

Ariel Dorfman, **Feeding on Dreams: Confessions of an Unrepentant Exile**, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, 352 pp., \$15.94 (hardcover), \$11.78 (paperback), \$9.99 (Kindle).

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Ariel Dorfman is widely known in media and cultural studies as co-author, with Armand Mattelart, of *How to Read Donald Duck*, a seminal 1971 text developing the concept of cultural imperialism. The book, a semiotic reading of Disney comics sold in Chile, uncovers the messages of inferiority of the native peoples encountered by magnate Scrooge McDuck in such places as Franistan and Aztecland. Dorfman and Mattelart deconstruct the texts, asserting that the comics' underlying messages influence readers to accept the domination of their "backward" society by McDuck's advanced society as natural and appropriate: "According to Disney, underdeveloped peoples are like children, to be treated as such" (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1975 [1971], p. 48). The caricatures of the natives in "Inka-Blinka" and other comic lands are based on stereotypes that "become a channel of distorted self-knowledge" for Latin Americans (p. 54).



Forty years after its initial publication, *How to Read Donald Duck* remains a classic. It is in print in numerous translations and is often required reading in classes on globalization, semiotics, media studies, and cultural theory. Dorfman's co-author, Armand Mattelart, a Belgian scholar and then-resident of Chile, has become a renowned media analyst and has written several classic texts. Dorfman himself has become well known in circles beyond media and communication for his work in many genres, both nonfiction and fiction. *Death and the Maiden*, his harrowing play about the aftermath of torture of political prisoners, had successful runs in both Spanish- and English-speaking theater and was made into a 1994 film directed by Roman Polanski.

Feeding on Dreams is Dorfman's second memoir. It traces the geographical, linguistic, and philosophical trajectory of this activist scholar and writer who has, he says, "lost my country three times in the course of one lifetime" (p. ix). Dorfman was born in Buenos Aires in 1942. In 1945, to escape incipient fascism, the Dorfman family left Argentina for the U.S., where Dorfman's economist father had been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship (Dorfman, 1998, pp. 23–25). Arriving in New York as a toddler, Dorfman "loses his Spanish and gains English" (p. 328). The family remained in New York for almost a decade, the elder Dorfman becoming a U.N. official. Threatened by McCarthyism, they left the U.S. in 1954 and settled in Chile. This trajectory is told in some detail in Dorfman's first memoir, *Heading South, Looking North* (1998), and is related in *Feeding on Dreams* with an emphasis on the language shifts that accompanied the geographical moves.

By the time Dorfman was college age, Salvador Allende had become a prominent politician in Chile's Socialist Party, and Dorfman an avid supporter. In 1967, Dorfman became a Chilean citizen, and in 1969, he foreswore English "the language of empire" in favor of Spanish, "the language of insurrection" (p. 328). When Allende won the country's presidency in 1970, Dorfman "fell in love with the peaceful revolution" that Allende propounded, which he felt would lead to "social justice in all of Latin America" and a life lived in Spanish: "I would not need to speak or write in English, not ever again, a language that my febrile radical brain identified with imperialism and U.S. domination" (p. xvi). He then served in Allende's government as a cultural adviser.

It was during the Allende presidency that Dorfman and Mattelart wrote *How to Read Donald Duck* in an environment of continent-wide liberation struggles—from the Cuban Revolution to the "liberation theology" advocated by Vatican II, to Allende's election—that was at the same time saturated with U.S. popular culture. Dorfman and Mattelart linked these forces:

Every day . . . television, radio, magazines, newspapers, cartoons, newscasts, films, clothing and records . . . contribute to weakening the international solidarity of the oppressed. We Latin Americans are separated from each other by the vision we have acquired of each other via the comics and the other mass culture media. (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1975 [1971], p. 55)

When Allende was overthrown in a brutal U.S.-supported military coup d'état in 1973, Dorfman spent weeks in hiding, unwilling to leave the country despite the danger to himself and his wife and young son. Eventually, "ordered to seek asylum by the Resistance," he went to Argentina. The following year, the family fled "Buenos Aires and its death squads" (p. 329), and spent time in, successively, Peru, Cuba, France, and The Netherlands, ending up in 1980 in Washington, D.C., meant to be a waypoint en route to settling in Mexico. The Mexico move was thwarted by visa problems, and after several difficult years in Washington, Dorfman moved to North Carolina to take a position at Duke University. Having "drifted away from the more rigid dogmas of Marxism" during the years spent in Europe (p. 232), in the U.S., he encountered the "unforeseen circumstance that the U.S. was not a monolithic Gringolandia" (p. 201).

The military that had ousted Allende continued to hold power in Chile. Dorfman was among the thousands whose names appeared on lists of those barred from entering the country—the most formal of the exiles of the book's subtitle. In 1983, he was permitted to return and he made a number of visits culminating in his participation in the 1988 campaign to restore democracy to Chile. The family then returned to Chile, planning to settle there permanently. To Dorfman's dismay, he found reintegration rough; after six "grueling" months (p. 271), the family left Chile to settle definitively in the U.S. where he continues to teach literature at Duke. In 2006, Dorfman took U.S. citizenship.

Written in a non-linear literary style, this memoir is an engaging recounting of Dorfman's travels and travails focused on the years following the 1973 coup d'état. It will be of interest to those interested in Dorfman himself, in 20th–21st century literature, in the past half-century of Latin American and Chilean history, in a specific example of the mechanisms and experience of forced exile, and in the particularities of Chile's international resistance movement during the Pinochet dictatorship. For communications

scholars, the book offers an exploration of the evolving thought processes of a shaper of the cultural imperialism argument. Dorfman probes questions that were left as settled in *How to Read Donald Duck* and details the experiences and "work of reconciliation" (p. 206) that led him not only to an updated and nuanced viewpoint about the dangers of mediated popular culture but also to becoming a citizen of the United States.

References

Dorfman, A. (1998). *Heading south, looking north: A bilingual journey*. London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton.

Dorfman, A., & Mattelart, A. (1975) [1971]. *How to read Donald Duck: Imperialist ideology in the Disney comic*. D. Kuntzle (Trans.). New York, NY: International General.