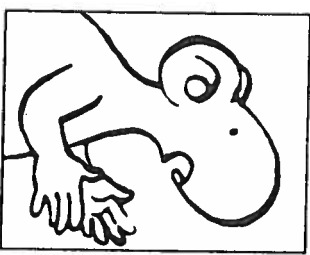


Acevedo and De-Disneyfication

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Although all comparisons are ultimately invidious, it would be impossible to avoid alluding to Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse in order to understand fully the range of meanings that are to be found in Juan Acevedo's clever comic strip, *Hola, Cuy!* (Hi, Gopher!). Alluding to the Disney creations gives resonance to the comic strip of the Andean rodent, with Mickey Mouse as both a pretext and a point of departure for Acevedo's graphic narrations and imaginative portrayal of the "Cuy's" characteristics.

What Acevedo proposes is the imperative to transcend and subvert the Disney comic by creating a constellation of autochthonous referents concerning the characters and narration, while concurrently maintaining the referential signs of the North American comic strip. This point could be interpreted as an unfortunate contradiction if it were not for the tension created between the foreign model (generally condescending and debasing in its general parameters, as many critics have pointed out) and the substitute Latin American paradigm. As a part of its internal process, this particularly compensatory relationship not only establishes the suspense of dynamically evoking other possible national value systems but also echoes the ideology of positively displacing current cultural models. Substitution and not supplementation becomes the

basis of Acevedo's ideology, since his purpose is not to diffuse a humble regional product as merely another trivial imitation of the cultural dictates of the vias of international consumption, but to metamorphosize the treacherous and dominating icons into referent signs of local values whose merit consists of not competing with, but referring to more global and popular cultural systems and their traditional meaning.

It would be counterproductive to trace the unavoidable parallels that result from the foregoing observations. Any reader of *City* must have been and probably will continue to be, in spite of "knowing better," a consumer not only of the Disney comics but also of the host of similar graphic artifacts that aggressively inundate the Latin American market. Acevedo's work is noteworthy not so much for *what* he does, but for *how* he has ideologically defined the substitution in terms of replacing the Disney characters with Peruvian counterparts as well as underlying and foregrounding the process by which he carries out this substitution.

An immediately outstanding characteristic of Acevedo's art is the imperative to make his comic strip *personae dramatis* everything that the repressive bourgeois morality of Disney culture prohibits and circumscribes. Therefore, the characters of the Peruvian comic strip assume their natural condition as biological entities (without avoiding the poetic license of finding themselves involved in social situations as well as assimilating the real linguistic codes of their society). For example, the animals of the strip freely exhibit their sexual appendages and/or other primary gender characteristics, in striking contrast to the aggressive asexuality of the world of Disney, where the biological characteristics of male and female are mere conventions and where gender identity is confirmed only by social (a woman's shoes or a man's hat) and not natural/biological conventions. Woven in against the disjunctive semantic backdrop of culture/nature, these categories are reinforced in the behavior of the characters in which being either masculine or feminine is not so much a biological issue but one of imposed social roles. If the manner in which society carries out these impositions is not totally arbitrary, it certainly would appear to be unavoidable.

As a result of these circumstances, a split occurs between the existing power structures that create a hierarchy of values based on sex differences and those other possibilities, seen without the rose-colored glasses of the "charming and funny" Disney conventions, which appear alarmingly abnormal on comparison with existing structures. However, this is a rather complicated issue.

Disney's blatantly masculine world could never be interpreted as a subtle and positive portrait of homosexuality no matter how we perceive the social signs of Mickey Mouse's home, Donald Duck, or a host of other comic strip characters such as Batman or Robin. Once we compare the male-oriented world of North American comics against a possible ideology that recognizes the homosexual experience as just as valid as any other within the framework of human erotic needs, we perceive that comic world as doubly twisted and false: a world that tries to be what it is not and a world that contradicts the facts of social organization.

What is so attractively refreshing in the Peruvian strip is the candor and openness with which sexual and erotic relations are portrayed. This particular facet eloquently deconstructs the repression of sexuality, biological characteristics, and human relations that we find in the impossible fantasy land of Disney's Mickey Mouse. Starting from its frank acceptance of biological characteristics and extending through its treatment of pertinent sociopolitical matters, it goes without saying that Cuy's world challenges its reader to accept it as more "real" and legitimate than the insipid and dehumanized society where Mickey Mouse and his cute little friends live.

This same ideology is to be found in Acevedo's graphic concepts. For over half a century, the Disney studios have been evolving their readily recognizable pyrotechnic style that is the result of the latest and most advanced production methods as well as of the personal organizational hierarchy involved. Acevedo's comic confections are, however, quite "homemade" in their graphic conceptions and in the plot development. Practically all of Disney's comics can be reduced to about half a dozen or so recurring paradigms, if that. Whether in Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck, one group is exploited by the other (children by adults, adults by children, poor by rich, and rich by poor) by such means as blackmail and deception, in such a categorical manner as to be the principal structural leitmotiv of the plots. Acevedo's strips make use of a single plot but metamorphosize it by exploring its derivations and variations throughout the more than one hundred pages of *City*, and in the hundreds of individual corresponding frames. This is a far cry from the narrative simplicity and infantleness that characterize the Disney strips.

The same thing could said about that graphic technique. In Disney's strips, sophisticated technology permits a wide use of color and an assertive imposition of the solid line, all of which are absent

in Acevedo's black-and-white creations, which are the indicators of not only economic realities but also metaphorical of regional values in their most primordial and unadorned presentation. The Peruvian strip opts for the bare outline as a less geometric conception that corresponds to a less absolutist interpretation that exercises less control over a prefabricated world. What this means is that, while Disney's artists are unable to waver in their manner of representation because their creations reflect an ethnocentric and rigidly secure view of the world, Acevedo's art deliberately emphasizes the precarious instability of the marginal existence of the Latin American artist, whose only point of reference with exterior models is shown through the skeletal outline of an imported artifact.

This particular aspect of *Guy* is clearly seen in those segments where the repressive forces, among them certain Disney characters, take over. The aggressive and self-sufficient graphic representations contrast markedly with the very modest norms of the Peruvian product. Without having to discard completely the imperialistic model, Acevedo reconfirms how Disney's comics serve as a countercultural referent that effectively accentuates the authenticity and social pertinence of a comic strip that reflects the important issues facing the Latin American reader.

Guy's initial naiveness and the progressive perception of what is in fact at stake in important social concerns underlie the cultural productivity of this comic strip in a way that profoundly transcends the "entertainment ideology" at the core of Disney's productions. Besides, Acevedo legitimates his artistic decisions by means of constantly contrasting the validity of "our" experience with the plastic and artificial images that foreign models impose in their place. By stimulating an alternative appreciation and by deconstructing the so-called innocence of imported cultural products, Acevedo's important Peruvian strip promotes a revisionist reading of current dominant cultural codes.

PLATE 9.1



PLATE 9.2

