen theme. The style is lively and the tone quite pleasant. The only criticism would be that the analysis of Disney's movies is sometimes only sketched. The author indicates the main lines, summarizes the themes and links them with the esoteric tradition he uses as a key to the whole of Disney's production, but the space devoted to the in-depth analysis of each single movie is relatively limited. This is a shortcoming that could lead to excellent results, were the author willing to continue his explorations in further critical endeavours. I should also mention the interesting bibliography, useful for a picture of Disney's reception in Italy.